EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF MINDFULNESS
ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

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A DISSERTATION

in

Educational and Organizational Leadership

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Education

2018

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Mindfulness frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion and makes it possible to live fully each minute of life. Mindfulness enables us to live.”

—Thich Nhat Hanh

I begin with a gentle bow to Thay, Thich Nhat Hanh, who introduced me and innumerable others to the Miracle of Mindfulness. My dear friend Sean offered this raft to me in the late 1980s. I’ve taken many trips since then, most recently revealing the power of mindfulness as a dependable vehicle with which to negotiate life’s turbulence. It was this personal journey that inspired me to explore this work with teachers.

To the teachers and students whom I’ve had the great privilege of working with and learning from, you deserve a peaceful classroom, school, and world. It is my sincere hope that this work might contribute to an expanding dialogue while nurturing seeds of mindfulness and peace.

At the University of Pennsylvania I have had the distinct pleasure of working with Elizabeth Mackenzie, who has provided invaluable insights and thoughtful feedback throughout the dissertation process. Sharon M. Ravitch has shown relentless support while inspiring and challenging me intellectually and methodologically. Michael C. Johanek has extended great kindness and encouragement, gifts for which I am immensely grateful. My brethren from Cohorts X and 13 have pushed my thinking in unimaginable ways. Peter J. Horn has been an invaluable thought partner and dear friend.

Patricia A. Jennings has been remarkably generous with her time and expertise. It has been an honor to learn from and with such an insightful leader in the field of mindfulness in education.

Edward R. Tufte has provided me with the inspiration to reimagine data display and presentation.

To my father and mother, Antonio and Maria. Dad, you have modeled for me hard work and dedication. You lived a humble and unassuming life, one that has served as a beacon for your admiring son. Mom, you have been my steadfast supporter, cheering me on and believing in me despite my own wavering faith. I write with and for you. This work is a direct fruit of your labor and love.

To my siblings, Carmen, Tony, Mita, Greg, and Emanuel. You are each sprinkled throughout these words and thoughts. This life’s journey is formed with you by my side and in my heart. Whether near or far, you are always with me. Your encouragement, patience, confidence, and faith have sustained me.
To my children, Joel, Jordan, and Alana. During those countless moments while I would wonder whether I would be able to persevere and see this work through, I would think of you. You have been my motivation and collectively, my North Star. You have made this work a possibility and reality. This is not my accomplishment. It is ours.
Abstract

Exploring the Impact of Mindfulness on the Lived Experience of Middle School Teachers

Albert Morales
Elizabeth Mackenzie

Research Problem: Educational systems find themselves in a constant state of flux with continuous restructuring and the work of teachers increasing in complexity (Hargreaves, 1998). The nature and pace of this institutional change along with the highly emotional nature of the classroom set the stage for what can become highly stressful experiences. Educational systems appear to assume, in part by virtue of its absence in training, that teachers have the requisite social and emotional competencies necessary to negotiate the emotional terrain of the classroom. The growing problem of teacher burnout and attrition contradict this assumption. A burgeoning body of research on mindfulness reveals the potential of mindfulness-based practices to decrease stress and improve well-being. A wide variety of neuroscientific research has shown the effects of mindfulness practices on brain activity and physiology. Most recently, studies on the effects of various mindfulness-based interventions in education have shown promise.

Methods: This qualitative study explores the ways in which mindfulness practices influence the lived experiences of teachers in a public middle school. The teachers in this study participate in a course designed for educators. This course combines a variety of mindfulness practices and practical in-the-moment strategies that can be incorporated into everyday life. At the conclusion of the course, teachers participated in focus group
discussions and individual interviews during which teachers provide rich descriptions of their experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTION: What is the lived experience of middle school teachers engaged in mindfulness practice?

KEY FINDINGS: 1. Mindfulness increases awareness of oneself and others and enhances teachers’ ability to choose a response rather than succumb to automatic reactions. 2. A mindful response includes specific common mechanisms including pausing, distancing, appraisal, reappraisal, and choice. 3. Mindfulness improves communication both in terms of transmission (speaking) and reception (listening). 4. Increased awareness fosters a greater sense of empathy and compassion which thereby promotes the expression of a mindful response. 5. Mindfulness reduces feelings of isolation through an increased recognition that negative experiences and struggles are common. Participation in the mindfulness course also results in feelings of close connection and community within the group.
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CHAPTER 1
BACKGROUND, CONTEXT, RATIONALE, & SIGNIFICANCE

The teaching profession is arguably among the most stressful occupations in this country. The demands on teachers do not ease but rather seem only to increase in both scope and intensity. As the leader of the classroom, the teacher must remain composed. When stress triggers manifest and provoke the fight or flight reaction, teachers can neither fight nor flee. They are instead called upon to manage their thoughts and emotions while also maintaining awareness of the thoughts and emotions of the dozens of young people sitting, standing, and otherwise behaving in front of them. In what ways has their pre- and in-service training prepared them for such complex and dynamic experiences? There is a growing belief and a burgeoning body of research that suggests mindfulness may help. Instead of succumbing to the cycles of stress reactivity, one might instead engage a mindfulness-based response. Instead of an escalating cascade of negative reaction, perhaps a sense of calm and clarity might be nurtured creating a more favorable working and learning environment.

As will be discussed, a confluence of mindfulness research from various disciplines reveals promising results of mindfulness meditation on health and well-being. This research has shown the ways in which mindfulness practice may mitigate the negative effects of stress while cultivating present-centered awareness of experience. These potential benefits have led research to consider the ways in which mindfulness practice might affect teacher experience and well-being and prompts the following
question as a guide to my proposed research question: What is the lived experience of middle school teachers engaged in mindfulness practice?

The intent of this inquiry is to add to the existing literature and promote continued study in the use of mindfulness in education. It is unreasonable to expect educators to know how to cope with the stressors of school and the classroom without providing useful tools to assist them. These tools can then be creatively employed to negotiate the triggers that inevitably arise.

When we are able to mobilize our inner resources to face our problems artfully, we find we are usually able to orient ourselves in such a way that we can use the pressure of the problem itself to propel us through it, just as a sailor can position a sail to make the best use of the pressure of the wind to propel the boat. (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 1)

It is possible to help educators learn how they might use the pressure of the problem to propel their work. It is only through an awareness of the wind that we can effectively adjust our sails and move in a direction of our choosing.

*Defining Mindfulness*

Many definitions for mindfulness have been offered as its secular use has expanded over the past many years (Bishop et al., 2004; Black, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2009). While further explanation will follow, for purposes of simplicity and clarity, this inquiry will utilize that which has been offered by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction or MBSR. Kabat-Zinn (2009) defines *mindfulness* as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4).
Background and Context

In addition to the high demands described above, the teaching profession is one of high visibility, intense scrutiny, and high expectations. The ever-changing landscape of public education is contoured with quickly emerging, shifting, and vanishing educational initiatives. It is entrenched in an era of high accountability with new evaluation systems incorporating a variety of measures including student achievement and growth outcomes and new teacher observation models. The adoption of the Common Core Content Standards and their accompanying assessments has moved districts to change curricula and instructional practices to meet these new demands. While it can be argued that these initiatives have added value, the immensity and speed of the changes they represent surely increase the pressures teachers experience.

The school in which this study is situated is a suburban, public, middle school in the Northeastern United States. It is located in an affluent, high achieving district with an ever-increasing diversity. As is true of middle schools across the country, its classrooms are filled with young adolescents in the throes of immense physical, emotional, and cognitive changes typical of this stage of development. Teachers are faced with the challenges of varied external and internal pressures to grow professionally while maintaining efficacy and control in what can be described as the “emotional soup” of the classroom (Jennings, 2015).

In this context, the changing demands of increased accountability has been rapid and significant. During the time of this study, the district had recently adopted a new teacher evaluation system. This system included a new teacher observation platform, an increase in the number of formal observations required, new processes for annual
reviews, the inclusion of Student Growth Objectives (SGOs), and the creation and monitoring of individual professional growth plans. Each of these components brought with them a host of complexities including an electronic interface that would add to this already steep learning curve. Additionally, through state mandate and district directive, the Common Core Content Standards (CCCS) and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) were implemented resulting in far-reaching changes to planning, instruction, and assessment. The new online PARCC assessment used to assess students with regard to their mastery of the CCCS was also adopted at this time with student performance directly impacting teacher evaluation.

During the time of this study, I had served as an administrator in this district for 10 years, nine of which had been as an assistant principal in this middle school. In this capacity, in addition to facilitating the adoption, training, and implementation of the aforementioned initiatives, I have evaluated staff, supervised curricular departments, administered discipline to students at all grade levels, and served on various school and district-wide committees. I have been an integral part of the hiring process for new staff during my tenure. In addition, I have assisted in the planning and implementation of in-service and professional development programs for teachers and paraprofessionals.

During the school year in which this study will commence, nearly all staff members participated in a 90-minute in-service on mindfulness in education. The presentation included an introduction to mindfulness, content related to the neuroscience behind mindfulness, mindfulness exercises and practices, and ways in which this learning might be utilized to support and enhance the teaching and learning environment.
At the conclusion of the session, all were invited to participate in a mindfulness course that would meet for seven sessions over 13 weeks. The course would be an extension of what was learned during this in-service both with regard to content and mindfulness practice. Participants were also informed of a voluntary program evaluation component that would also occur if they chose to participate. Not participating in the program evaluation would not preclude anyone from participating in the course itself.

On the first day of the class, 21 staff members enrolled in the course. Of the 21 who enrolled, 12 agreed to participate in the voluntary program evaluation. After the second week, the final number of participants decreased to 18, including myself, with the same 12 participating in the optional evaluation.

**Rationale and Significance**

*Teacher Stress.* The impact of stress on the teaching profession is far reaching and complex. While there are a wide variety of conditions that account for this reality, among the most salient are the nature of institutional change and the highly emotional nature of the classroom. This emotionally laden and stress provoking profession is characterized by constant and dramatic changes. Educational systems are in a constant state of flux with continuous restructuring and the work of teachers increasing in complexity (Hargreaves, 1998). These changes continue to increase in pace, intensity, and extensiveness (Hargreaves, 2000). These frenetic institutional changes form the backdrop that sets the scene for the classroom setting.

When faced with emotionally challenging interactions in the classroom, teachers are called upon to manage their emotions in real time without the opportunity to leave the stressor itself. When this occurs, the stress reaction is activated and teachers’ bodies are
flooded with stress hormones designed to address short-term challenges (Jennings, 2015). Teachers do not have the luxury of walking away from the circumstances generating this stress, a coping strategy available in most other professions. There simply is no escape. Without the ability to exit the stage, the stress reaction feeds itself.

Given this reality, it is critical to equip teachers with the tools needed to manage this stress. Yet, the development of teacher Social Emotional Competence (SEC), skills that would certainly assist in the classroom domain, is an area that has been given little attention in either pre-service or in-service training:

[T]he current education system appears to assume that teachers have the requisite SEC to create a warm and nurturing learning environment, be emotionally responsive to students, form supportive and collaborative relationships with sometimes difficult and demanding parents, professionally relate to administrators and colleagues, effectively manage the growing demands imposed by standardized testing, model exemplary emotion regulation, sensitively coach students through conflict situations with peers, and effectively (yet respectfully) handle the challenging behaviors of disruptive students. (Jennings & Geenberg, 2009, p. 495-496)

Early findings suggest that teachers with low SEC find it difficult to manage their classrooms and maintain a positive classroom climate, so they become emotionally exhausted. These conditions can initiate what Jennings and Greenberg (2009) refer to as a "burnout cascade" resulting in a decrease in the expressions of sympathy and caring, tolerance for challenging student behaviors, and dedication to their work. Very little research, however, has been designed to understand teacher ability to regulate strong emotional responses to stress or how SEC might help them to cope with these stressors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011; Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016).
*Burnout.* The persistence of the conditions described above generates fertile ground for exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of inefficacy, the core dimensions of burnout described by Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), to take root. Exhaustion results in the distancing of oneself both emotionally and cognitively from one’s work, leaving him or her with a decreased capacity to be responsive to and serve those who would receive their care. Depersonalization is marked by an intentional distancing by actively ignoring qualities unique to the individual recipient and results in cynicism and indifference. Exhaustion and depersonalization interfere with effectiveness and can lead to a decreased sense of efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001).

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) similarly define burnout as the deterioration over time of one's ability to cope effectively with common challenges. It is marked by "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment" (p. 497). According to Farber (2000), 30-35% of American teachers reported being strongly dissatisfied, and 5-20% are considered to be “burned out.” The pressure to achieve better with lower performing students and fewer resources is among the factors cited. In addition, excessive paperwork, large class sizes, and challenging students are among the most salient stressors contributing to this phenomenon (Farber, 2000).

*Teacher Attrition.* It is not surprising then to learn that teacher attrition is on the rise. While this is due to a variety of issues, emotional stress and poor emotion management are cited as common factors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). According to a report by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 57% of teachers leaving the profession in 2005 did so to pursue another profession. Alarmingly, one third
of new teachers leave within three years and almost 50% leave within the first five (Shakrani, 2008). The disruption to the educational system at large and classrooms more precisely can be devastating.

*Teaching and Emotion.* Teaching is often described in terms of its technical nature including issues of pedagogy, assessment, and classroom management. While these and other important characteristics of teaching require thoughtful attention, Hargreaves (2000) asserts that there has been a “disturbing neglect of the emotional dimension in the increasingly rationalized world of educational reform” (p. 811). Teaching should not be oversimplified as a practice that engages cognitive skills alone. It is equally important to view teaching as an emotional endeavor (Hargreaves, 1998).

Nurturing healthy teacher-student relationships is critical to teaching and learning. Hargreaves (1998) illustrates the following four ways that emotions are integral to teacher-student relationships: (a) teaching is an emotional practice, (b) teaching and learning involve emotional understanding, (c) teaching is a form of emotional labor, and (d) teachers’ emotions cannot be seen as separate from their moral purpose. Understanding these emotional aspects of teaching and their relationship to the teaching and learning process is critical. Emotions do not simply reside in the minds of individuals, “they are embedded and expressed in human interactions and relationships” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 824). The nature and quality of these relationships serve as the cornerstone of the classroom, for better or worse.

Emotional intelligence (EI) and its associated social and emotional competencies (SEC) are necessary to negotiate the emotional terrain of the classroom. Jennings (2015) argues that the lack of emotional awareness and SEC contributes to the emotional distress
experienced by teachers as they attempt to handle the challenges of the classroom. Not only does this negatively impact teacher effectiveness, it may also lead to teacher burnout, deteriorating teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and classroom climate (Jennings, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

There has been a lack of attention given to the development of teachers' SEC in either pre-service or in-service training. Educational systems appear to assume, in part by virtue of its absence in training, that teachers have the skills and dispositions required to cultivate healthy classroom environments and relationships with students, parents, and colleagues (Jennings, 2015). Addressing this gap in teacher pre-service and professional development is of utmost importance in order to cultivate the relationships and classroom climate necessary for teachers and students to thrive. Taken together, the issues delineated above describe an educational system in crisis.
CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section is a review of the literature on mindfulness as well as disciplines related to its study. This conceptual framework explores mindfulness as a construct and situates it in its historical and contemporary context. The automatic stress reaction and the nature of its physiological characteristics are described along with the ways in which the stress reaction can be both adaptive and maladaptive. The nature of emotions and the construct of Emotional Intelligence (EI) is explored. Siegel’s (2007) description of mindful awareness provides a model with which to conceptualize the automatic appraisals that often lead to unnecessary suffering. Findings from the burgeoning body of mindfulness research exhibits convincing evidence of the efficacy and benefits of mindfulness meditation practices. The proliferation of neuroscientific research sheds light on not only how these processes can be better understood but also the ways in which our brains develop and change over time. Research has begun to show a relationship between mindfulness activity and both the function and physiology of the brain. Finally, research in education has begun to show promising effects of mindfulness practices on teachers’ sense of well-being and the regulation of stress.

Mindfulness

While mindfulness has gained popularity in the West over recent years, its practice has existed for more than two thousand years and finds its roots in the contemplative traditions of Asia. A variety of influences brought mindfulness practices to the West in the 1960s and 1970s. The Chinese invasion of Tibet and decades of war in
Southeast Asia punctuate the violence and unrest of this turbulent time. This resulted in the exile of many Buddhist monks and teachers, many of whom traveled to and settled in the West. In addition, the proliferation of cross-cultural exchange between the East and West helped to cultivate an interest in mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness has been used as a vehicle with which to promote the cessation of suffering (Bishop et al., 2004). Jon Kabat-Zinn was influenced by this practice and in 1979 founded MBSR. Originally designed to treat those suffering from chronic pain, MBSR has evolved as treatment for a wide variety of conditions and remains the subject of much scientific study.

Mindfulness has been described and understood differently since its introduction into Western medicine. As mentioned above, Kabat-Zinn (2009) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). This definition has served as an anchor for many subsequent descriptions. As interest in the study of mindfulness has increased, many definitions have emerged. Black (2011) has summarized several of these and identifies the common theme of “general receptivity and full engagement with the present moment” (p. 1). Black goes on to illustrate its opposite as mindlessness, that which occurs when attention is scattered “due to preoccupation with past memories or future plans and worries” (p. 1). Rather than engaging with the present, this preoccupation leads to limited awareness and attention.

The proliferation and variety of research and description led Bishop et al. (2004) to call for an operational definition that would allow for appropriate instrument development and focused investigation into its mediating role and mechanisms. In its broad conception, “mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonelaborative,
nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is” (p. 232). The operational definition they have proposed includes two aspects: self-regulation of attention and orientation to experience. More specifically, this definition describes “mindfulness as a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of nonelaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance” (p. 234). This operational definition has informed the creation of metrics used to measure aspects of mindfulness including the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). While these varied conceptualizations enrich our understanding of mindfulness, this study will anchor its inquiry in Kabat-Zinn’s early definition cited above.

*The Stress Reaction*

Mindfulness has been used widely as a practice to aid in the understanding and management of stress. According to John Kabat Zinn (2013), the stress reaction is a physiological response to a perceived threat. This might be a physical threat that is perceived to have the potential for causing physical harm. This threat might also be a threat to one’s sense of self or social/emotional well-being. Both “real” and “imagined” threats initiate the same reaction and often happen more quickly than one’s ability to perceive them. It has been and can still be a useful tool for survival and is considered “adaptive” when it serves in this capacity. This automatic stress reaction was especially useful in our evolutionary past as our ancestors needed to react swiftly to threats in order to survive. If, however, the trigger is not a threat to physical safety, this stress reaction can have a deleterious effect, adding stress to an already taxed nervous system.
Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes how, once a threat is perceived, the body enters into a state of hyperarousal in which a series of conditions manifest. Muscle tension in the face and body serve as expressions for communication (e.g., tensed eyebrows expressing anger) or prepare the body for the fight, flight or freeze response (e.g., clenched fists). Strong emotions emerge and a neural cascade initiates causing the brain and nervous system to “fire.” Hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are released and the body experiences a wide range of reactions that serve to increase sense perceptions. Pupils dilate in order to capture more of the visual field and hearing becomes more acute. Hairs on our bodies stand on end to better sense vibrations in the air. Heart contractions strengthen producing as much as four times more blood than usual. The additional blood flow increases the amount of oxygen available to our arms and fists in preparation for fighting and to our legs for fleeing. Blood is diverted from other non-critical systems including the digestive system. It is this rerouting of blood that accounts for the felt sensation of “butterflies” in the stomach.

The fight or flight response is “not a hardwired reflex… but a highly evolved intelligent capacity to steer us through complex situations that threaten our survival” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 317). This ability has been adaptive and without which our species would not have survived. The problem is, if we cannot regulate it, it will be employed in situations that are not life threatening. It, in that instance, is maladaptive and perhaps even more hazardous than the perceived threat itself.

*Emotions*

As research on emotions has evolved as an area of study, a variety of definitions have emerged. This conceptual framework draws heavily on the work of Paul Ekman, an
early pioneer in the study of emotions. Ekman (1992) argues that emotions are \textit{basic}. He explains that first, specific emotions are imbued with important differences and second, evolution has played a significant role in their unique characteristics and functioning.

Ekman (2007) further describes emotion as:

\begin{quote}
\text{a process, a particular kind of automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal past, in which we sense that something important to our welfare is occurring, and a set of physiological changes and emotional behaviors begins to deal with the situation (p. 13).}
\end{quote}

Ekman (1992) categorizes emotions into larger groups called \textit{families}. While all emotions share common characteristics, families differ from one another. Each family has both a theme and variation. The theme includes core elements characteristic of all instances of emotions in that family and are considered to be innate, a product of evolution. Variations on those themes are a product of influences and can therefore be seen as developmental or socially constructed. These influences include biological constitution, different learning experiences, and differences in the occasions that call them forth.

Each emotion contains unique features and characteristics. All emotions include universal signals, presence in other primates, distinct physiology, universals in antecedent events, coherence among emotional responses, quick onset, brief duration, automatic appraisal, and unbidden occurrence (Ekman, 1992). Ekman (1992) asserts that emotions are not private events but rather public displays that can be identified by the unique signals characteristic of each emotion. Anger, for example, carries with it a facial expression that includes the lowering and convergence of tensed eyebrows, glaring eyes, and a narrowing of the lips. As described in relation to the stress reaction, the physiology associated with anger includes a quickening heart rate and increased blood flow to the
hands in preparation to fight. An antecedent event that might provoke anger is one perceived as having the effect of thwarting or causing one to lose a desired goal.

Emotions occur instantaneously and outside of conscious awareness, without our prompting, and are involuntarily expressed. Ekman (2007) observes, “We don't choose how we look and sound or what we are impelled to do and say when we are emotional any more than we choose when to become emotional” (p. 53). Automatic appraisal mechanisms act as sentinels scanning our environment for triggers experienced in our evolutionary or less distant, experiential past. Evolution and experience have collaborated to create shortcuts which allow emotions to bypass cognitive thought in favor of instantaneous reaction without the anchor of analysis.

What we have learned through brain research is that “when an emotional trigger becomes established, when we learn to be afraid of something, new connections are established among a group of cells in our brain forming … a cell assembly” (Ekman, 2007, p. 43). These assemblies, formed as a result of an emotional trigger, contain the memory of that trigger and “seem to be permanent physiological records of what we learned” (Ekman, 2007, p. 43). What once had to be learned has become streamlined into automatic appraisals and concomitant reactions.

Ekman (1992) asserts, “the primary function of emotions is to mobilise the organism to deal quickly with important interpersonal encounters” as informed by our evolutionary past (p. 171). They have evolved to allow organisms to respond to life events automatically and instinctively without conscious awareness. This is an important aspect of the emotions’ function. If conscious awareness were part of emotional processes, cognition would slow the reaction time rendering the emotion useless when
called upon to respond quickly to life or death encounters.

In addition, emotions serve as an elaborate tool for communication. It is likely that there is some consensus about emotional meanings serving to facilitate communication. One can thereby compare another’s emotional reaction to what might typically be experienced. If an emotional response is unexpected, this might signal concern or misinterpretation. For example, it would be reasonable to expect one to be happy in a pleasant environment or fearful in response to a threat (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). When the response however is incongruent with what might be expected, this dissonance serves to communicate that something may be amiss. If this discrepancy is noticed, it may conjure in the observer the question, “What’s wrong?” If the cues are subtle, this communication may go unnoticed. One with a high level of emotional awareness may pick up on even the subtlest of cues. This ability is but one aspect of the construct, Emotional Intelligence (EI).

*Emotional Intelligence*

Emotional Intelligence has been defined as one’s ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions along with the ability to use emotions to facilitate thinking (Goleman, 1995; Lopes, Salovey, Beers, & Petty, 2005; Mayer et al., 2001; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004; Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000). Mayer et al. (2004) define EI as:

…the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (p. 197).

Dulewicz & Higgs (2000) describe the construct of EI as emerging from a
growing debate questioning the limitations of IQ (Intelligence Quotient) as a comprehensive measure of intelligence. Thorndike developed the notion of social intelligence to account for those things not measured by IQ. Howard Garner proposed the now widely accepted theory of multiple intelligences to include a wide array of intelligences beyond that conceptualized and constrained by IQ. EI seeks to provide a lens through which to view one’s capacity to recognize, understand, and regulate the complexities of emotion both in oneself and in others.

Emotional Intelligence has been conceptualized as having four “branches.” These include (a) perceiving emotions, including the ability to identify facial expressions; (b) facilitating thought, the ability to use emotion to enhance thinking; (c) understanding emotion, the “ability to comprehend emotional information about relationships, transitions from one emotion to another, [and] linguistic information about emotions,” and (d) “managing emotions and emotional relationships for personal and interpersonal growth” (Mayer et al., 2001, p. 235). These competencies are organized in order of complexity and importance. For example, the ability to perceive emotions, while important and arguably foundational, is less complex than the ability to use emotions as tools to generate self-motivation. Additionally, understanding emotions and their relationship to other emotions is required in order to manage one’s emotions, the most complex aspect of EI.

Adding to Ekman’s definition of emotion stated above, Mayer et al. (2001) propose a definition of emotion as “an organized mental response to an event that includes physiological, experiential, and cognitive aspects” (p. 233). They assert that emotions appear to contain information about relationships and when personal
relationships change, so do the emotions that are associated with them. “Whether these relationships are actual, remembered, or even imagined, they are accompanied by the felt signals called emotions” (p. 234). The ability to recognize this and utilize this understanding to reason and solve problems is a core aspect of EI.

As has been discussed, each emotion prepares us to act in ways that are responsive to past patterns of everyday life. While emotions have been “wise guides” in our evolutionary past, their adaptive functions are not quite in sync with the realities of the 21st century. Goleman (1995) suggests the “biological design for the basic neural circuitry of emotion, what we are born with is what worked best for the last 50,000 human generations, not the last 500 generations—and certainly not the last five” (p. 5). Given this assertion, the ability to develop EI serves to bring a greater awareness to the nature of emotions, their relationship to each other, and one’s ability to manage them. Bringing a mindful approach to our understanding of emotions and the physiological response accompanying them may calm the swells that inevitably arise.

Mindfulness-Mediated Stress Response

Humanity owes its survival to its complex system of emotions and the automatic appraisals and responses that have saved us from the perils of our ancestral past. While contemporary threats stand in stark contrast, our reactions often remain the same. Kabat-Zinn (2013) emphasizes the importance of “recognizing that our instantaneous appraisals of threat are often inaccurate and generate unnecessary fear and suffering” (p. 319). He asserts that simply bringing awareness to the stress reaction already changes our relationship with it. One can choose not to react automatically as if on “auto-pilot” or suppress thoughts and feelings. Instead, this awareness allows one to feel tension,
emotions, and observe thoughts. We can learn to work with our reactions rather than being controlled by them. We can begin to see more clearly and become open to alternative ways of responding.

Mindfulness in the moment is not likely to be an available tool if it is not practiced. Kabat-Zinn (2013) asserts that it is akin to a muscle that needs to be developed through regular training. This training comes in the form of formal and informal practice. The body scan is a formal practice in which one brings awareness to the physical sensations in the body. Sitting meditation can include the practice of maintaining focus on the breath. In any formal practice, when thoughts and emotions inevitably arise, one simply recognizes them with curiosity and without judgement, and calmly returns attention back to the breath. These practices promote a sense of acceptance, calm, clarity, and openness. They allow for objective observation in which one can more accurately see the relationship between the event and the thoughts and feelings they provoke.

With an awareness of the present moment, we can decide how we are in relationship to what is occurring and form an effective and appropriate response. As we practice the relationship to our own direct experience, we strengthen our tendency to bring this same disposition to the next moment with what Siegel (2007) refers to as internal attunement. When a stressful event comes into our field of awareness, one can pause, buffering the effects of the stress reaction. We can then recognize the signs (thoughts, emotions, and sensations) and remain open to and embrace them. When stressors are seen and experienced with mindfulness, they “can become like wind for a sailor, here for you to use to skillfully propel you where you want to go” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 342).
Mindful Awareness

Siegel (2007) proposes a model of mindful awareness that further explicates the relationships among awareness, attention, and the elements of experience. Using a wheel as a metaphor, he describes the central hub as a representation of awareness, the outer rim as inclusive of the elements of experience, and the spokes that extend between the rim and the hub as the attention given to the object of experience. With exogenous attention, outer stimulus draws our attention “pulling from the rim a spoke [we] haven’t initiated” (Siegel, 2007, p. 124). An object “grabs” our attention whether we like it or not. Conversely, endogenous attention is aimed and initiated from within. We intentionally choose to focus our attention on inner or outer experience. This model provides insight into the nature of attention and how we might focus it with intention and purpose.

Present-centered awareness may strengthen the ability to notice experiences without automatically reacting to them. Siegel (2007) describes this as “observing to decouple automaticity.” Instead of appraising a situation instantaneously, one might observe it without judgment as it actually is in that moment. This disposition provides space for a more objective appraisal of experience, one that resists the “grasping onto the inevitable judgments the mind creates” (p. 74). Decoupling from this automaticity is a kind of “waking up,” a freeing oneself from the pull of experiences and the automatic appraisals that accompany them.

The grasping described above can create suffering when the reality of the situation does not meet our preconceived expectations. For example, a teacher might devote substantial time, thought, and energy in the creation of a lesson designed to be interesting and engaging. If students do not respond as expected and instead appear
uninterested, the teacher may see this as a reflection of his or her ability to create a lesson that students will learn from and enjoy. The resulting tension can be experienced as stress.

Decoupling from this automatic appraisal may give the teacher space with which to look more objectively at the situation as it unfolds. Perhaps the students have not received a break for a long period of time or are coming back from lunch and still thinking about recent interactions with their peers. Perhaps there was an unknown conflict that has left some students agitated. If the automatic appraisal system is not interrupted, a teacher may be whisked away by the perceived experience and fall prey to the automatic stress reaction and the accompanying suffering that is so easily summoned.

Siegel (2007) describes this suffering as “adventitious suffering... our minds create our own mental anguish by grasping onto conceptualizations and automatic reactions that pull us out of direct sensory experience” (p. 77). Decoupling can help one pause the automatic appraisal and instead reappraise the situation more objectively. Additionally, decoupling can provide a kind of distance that allows one to dis-identify from experience. An objective view of experience can bring awareness to the reality that the experience is temporary and not a fixed characteristic of one’s self. Instead of thinking, “I’m not a good teacher,” a teacher might instead consider, “Maybe we need to take a break before we move on.”

Mindfulness Research

Since John Kabat-Zinn’s introduction of MBSR in 1979, mindfulness-based interventions have been widely used and studied both nationally and internationally. While mindfulness is a nascent area of scientific study, the number of research studies
over recent years has grown exponentially. According to the American Mindfulness Research Association (AMRA), there have been 3,059 studies conducted since 1980. The number of studies conducted in the past three years alone (1,954 from 2013-2015) is greater than the total number of studies over the previous 33 years combined (1,441 from 1980-2012) (American Mindfulness Research Association).

While the volume of research studies is arguably an indication of advancements in the field, the following review provides significant weight to the quality of this research and reliability of its findings. In a systematic review and meta-analysis published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 18,753 citations were reviewed resulting in the inclusion of 47 trials involving 3,515 participants. Through this analysis, Goyal et al. (2014) found evidence indicating mindfulness meditation programs improve anxiety, depression, pain, and stress. Additionally, the effect of mindfulness meditation on psychological stress is similar to that experienced through the use of medication, exercise, and other behavioral therapies. It is also significant to note that the effect sizes for the mindfulness meditation programs are comparable to those seen with the use of antidepressants to treat anxiety and depressive symptoms “without the associated toxicities” (p. 364). Goyal et al. (2014) assert, “clinicians should be prepared to talk with their patients about the role that a meditation program could have in addressing psychological stress” (p. 365).

The volume and rigor of these studies support the assertion that mindfulness-based practices effectively decrease stress and improve well-being. The practice of mindfulness has been shown to not only reduce emotional distress, but also increase positive states of mind, and improve overall quality of life. “[M]indfulness practice can
influence the brain, the autonomic nervous system, stress hormones, the immune system, and health behaviors… in salutary ways” (Greeson 2009, p. 10). The following highlights this research along with studies within the field of education.

*The Neuroscience of Mindfulness Meditation*

Our understanding of the brain has grown exponentially in recent years. The brain, which was once believed to be a relatively static organ, is now known to be exceptionally malleable in important ways. This malleability is referred to as neuroplasticity and involves the physiological changes in neural connections and formation in response to experience. While neural connections are created by genes, they are further shaped by experience. Experience is the stimulus that activates the firing of neurons, which builds connections between them. As synapses fire, the connections between neurons strengthen and the growth of support cells and vasculature increases. The brain grows through the formation of these new connections (*synaptogenesis*) and new neurons (*neurogenesis*) (Siegel, 2007).

New technologies have offered broad perspectives of the brain’s physiology and function. Critical of western science’s seemingly myopic view of neuroscience through the lens of pathology, the 14th Dalai Lama posed a simple challenge to prominent neuroscientist Richard Davidson in 1992. He asked why western science devotes so much of its resources and energy to the study of anxiety, depression, and fear, while ignoring potential research on positive attributes such as compassion and generosity. At the time, Davidson could not provide a response. Research on mindfulness has grown exponentially since that time (AMRA; Greeson, 2009; Tang, Hölzel, & Posner 2015). According to the AMRA, during the 12 years between 1980 and the year of the Dalai
Lama’s challenge, only 23 research studies were conducted. In the intervening 23 years (1992 – 2015), over 3,000 (3,036) studies have sought to gain deeper insight into the ways in which mindfulness affects human health and well-being (AMRA).

A wide variety of this research has begun to elucidate some of the effects of mindfulness practice on brain function and physiology. In a systematic review and meta-analysis of 21 morphometric neuroimaging studies including 300 meditators, Fox et al. (2014) found eight brain regions to be consistently altered. These areas include those correlated with meta-awareness, body awareness, memory, emotion regulation, and intra- and interhemispheric communication. The authors acknowledge that the meaning of these changes in brain structures is currently poorly understood. While they caution for a tempered enthusiasm, they also note that the findings from their analysis take a conservative approach, with the eight regions referenced as experiencing “the most dependable morphological differences” (p. 69).

One neuroscientific study found that after taking an eight-week MBSR course, neuronal activity increased in the networks associated with present-centered experience while also showing decreased activity in the narrative neural network associated with mind-wandering (Farb et al., 2007). These findings suggest an improved ability to remain focused while resisting the potentially maladaptive elaborative thinking (e.g., rumination). Another study revealed increase in brain density of the hippocampus, a structure believed to play a critical role in the regulation of emotions (Hölzel et al., 2011).

Additional studies on mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) have shown similarly promising results. Meditation has been shown to decrease emotional arousal through the calming of the amygdala response activated in reaction to stress (Tang,
Meditation has also been shown to improve executive functioning, emotional regulation, and bolster the immune system by downregulating the stress response (Chan, Shum, Touloupoulou, & Chen, 2008; Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, & Rosenkranz, 2003).

In a study conducted by Lazar et al. (2005), findings indicate that regular meditation practice increased the cortical thickness of brain regions related to “somatosensory, auditory, visual and interoceptive [within the body] processing” (p. 1895). Mindfulness has also been shown to help practitioners cope better with life stresses, improve meta-cognitive skills that may assist in one’s ability to decenter or re-perceive, facilitate secondary appraisal of stressors, mitigate dysfunctional coping styles such as catastrophizing and ruminating, enhance adaptive coping strategies including positive reappraisal, and reduce distress and psychophysiological activation (Greeson, 2009).

Mechanisms of mindfulness appear to facilitate shifts in cognition, emotion, biology, and behavior, which in turn seem to work collectively to improve health (Greeson, 2009). One of these shifts involves a decrease in self-referential processing. Rather than identifying the self with a particular feeling, being self-aware allows space for one to consider that he is not the feeling itself but instead is experiencing the feeling. Tang et al. (2015) suggest that mindfulness meditation may “facilitate a detachment from identification with the self as a static entity and a tendency to identify with the phenomenon of ‘experiencing’ itself is said to emerge” (p. 219). Thoughts and emotions thereby become objects of experience rather than aspects of one’s identity.
Meditation has also been shown to decrease emotional arousal. Research has shown a decrease in amygdala response both during and after meditation practice (Tang et al., 2015). In one study, novice and experienced meditators were shown negative images and the activity of the prefrontal cortex was measured. Novice meditators experienced increased activity in regions of the prefrontal cortex while experienced meditators did not. This may be a result of a decreased need for experienced meditators to disengage, reappraise or otherwise reframe the meaning of the negative stimuli (Tang et al., 2015). This contrasting finding could be the result of mindfulness cultivating an overall state of being that is more accepting of whatever arises in the present moment.

Novice meditators may have previously developed deeply entrenched patterns of stress reactivity. Tang et al. (2015) suggest that during mindfulness meditation, novices are engaged in an active regulation of thoughts. Novices must overcome habitual patterns of thinking and feeling which involves the activation of the prefrontal cortex. Conversely, expert meditators may have developed an instinctive stance that is open and accepting of experience.

In addition to the length of experience, the frequency of meditation practice may play a role. Lazar et al. (2005) found that regular meditation practice may increase the cortical thickness of brain regions related to somatosensory, auditory, visual, and interoceptive processing. The authors suggest that, while these results cannot infer a correlation between meditation practice and increased cortical thickness, it is a reasonable and likely explanation. These findings suggest that the experience of mindfulness meditation may promote neuroplasticity (Lazar et al., 2005; Siegel, 2007). It is also
important to note that these changes, while more pronounced during early stages of life, occur in adults as well. The brain is now known to be malleable throughout the lifespan.

*Mindfulness-Based K-12 Teacher Training*

While the burgeoning field of mindfulness research is in its nascent stages, research on the use of mindfulness in teacher training is younger still. Two recent systematic reviews, however, have provided convincing evidence supporting the use of mindfulness for teachers. Emerson et al. (2017) found that mindfulness-based interventions in the educational setting resulted in improved mindfulness and self-compassion leading to enhanced emotion regulation, teacher self-efficacy, and consequently, reduced stress. Hwang, Bartlett, Greben, and Hand (2017) similarly assert that evidence supports the potential of MBIs to enhance in-service teachers’ well-being and performance. Quantitative studies reveal a reduction in teachers’ levels of stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety. Qualitative studies express evidence of improved ability to cope with and manage stress, difficult emotions, and conflict. Improved awareness helps teachers to recognize habitual reactions, maintain a clear mind and calm affect, and respond skillfully in stressful situations. These reviews are significant in their scope and findings and serve to illustrate the efficacy of the use of mindfulness for educators and to move this field of research forward.

One promising intervention is mMBSR, modeled after John Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program, adapted specifically for teachers. In their pilot study, Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, and Davidson (2013) found that mMBSR improved teacher mindfulness and self-compassion, reduced psychological symptoms including reduction in reactivity,
decreased emotional exhaustion and depersonalization associated with burnout, and reduced attentional biases.

The Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB) program is an intervention developed to address the need to promote healthy emotional balance and decrease destructive emotions (Jennings, 2015). While not developed specifically for teachers, subsequent study of the program selected teachers as participants due to the emotionally demanding nature of their work. The study’s findings support previous research suggesting that meditation practices promote plasticity in the recovery from stressful events and threats to one's emotional well-being (Kemeny et al., 2012).

Meiklejohn et al. (2012) studied the effect of three mindfulness-based training programs for teachers: Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education (MBWE), Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Educators (CARE), and Stress Management And Relaxation Techniques (SMART). Taken together, these early results indicate that mindfulness training can increase teacher well-being and self-efficacy, increase teachers’ ability to manage classroom behavior, and cultivate and maintain healthy and supportive relationships with students.

CARE is among the most widely studied teacher professional development models. CARE is a professional development program designed to reduce teacher distress, promote improvements in well-being, motivational orientation/efficacy, and mindfulness (Jennings et al., 2011). The program addresses three content strands: emotion skills instruction, mindfulness/stress reduction practices, and caring and listening practices.
The emotion skills component utilizes what has been learned through the neuroscience of emotion and is designed to help combat emotional exhaustion and promote the ability to self-induce positive emotions. It combines both didactic instruction and experiential activities. The mindfulness/stress reduction practices focus on present-centered awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise and approaching these with nonjudgmental acceptance. The two primary components include the self-regulation of attention and nonjudgmental awareness. These practices develop teachers’ abilities to resist automatic, reactive appraisals. The caring and listening practices are designed to cultivate teachers’ abilities to listen without judgement, interruption, or correction (Jennings et al., 2011).

Early findings suggest that CARE assists teachers in promoting awareness of stress and emotional reactivity leading to improved emotional regulation and caring for others (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2011). Participants report a shift in emotional reactivity and approach to students through present-centered awareness of emotions and emotional reappraisal (Jennings et al., 2011). This increased awareness and ability to remain neutral during emotionally charged interactions result in improved teacher-student relationships (Schussler et al., 2016). Additionally, educators report improvements in well-being, mindfulness, and efficacy (Jennings et al., 2011). Sharp and Jennings (2015) assert, “One of the most promising mechanisms of action of the CARE training is its ability to aid participants in broadening their mental perspectives of the situations they encounter” (p. 215). In a study designed to better understand the ways in which the mechanisms of the CARE training affect teacher awareness and sense of well-being, Schussler et al. (2016) found that teachers became more aware of their physical
and emotional health; increased somatic awareness of signals of stress; and felt equipped with strategies to ease that stress.

Jennings et al. (2017), in a study significantly larger (224 teachers over 36 urban elementary schools) than previous randomized trials, found that teachers who received CARE experienced positive effects on emotion regulation, mindfulness, psychological distress, and time urgency. As a professional development offering, CARE for Teachers improved teachers’ social and emotional competence and classroom interactions. Improvement in adaptive emotion regulation, an area in which participants received explicit instruction, was seen in teachers’ increased ability to experience difficult emotions and subsequently reappraise them. Additionally, teachers revealed a decreased tendency to suppress emotional expression (Jennings et al., 2017).

Observational data revealed that teachers enrolled in CARE provided higher levels of emotional support to their students when compared with the control group. Instead of exhibiting the characteristic decline in this area, CARE teachers maintained a consistent level of emotional support for their students. What’s more, CARE teachers showed an increase in the sensitivity dimension of emotional support compared with a decline in sensitivity among controls (Jennings et al., 2017).

While there does not appear to be a decrease in the frequency or amplitude of the stressors teachers will face, there is an emerging understanding of the intense emotional landscape of the classroom and the need to nurture teacher well-being. Attention focused on the development of teachers’ social and emotional competencies in order to cultivate peace in the classroom has begun to bring into balance the cognitive and emotional aspects of educating our children. These conditions, along with what we are beginning to
understand about the effects of mindfulness in general and its implications for education, call for even greater attention.

**Conclusion**

As described in the preceding section, much has been learned about the ways in which mindfulness might impact human relationship to experience. Bringing mindful awareness to experience may mediate the maladaptive mechanisms of the automatic stress reaction in favor of a mindfulness-mediated response. Additionally, mindfulness may slow the automatic appraisal of emotion, providing space with which to exercise and enhance greater emotional awareness. Mindfulness research has been promising, suggesting its potential effects on brain function, physiology, and neuroplasticity. Most recently, the use of mindfulness practices to improve teachers’ social and emotional competence along with the benefits to well-being has just begun. The paucity of programs designed for teacher training and limited research on these programs and their effects call for continued and expanded inquiry. A lack of understanding of the relationship between present-centered awareness and emotional regulation necessitates still deeper exploration. For these reasons, the study proposed herein can contribute to this conversation and help to deepen our understanding of the ways in which mindfulness practices might influence teachers’ experiences.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & METHODS

Methodology and Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative research design and phenomenological approach in order to explore the meanings that teachers ascribe to their experiences (Creswell, 2009). This allows for an inductive search for explanations in an attempt to understand the meaning made by the participants, the context of the classroom and how it influences their experience, unexpected phenomena and influences, the process by which events and actions occur, and causal relationships that may develop (Maxwell, 2005).

A social constructivist epistemology frames this work. The teachers who volunteered to take this course have an expressed interest in learning more about the concept of mindfulness and how they might make meaning of this in their personal and professional lives, key tenets of the social constructivist view. Additionally, as the meanings they make will be varied, rather than attempting to simplify and narrow their views, I instead search for the complexities these views present (Creswell, 2009). This resulting understanding is expected to generate new hypotheses about mindfulness as practiced by teachers and inform future professional development design and implementation.

This study included three major phases over a four-month period. On February 12, 2016 the introductory 90-minute in-service included an invitation to participate in the Everyday Mindfulness for Schools course and/or optional study component. In the second stage, from March to June, 2016, the Everyday Mindfulness for Schools course was
explored over seven 90-minute sessions (see Table 3.1). The third stage included focus groups and individual interviews of approximately 45 minutes each.

**Participant Selection and Selection Criteria**

Participants were self-selected from a group of staff members who attended an in-service program on mindfulness. At the conclusion of this session, all were invited to participate in a mindfulness course that would meet for seven sessions over 13 weeks. The course was described as an extension of what was learned during this session both with regard to content and mindfulness practice. Eighteen staff members volunteered to take the course with 12 participating in the voluntary study component.

**Everyday Mindfulness for Schools Course Description**

*Everyday Mindfulness for Schools* is a course designed for educators by an educator in response to the growing need for teacher self-care and burnout prevention. It combines a variety of mindfulness practices including sitting meditation, walking meditation, and the body scan. Participants also learn practical in-the-moment strategies that can be incorporated into everyday life. Educators learn about habitual thought and behavior patterns while exploring the ways in which mindfulness practices can be used to generate new neural pathways.

*Everyday Mindfulness for Schools* normally consists of eight 90-minute sessions held after school on site and are held during alternate weeks over the course of 16 weeks. The schedule was adjusted as stated above in response to scheduling constraints. The course explores the benefits of mindfulness practices for the participants’ personal and
professional lives. The content presented during each session is displayed in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1. Overview of *Everyday Mindfulness for Schools* Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1: Setting Intentions; Formal and Informal Practice; Sitting Practice</td>
<td>Participants explore intentions for taking the course, learn the difference between formal and informal practices, and participate in a basic breath awareness exercise. Sharing a smile moment with a sharing stone is introduced. Attention like a flashlight analogy is introduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2: Sensing into the Body; Gut Feelings/Body Knowledge; Body Scan Practice</td>
<td>Participants reflect on their relationship to their bodies, learn about interoception, and practice the body scan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 3: Understanding the Stress Response; Stressors and Reactions; Pausing and Noticing</td>
<td>Participants work together to identify common stressors and effects, define stress, and ultimately discuss the fight or flight response. Mindful walking is practiced with open awareness. Participants learn to pause, notice, and name the stress response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 4: Working with Triggers; Responding vs. Reacting; Habitual Reaction Practice</td>
<td>Participants identify internal and external events that trigger unfavorable behavioral responses and discuss ways to slow down the reaction, insert a pause, and respond with awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 5: Understanding Thoughts; Thoughts influencing Behavior; Tuning in to Thinking</td>
<td>Participants practice sitting in open awareness and identify thoughts as they come. Thought chains and rumination are discussed. Cognitive distortions are identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 6: Understanding Emotions; Impermanence of States of Mind; Mindful Listening</td>
<td>Participants explore the thought-emotion-sensation connection and discuss the idea that emotions are fleeting and impersonal. Dyads practice mindful listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 7: Uncovering the Inner Critic; Cognitive Distortions/Habits of Mind; Self-Compassion Practice</td>
<td>Participants tune in to their own critical inner dialogue to uncover ways they engage in unsupportive self-talk. Neff’s elements of self-compassion are discussed and self-compassion guided practice is introduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 8: Pulling it all Together; Intentions for Moving Forward</td>
<td>Participants reflect on their growth and most meaningful experiencing in the class. Intentions for continuing the practices are shared and learning is celebrated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each participant is supported in establishing simple formal and informal mindfulness practices that streamline into the busy school day to help manage stress and promote well-being. The primary focus of the course is to develop oneself as a mindful educator, with a secondary focus on introducing mindfulness-based techniques to students.

**Threats to Validity**

In terms of positionality, I was a school administrator and full participant in the course, conducting the study as participant observer. Having never taken a mindfulness course previously, I believe it was important to experience the content alongside the staff in order to obtain a deeper and more contextualized understanding of the participants’ experiences. The threat to validity that my positionality might have on the data was important to consider throughout the process. To mitigate this threat, the course facilitator discussed expectations for confidentiality and its importance to creating a safe and comfortable environment. Additionally, as researcher, I did not take notes during the sessions, trying always to share honestly and sincerely in ways that mirrored the sharing of other participants. Rather, I took notes immediately after each session to capture the essence of the class content, activities, and discussions.

In order to guard against researcher bias, I explored my assumptions about what mindfulness is and how it might impact teacher experience. I actively sought to “bracket” these beliefs in order to be better able to suspend judgement, see things more clearly, and make the familiar strange (Laverty, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). Reactivity is another potential threat to validity. While it is not possible to eliminate my influence on the setting, my understanding of it informs the findings discussed in subsequent pages. I designed
instruments intended to allow for teachers to tell their stories, rather than respond to leading questions. I used triangulation and comparison to help reduce the threats to validity. Triangulation allowed me to identify common and discrepant themes as well as help to inform subsequent instruments. It is also important to note that the instruments used in this study (focus groups, interviews, journals) are all vulnerable to self-report bias (Maxwell, 2013), which I tried to counter by means of probing questions to help develop thick descriptions of experience.

Data Collection

Phenomenological methodology seeks to elicit rich descriptions of experiences and the ways in which people make meaning of their lived experiences (Laverty, 2003). To this end, it is important to elicit narrative accounts of the ways in which mindfulness has been experienced by the teachers in this study. The instruments used to collect these data include participant journals, focus groups, and interviews.

Each participant kept a research journal as a normal component of the course. The journal prompts were germane to the content learned during each session and provided to participants at the conclusion of each class. Participants were encouraged to keep these journals with them in order to record their reflections between class sessions. Class sessions began with a voluntary sharing of aspects of their journals in small groups and/or with the larger group. These journals provided an opportunity for participants to capture their experiences individually while serving as points of discussion during class. Those participating in the study submitted their journal entries at the conclusion of the course. Each journal entry allowed me to gain insight into the ways in which participants have applied the content to their daily lives.
Focus groups are particularly useful when exploring processes of social interaction and how knowledge and ideas are constructed within a group context (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This is relevant to this study as teachers learned together through the *Everyday Mindfulness for Teachers* course. The focus group format allowed participants to share each other’s experiences, explore and clarify their views, and reveal aspects of understanding that might otherwise go unnoticed (Kitzinger, 1995). The resulting dialogue was essential to developing rich descriptions that proved to be generative. The focus group questions were designed to have participants put into words their personal and evolving understanding of mindfulness, those practices and concepts that are most useful, and moments when mindfulness was applied to everyday life. As part of the focus group interview guide, participants were encouraged throughout the discussion to engage in a dialogue with the group.

The use of interviews is critical to gaining individual insight into participants’ experiences as they each understand them. Maxwell (2005) describes the difference between instrumentalist and realist approaches. The instrumentalist approach, concerned with issues of validity threats, prefers observable and measurable data. Researchers with a realist approach regard “unobserved phenomena as *real*, and their data as *evidence* about these, to be used critically to develop and test ideas… about phenomena” (p. 73). These data can then be used to explore how each teacher’s described experience compares with others as well as understanding the range and variation of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interview guide for this study was designed to explore various areas of teachers’ experience. Questions aimed for insights into
participants’ personal mindfulness practice, intrapersonal experience, and interpersonal experience. The questions were designed to be open-ended and not leading.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was used to inform this study. This strategy of inquiry allowed theory to be developed throughout the study, emerging from the participants’ points of view, and thereby “grounded” in the data itself (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2012). Data analysis began with memos as an important analytical tool to help understand theories as they emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As described by Schwandt (2015), analysis involves a continuous comparison of data in order to identify similarities and differences. Theoretical sampling was used to explore teachers’ understanding of their experiences until reaching the point of what Schwandt (2015) calls “theoretical saturation,” the point at which further analysis produced no new insight.
CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Approach to Analysis

This study utilizes a phenomenological approach focusing on participants’ lived experiences. It set out to understand how teachers learn, experience, and practice mindfulness. It was designed to explore the ways in which these experiences impact teacher perceptions of themselves and others, and to understand how mindfulness might influence teachers’ interactions with students, colleagues, and family.

This research draws upon grounded theory, relying on an inductive process to generate theories from the data. An open coding process resulted in emergent codes that were then organized into themes. I evaluated the frequency, the number of times a code was applied, and density, the number of times a code co-occurred with another code, of each original code. The patterns that emerged suggested the significance of particular codes and which warranted further investigation. These patterns thereby informed the importance and universality of the ideas and experiences expressed.

An integrative approach was also employed throughout the analytic process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Formative analysis informed subsequent data collection as in the revision of the interview protocol following focus group discussions. The protocol was revised to include questions designed to explore the emergent concepts of Normalizing and Connectedness. An intentional, recursive, and flexible approach to data analysis was employed. The preliminary analysis initiated a shift in the study’s original design that is explained further in descriptions of the various phases of the analytic process.
Current research in the field of mindfulness in education was used to conceptualize, refine, and define these emergent codes. The table below represents those codes most influential during this stage of analysis.

Table 4.1. *Relevant Codes from Research on Mindfulness in Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Study</th>
<th>Relevant Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharp and Jennings (2015)</td>
<td>Present-centered awareness of emotions</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Ability to reappraise situations and shift perspectives</td>
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<td>Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, &amp; Frank (2016)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Compassion/Empathy – “feeling for” or “feeling with” another person</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community/Collegiality – feeling connected</td>
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<td>o Respect &amp; Recognition</td>
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<td>o Regulation &amp; Responsiveness</td>
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Additionally, multiple versions of a code diagram were created to show the relationships among codes. Both will be displayed and described below.
Phases of Analysis

My analytic process included five phases. During phase one, I coded all interviews inductively, allowing themes to emerge based upon the participants’ responses and descriptions. I analyzed these data with regard to both frequency and density. This phase resulted in 776 quotations represented by 54 codes.

Phase two included a secondary analysis of the salient portions of the transcripts that were generated from the phase one analysis (776 quotations). Throughout this review process, I identified where codes were not applied but were accurate descriptors. For example, the following quote was initially coded only as “Control”: “It’s about conscious choices, and not endless stream [sic] of thoughts, that I just hold on to a feeling, and hang on wherever it’s going to take me. In doing that, my time is much more productive.” After reviewing this quote, I added the code, “Response: Self,” to indicate that this example not only shows how the participant is able to gain control, but also choose a response rather than reacting spontaneously.

The analysis in phase two resulted in the emergence of four additional codes: Hurry, Impact, Overwhelmed, and Pause, Stop, Breathe. These new codes were then analyzed to discern their significance. Hurry was coded only four times and appeared to be closely related with the code Overwhelmed, which appeared only three times. The Impact code was applied eight times and was used to capture expressions of how mindfulness has had an impact while not explicitly stating that impact as “profound.” These three codes did not appear with significant frequency or density.

The Pause, Stop, Breathe code generated 52 occurrences while co-occurring with 27 codes (142 instances of co-occurrence). Due to the significance of this observation, I
counted the number of quotes associated with each of these 27 co-occurrences as represented in Table 4.2 below. It most frequently overlapped with instances where participants noticed themselves responding rather than reacting (28). It also coincided with descriptions of mindfulness as a strategy (16), suggesting that pausing might be an important mechanism of the strategies used to respond rather than react. The pause code was also present when participants describe their witnessing of others’ reactions (11) and an overall awareness of others (10). Pausing coincided with multiple awareness codes (21 total co-occurrences) including Awareness: Others (10), Awareness: Self (7), and Awareness: Self: Physical (4). Table 4.3 presents every code, along with its frequency and density, in phases one and two. Table 4.4 presents all codes resulting from the phase two analysis and sorts them by a sum of both frequency and density.
Table 4.2. *Density of Pause Code*

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During phase three of analysis, I collapsed the original 54 codes and identified 10 major themes. Table 4.5 organizes these codes by theme and includes definitions for each.

Table 4.5. Themes, Codes, and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
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<th>Code Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Mindfulness: Attention</td>
<td>MND:ATT</td>
<td>Participant notices or exerts effort to focus attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindfulness: Present-centered awareness</td>
<td>MND:PRES</td>
<td>Participant describes being present in the moment, noticing mind-wandering and bringing attention back to the present</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindfulness: Non-reactivity (calm/control)</td>
<td>MND:NRCT</td>
<td>Participant allows an experience (inner/outer) to be as it is without getting pulled away; describes calm, ease, decreased agitation or excitability; exercises control rather than being controlled by circumstances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindfulness: Acceptance</td>
<td>MND:ACC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizes a situation as valid without feeling compelled to change it; Attempts to see things as they are without judgement or interpretation; taking a non-evaluative stance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self</td>
<td>Awareness: Self: Physical</td>
<td>AS:PHYS</td>
<td>Participant describes/expresses awareness of physical responses to stress, anxiety, upset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self: Thoughts: Inner Critic</td>
<td>AS:TH:IC</td>
<td>Participant describes an awareness of critical self-talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self: Thoughts: Rumination</td>
<td>AS:TH:RUM</td>
<td>Participant describes an awareness of getting “stuck” in repeated thought patterns, particularly negative, unproductive, destructive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self: Emotions: Description</td>
<td>AS:EM:DSC</td>
<td>Participant describes awareness and characteristics of emotions, their onset and effect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self: Emotions: Regulation</td>
<td>AS:EM:REG</td>
<td>Participant describes an awareness of efforts/ability to regulate emotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self: Reactivity</td>
<td>AS:RCT</td>
<td>Participant describes an awareness of reacting habitually/automatically</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self: Stress: Time Urgency</td>
<td>AS:ST:TU</td>
<td>Participant describes a sense of hurry, having a shortage of time, being late</td>
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<td>Awareness: Self: Stress: Task Volume</td>
<td>AS:ST:TSK</td>
<td>Participant describes having a lot to do, feeling overwhelmed with many responsibilities to manage at once</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Subcategory</td>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self</td>
<td>Stress: Professional</td>
<td>AS:ST:PRF</td>
<td>Participant describes many job responsibilities and the pressure to perform</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Self</td>
<td>Stress: Family</td>
<td>AS:ST:FMLY</td>
<td>Participant describes personal family concerns/relationships; balance between family and work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness: Others</td>
<td>Reactivity</td>
<td>AO:RCT</td>
<td>Participant describes others’ tendency to instinctively react without the buffering effects of thought and deliberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness: Others</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>AO:RSP</td>
<td>Participant describes others’ ability to resist instinctive reactions in favor of thoughtful and deliberate responsive actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice: Formal</td>
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<td>PR:FRM</td>
<td>Participant describes formal practices named, described, applied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice: Informal/Strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td>PR:INFRM</td>
<td>Participant describes bringing practices into daily interactions; used strategically</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice: with Students</td>
<td></td>
<td>PR:STD</td>
<td>Participant describes bringing practices into the classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindful Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mindful Response:</td>
<td>Pause</td>
<td>MR:PS</td>
<td>Participant describes stopping, taking a breath, slowing down; as a tool buffering reactivity and facilitating the choosing of a response; recognition of the value of pausing, for themselves and for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful Response:</td>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>MR:DIST</td>
<td>Participant describes the ability to resist becoming emotionally engaged/invested while maintaining an objective perspective; dispassionate observation; ability to depersonalize; specifically noting the following: observing from a distance, creating space between self and event/emotion/thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful Response:</td>
<td>Reappraisal</td>
<td>MR:RAP</td>
<td>Participant describes evaluating a situation and considering a different interpretation; shifting perspectives based upon reevaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful Response:</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td>MR:RSP</td>
<td>Participant describes how he/she would analyze a situation and choose to respond rather than react to internal or external experience (thinking before acting); having an awareness of the opportunity to choose a response; awareness//description of “the anatomy of a response”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication:</td>
<td>Reception: (Listening)</td>
<td>COM:REC</td>
<td>Participant describes listening attentively, asking questions, carefully considering what is being said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication:</td>
<td>Transmission (Speaking)</td>
<td>COM:TRNS</td>
<td>Participant describes carefully choosing words, phrases, tone when communicating</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Phase four includes a preliminary exploration of the relationships between and among these themes. The conceptual display below (Figure 4.1) provides a visual representation of these relationships and their influence on each other.
In phase five, the original themes were collapsed once again resulting in seven major themes. Each theme along with representative quotes, are displayed in Table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6. Themes and Representative Quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mindfulness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>“That piece of it, I think, has been really helpful because bringing me back to the moment, I’m giving things my full attention, whereas maybe before I thought I was giving them my full attention, and thought maybe I could multitask all these things at once.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present-centered awareness</td>
<td>“…look into their eyes, and think about what they’re thinking, and what they’re feeling, and live more in that moment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>“The inner critic is nothing but thoughts and that you can control yourself. I thought that that was incredibly empowering and just ... being nonjudgmental for yourself, which then extends out. When you're not judgmental of yourself, then you become less critical of others.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>“Just even that awareness that I am thinking about, “Whoa.” I notice that you’re thinking that way or responding that way where obviously if I was upset about something, I knew that I was upset, but I never really stopped and said, “Oh, that’s interesting I reacted that way.” Kind of like observing myself on the outside, like stepping back and looking at my reactions apart from myself, in a way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>“I’m seeing other people getting stuck on someone who's irritating them or something that has frustrated them. I've noticed things like that more and then that makes me question myself like, ‘Am I doing that in my own life? Where can I improve?’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pause</td>
<td>“It's this pause. It's this, ‘Stop and think. Stop and name it. Stop and choose a response. Stop and breathe.’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>“I feel like sometimes I can take myself out of myself, and it's more of an objective kind of view, or perspective on what I'm thinking, what I'm doing, or how I'm behaving.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Reactivity</td>
<td>“The biggest thing that I took away was that you are in charge of your response. You don’t have to react to this situation.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>“You listen and try to figure out what the person means by that. In school with children, it's challenging because, you know... what they say to us sometimes. The kids are saying, &quot;I hate this class,&quot; but it really means, &quot;I don't know how to do this.&quot; Just listening and trying to understand, not judging yourself, not taking it personally when somebody says that.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
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Communication Speaking

“It's made me more thoughtful in my approach with them, and to try and be like a neutral party, no matter what kind of stuff I'm approaching them with. Whether it's really positive or really negative. I've tried to start to question them more, as opposed to coming to them with preconceived notions... That has definitely changed the way I talk to them.”

Compassion

“You have these thoughts about yourself. “Oh God, that was so stupid, why did I say that?” Just being able to share that and recognize that other people are experiencing that. I think it makes you feel closer to people, too, because you have something that you share in common and that you understand. You can have more empathy for other people. It maybe gives you a lens into their world.”

Connectedness

“Being able to hear about them and their lives and hear about their feelings really, sort of like what was brought up was just... You see them in the hallway and you just have this different connection to them... This really did bring about a sense of community within the group of people that were there.”

Normalizing

“The thoughts I had, all of them, all of those negative thoughts were not exclusively mine, that other people feel it, too. It's a sense of not feeling like an oddball, or somewhat of a freak. I don't want to say misery loves company, but there's a comfort in knowing that you're near these people who you think are so confident, and not that you don't want them to be, but you think they have something that you don't, or there's something you lack, or something you don't do right that might bring that about, everybody felt it. There's just a comfort.”

As I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how these themes interact with each other, I looked more closely at the frequency and density of codes within and across themes. I began by counting the co-occurrences between all represented codes. For
example, the present (*P-C Awareness*) code co-occurs with *attention* eight times. Table 4.7 displays this work.

**Table 4.7. Density of All Paired Codes in Seven Major Themes**

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</tbody>
</table>

Once I completed this process, I added the total number of co-occurrences between themes. For example, the total number of co-occurring codes for the Mindfulness and Awareness themes are 36, the sum of all co-occurrences between them (5, 6, 1, 5, 1, 4, 2, 2, 4, 4). I continued this process for every code associated with each of the seven major themes.
Table 4.8 displays the results of the process described above and illustrates the relative strength of the relationships between pairs of themes. The numbers represent the density between those paired themes. The higher the density, the stronger the presumed relationship. As a qualitative study, it is important to note that this is suggestive and has helped to guide my thinking about these relationships and inform the revised conceptual display (Figure 4.2).

Table 4.8. *Total Density by Theme Pairs*

The cells intersected by gray squares are self-referential. In other words, these numbers represent the number of co-occurrences of codes within that particular theme.
The results in these instances appear in part to be related to the number of codes within each theme. For example, the *Response* theme consists of five codes resulting in 49 co-occurrences within that theme. The *Awareness* theme consists of only three codes and results in 14 co-occurrences. It thereby stands to reason that themes with fewer codes would result in lower *self-referential* co-occurrences. With that said, the strong relationships within this theme seem to suggest that these aspects of responsiveness are significantly reinforcing.

The highest number of code co-occurrences range from 12 to 28. This observation prompted me to explore this more closely. This analysis reveals that five of these code pairs include the Response theme. This further supports the supportive nature of the mechanisms of a mindful response. Table 4.9 displays representative quotes from these paired codes.

Table 4.9. *Representative Quotations from High Density Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Density</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Representative Quotes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Response, Pause</td>
<td>“In most cases, as I'm being mindfulness [sic] about my response, making a choice up front about how you’re going to respond, in the times I was mindful about pausing and responding, choosing a response rather than reacting, as I thought about it later I thought, in doing that I affected the outcome in a positive way, in a way I would have preferred it to go.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Awareness: Self Distance</td>
<td>“I tend to perseverate on any little issue and I've always done that. I think this has helped me... I've noticed myself stopping that. I'll address whatever the problem is, if it's a parent email that had me upset or even at home like my kids are irritating me or whatever it is, if I'm driving and somebody cuts me off, then I can't get off that. I'm stuck on that. I've realized that because of the [sic] Mindfulness I'm immediately recognizing, “Okay, this is...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
what you're doing. You're perseverating again. You're stuck on this,” and I take a step back from it and it's been so much easier to acknowledge what I'm doing and recognize it and then it actually stops…”

| 17 | Response Awareness: Self | “…understanding the stress response, knowing the difference between the response and the reaction, and just becoming more aware of that in myself and in others. To take that moment to understand where it's coming from, and realize if it's something that needs a reaction in the moment, or something that I can just take a deep breath, step away, and realize that it's not the most important thing at that moment.” |
| 15 | Response Distance | “I can't necessarily change who I am, but I can curb and control times where I may lose my temper. There are times where Mindfulness has allowed me to step back from the situation that could get volatile and deal with it in a better way.” |
| 12 | Response Control | “Now I kind of make choices about, ‘Is that threatening, truly threatening to me, should it generate stress, or can I name it something else, just like feeling a little anxious.’ Having that choice, making that choice, gives you a better sense of control. You're not as vulnerable to the stresses that I previously was prey to.” |
| 12 | Response Communication | “It's made me more thoughtful in my approach with them, and to try and be like a neutral party, no matter what kind of stuff I'm approaching them with. Whether it's really positive or really negative. I've tried to start to question them more, as opposed to coming to them with preconceived notions, I guess might be a better way to say it. That [mindfulness] has definitely changed the way I talk to them.” |
| 12 | Communication Listening: Active | “I think there was difficulty communicating with them [students]. I was just mindful of the fact that it was, that there was some sort of a disconnect. I was just trying to listen to communicate better with them, practicing mindfulness on that scale. Just with being a better listener, rather than... I'm always flying down the hallway with a cart, saying, ‘Walk with me, I have to get to the next place.’” |
The following conceptual display (Figure 4.2) further explores the relationships between these themes. This display is organized into the seven themes sized according to the total frequency of their representative codes. The connecting lines drawn between themes represent the density that emerged between them. Each theme displays both the frequency and density of the theme in total along with the frequency and density of each individual code within that theme.
Figure 4.2. Schematic Map of Relationships between Themes

[Diagram showing the relationships between themes such as Mindfulness, Awareness, Response, Communication, Connectedness, Normalizing, and Compassion, with codes indicating frequency and density of occurrences.]
The strongest relationship is between the Awareness and Response themes with a density of 84. There are also very strong relationships between the following theme pairs: Mindfulness/Response (57), Mindfulness/Awareness (36), Response/Communication (33), and Awareness/Communication (35). While not as strong as these pairs, the following pairs also show a strong connection between them: Awareness/Compassion (16), Mindfulness/Communication (15), and Response/Compassion (11).

**Main Findings**

This section summarizes the main findings of this study with additional detail in subsequent sections dedicated to each particular theme. Each of the seven themes presented have emerged as significant with several notable relationships highlighting their importance. As Figure 4.2 illustrates, there is a strong connection among the Mindfulness, Awareness, and Response themes as evidenced by their high level of co-occurrence between theme pairs. These themes also have the highest frequency signifying the importance participants place on these constructs.

This display also demonstrates the strong connection between the Communication theme and the Response and Awareness themes. While Communication as a construct is a particular type of response, its prevalence demonstrates participants’ views of the effect mindfulness has exerted on their ability to communicate with others.

While the connections between and among the Connected, Normalizing, and Compassion themes are weaker by comparison, participants have expressed the significance of these constructs relative to their experiences.
Mindfulness, Awareness, and Response

Mindfulness, Awareness, and Response are closely connected constructs that emerge from and support each other. Mindfulness can certainly be seen as the driving force behind every finding. What these results show is the influence the mechanisms of mindfulness (attention, present-centered awareness, acceptance, and non-reactivity) have on teachers’ lived experience.

First, mindfulness is instrumental in increasing awareness of oneself and others (36) and critical to teachers’ ability to respond (57). Without awareness, one remains oblivious to personal thoughts and feelings and is equally unlikely to perceive others’ thoughts and feelings.

Second, responding involves specific and distinct practices. These practices are instrumental in initiating and enacting a mindful response. These practices (pausing and distancing) also act as mechanisms common to responding and absent during impulsive reactions. Participants frequently reference pausing and distancing when describing both the ability to refrain from reactivity and engage in a response. Increased awareness supports both pausing (21) and distancing (33) as evidenced by their high co-occurrence.

Third, communication is a specific form of responding and not a mechanism of a mindful response. Communication emerges as an important and common expression of a response both in terms of transmission (communication) and in terms of reception (listening).

Fourth, expressions of compassion and empathy are most evident in relation to the Awareness and Response themes. Increased awareness fosters a greater sense of empathy and compassion. Compassion and empathy encourage thoughtful consideration of
another’s circumstances and thereby promotes the expression of a mindful response. Distancing, a mechanism of a mindful response, provides a broadened perspective with which participants could more clearly consider another’s experience. This thereby supports one’s ability to remain calm and respond with compassion.

Fifth, Normalizing and Connectedness as concepts first appeared during the focus group sessions immediately following the final class. As participants expounded upon these concepts during the interview process, these constructs emerged as significant and particularly meaningful themes. Normalizing refers to teachers’ recognition that their negative experiences and struggles are not unique to themselves but rather experiences common to everyone. This realization relieved teachers from feelings of isolation and aberrance and instead provided comfort in knowing that they were in fact normal.

This sense of normalizing grew out of the sharing that took place during the class sessions. Participants describe the building of community as an outgrowth of feelings of “connectedness.” During these sessions, teachers often share intimate and at times emotionally charged experiences. Participants would willingly leave themselves vulnerable to each other while cultivating a community of trust and caring. In this way, the same opportunities that allowed teachers to feel joined through their common suffering also forged a sense of community and Connectedness that many described with great affection.
Findings by Theme

MINDFULNESS. The mindfulness theme comprises participants’ expressions of focusing attention, present moment awareness, acceptance of experience, non-reactivity as characterized by a sense of calm and control. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the codes Attention: focused (24) and Attention: divided (18) in phase one which were subsequently combined to become the construct of Mindfulness: Attention (45) in phase two.

The construct of Mindfulness: Attention explores the ways in which participants notice qualities of attention along with their efforts to gain and focus attention. The themes that emerged from this exploration includes the following an awareness of mind wandering, dispersion, and distraction; focusing attention; and attending to the present.

Mind Wandering: Taming the Squirrel

Participants describe their minds’ tendency to wander and scatter focus on multiple things at once. They further express the realization that this behavior interferes with an ability to be present. There is a recognition that while they may have previously subscribed to the idea that they could be productive by multitasking, they now share that this behavior is indeed inefficient. During class, the metaphor of a flashlight was used to illustrate the nature of attention and the individual’s ability to control its direction. One teacher comments how this “flashlight of attention” helps to focus attention on the present. “I think I'm like a squirrel. Because of my personality and how I’m all over the place most of the time. Now I’m more aware… present in the moment.”

Another describes a tendency to succumb unwittingly to mind wandering and the inherent inefficiencies of this behavior:
I could be doing my report card comments, and thinking about what I’m making for dinner, and talking about what clothes have to get laid out for the girls the next day. Whatever it might be, however we’re wandering. It’s like, no, you really can’t do all of that, and do things well. You can’t be in five different places at once. You can’t be there physically and then mentally... I think that has been a huge help for me, because I catch myself constantly now, where I don’t think before it even phased me that I was in five different places in my head at once.

One participant describes how mind wandering sometimes allows attention to veer quite far from what is actually happening:

Sometimes you go off on a tangent, and you forget you were supposed to be over here, and you're in some other orbit, some other galaxy, and you don't even realize you've wandered because you're just following that trail of thoughts, one that leads right into the next.

Mind wandering is seen not only as negatively affecting one’s ability to focus and truly listen, but as pulling one from enjoyable experiences and negatively impacting the quality of interpersonal interactions:

Even though I'm in a moment with somebody, I would be thinking about the five, six, seven other things. This has really taught me to say, "Wait a second. You're drifting, come back to this." Or, "Wait a second. You're thinking about something you shouldn't be thinking about. This is the moment we're in. This is what we have to focus on.

Focusing Attention

This increased awareness of the distracted mind and its seemingly relentless tendency to wander became an impetus to improve the quality of attention. One participant comments on how she’s experienced a difference in her quality of attention.

That piece of it, I think, has been really helpful because … bringing me back to the moment, I'm giving things my full attention, whereas maybe before I thought of giving them my full attention, and thought maybe I could multitask all these things at once.

Expanding upon the flashlight metaphor, its effectiveness lies in its ability to keep a steady aim on the object its user wishes to illuminate. Participants describe our attention
as often moving spastically and involuntarily from one place to the next. In the following
description, the participant refers to having “1,000 flashlights” to illustrate the extent to
which thoughts can divide one’s attention.

[Y]ou start thinking about all these different things. You have 1000 flashlights, remember what she [course instructor] was saying, the flashlights, how to bring it back to just one? I do that all the time now. Just breathe, come back to one, and that never happened before.

Attending to the Present

The future appears to be a significant distractor often holding one’s attention hostage. Participants describe being multiple steps ahead, making extensive and scrolling mental lists, and often feeling helpless against the pull of anticipation. One teacher describes how awareness of this habit exposed her previously held belief that she listened well. “Where I thought I was listening before, maybe I wasn't because I was eight steps ahead, thinking of something else.”

Another describes the ways in which pausing was a precursor to paying attention. The discussion preceding the following excerpt referred to the use of the “pause,” the “two-step” technique of “pause and fill in the blank.” When the participant refers to “Okay, use it. Stop here,” she is referring to using this technique. In this example, the idea of “stopping” or “pausing” is described as a precursor to paying attention.

Being present in that moment ... I think by stopping and doing that, it keeps you present. I find myself really getting it when I’m in transition times in my day whether it's in the morning or when the kids are coming into school or there’s a transition in the classroom. That tends to be when all the events are happening and I could be in five different places in my mind, but then I'm being forced to like, "Okay, use it. Stop here. What are we going to do? How am I going to react? Name my emotion. Is that the right way to respond right now?" and just walk myself through it.
Pausing, or “stepping back” as the following participant describes it, is a tool used to bring full attention to sensory experience allowing one to “savor” and cope with situations.

It’s a tool to be able to handle, to step back and sense things and *use* your senses. To taste, to feel, to smell, to touch, all those things would be things we seem to take for granted, especially in a fast-paced world. To step back, it helps in those ways to savor things, but also in how to handle situations.

**PRESENT.** The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the code *Present* (21) in phase one, increased to 23 occurrences in phase two. The construct *Present: Present-centered awareness* explores the ways in which participants describe being present in the moment, noticing the mind’s tendency to be pulled from the present, and efforts to bring attention back to the present.

Present-centered awareness is often referred to as “staying in the moment.” It is described as fostering connection, acceptance, and gratitude. The absence of present-centered awareness was found to obscure understanding of the true source of upset and a tendency toward distraction and dispersion of thought. Present-centered awareness overlaps multiple codes as witnessed throughout this study. For this reason, some of this is only briefly touched upon in this section and more thoroughly explored in others.

*Fostering Connection, Acceptance, and Gratitude*

As is more thoroughly explored in the *Communication* and *Attention* constructs, attending to the present enhances the quality of interpersonal interactions. Participants describe its ability to foster a sense of connection through intent listening and protection from distraction. One teacher expresses being “much more attentive, not only to words, but to the person… and can look into their eyes, and think about what they’re thinking, and what they’re feeling, and live more in that moment.” Another describes how
maintaining present-centered awareness results in an increased ability to listen stating,

“Being present in that moment… I think by stopping and [pausing], it keeps you present.”

Another describes present-centered awareness as having the effect of fostering the acceptance of experience, maintaining a healthy perspective on the significance of particular stressors, and focusing on enjoyment of the present moment:

It's just the things that we focus on, well people focus on, isn't really that important. Like you just said, is there a Sabertooth tiger ready to attack me, or is this not a big deal? "Our dishwasher's broken, our basement's been flooding." All these things. Let's just fix it. Let's find a way to fix it. Let's not get mad about it and waste an entire night where we could be enjoying a meal together. If there's nothing we can do about it right now, let's enjoy the now, and we'll worry about that tomorrow. That's been a big switch for me...

One participant describes how staying in the moment enriches experience and cultivates a sense of gratitude. This gratitude was expressed in a number of ways including a deep appreciation of relationships and a recognition of an interconnectedness previously unrecognized:

I just really stopped for that moment and had gratitude for that moment. It's not that I wouldn't appreciate it in the past. Of course I would, but I am just saying that I kind of held onto that and just stayed connected with that child for that moment, and just had that moment of gratitude for the experience.

In another instance, a teacher describes the role eating mindfully plays in this process:

When I ate my lunch today, and I've been doing that all weekend by the way, with the food, because I just think that not only to just be in the moment eating it and tasting and enjoying it because I started doing that before, but the appreciation and the gratitude. I started putting that into my food because I've been recently working on gratitude, what I'm grateful for, and I find that I have a much longer list than I... I used to think about all the things I didn't have or all the things I wanted, but I never realized all the things I did [have]…

65
Absence of Present-Centered Awareness

The absence of present-centered awareness is described as having the effect of promoting a tendency toward reactivity. Placing oneself in the present may lead to increased awareness and empathy.

That's the thing that stood out to me the most in my colleagues. I've been noticing they're very reactive, as opposed to trying to put themselves in the moment, put themselves with the student, like is this really why I'm upset right now?

Conversely, maintaining an awareness of the present moment mitigates reactivity in favor of choosing a thoughtful response. One teacher describes how an awareness of her thoughts and emotions in the moment helps her to do this.

[I]t's really made me more aware of what's going on inside of my head, and allowed me some strategies to kind of take a step back and really go through it in my head at the moment, and know how to choose my response, instead of just reacting to my emotions.

ACCEPTANCE. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the “Acceptance” code. After phase one, there were 20 occurrences which increased to 26 in phase two. These 26 quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them. The construct of Acceptance explores the ways in which teachers describe an acceptance of present conditions and experiences. One emergent theme includes an acceptance of one’s suffering as normal (Normalizing). A second theme reveals how the acceptance of one’s own suffering may result in an acceptance of and empathy toward others. The third theme reveals the liberating effect of acceptance resulting in a mitigation of negative emotions and a freedom from the compulsion to change things.
Normalizing

While the notion of normalizing is explored in greater depth in a section to follow, its relationship with the construct of acceptance is worth noting here. One of the aspects of normalizing that has emerged is the participants’ realization that they are not “alone.” Accepting others’ expressions of suffering, particularly during class sessions, provides a sense of relief that tempers the sense of isolation sometimes felt. One participant shares her struggle with harsh self-judgement and the battle with often feeling that things and she “should” be different. “I think that, you know, being able to accept that and hear other people's challenges really helped me feel less by myself.”

In addition to participants expressing relief at not feeling alone, teachers also expressed solace in feeling connected to others, particularly those relationships formed in the intimate group setting of the class.

[W]e built this relationship throughout the entire year of allowing them to know we all go through so much. Not just talking about it in the eyes of a character in a story, but that we're all like a character in our own story in how we go about things, and how we go through stress together ... That it's okay ... I think that was one of the big takeaways in the small group. It's okay to have those feelings. You're going to be okay. You're going to live. We're not in danger.

The idea of common suffering was taken out of its often fictional setting and placed squarely in the reality of the people in the room. Far from remaining in the abstract, this universal notion, expressed through examples and strong emotion, became quite real. This shared understanding provided a sense of reassurance, support, and acceptance.

Acceptance of Self and Others

A second theme within the construct of acceptance is the sentiment that an acceptance of oneself may lead to the acceptance of and positive outlook toward others. One topic discussed during the class was the existence and persistence of the inner critic,
that critical voice within that passes judgment on ourselves. In the following comment, a
teacher expresses how coming to terms with and accepting the inner critic can also help
one to be less critical of others.

The inner critic is nothing but thoughts and that you can control yourself. I
thought that that was incredibly empowering and just ... Being nonjudgmental for
yourself, which then extends out. When you're not judgmental of yourself, then
you become less critical of others.

Another teacher similarly expresses her sense of how self-acceptance can extend to
support a wider acceptance of others. “Then I can feel more positive about myself and
those around me because I'm more accepting of myself.”

Acceptance as Liberating

As participants would recount stressful situations in which they witnessed others
expressing strong negative emotions, the participants’ ability to accept what was
happening and refrain from judgement appeared to have a liberating effect. In one
example, a participant recounts the way in which another teacher might enter a meeting
and monopolize portions of this time to complain about personal issues. She concedes,
“where I would be frustrated and maybe aggravated, I try to just step back and let them
be who they are to a certain extent.” Another describes a situation in which a partner
becomes upset and how the participant simply lets the person have that moment and,
rather than engaging in a conflict, chooses a different response.

I would want to [say], "That's ridiculous! It's not a big deal. Stop yelling. It's just a
fridge. We can fix it!" He wasn't really upset about the refrigerator, he was upset
at something that happened two hours ago and it was coming out. To just kind of
let him have that, and stop trying to fix that, and then kind of be like, "All right,
well, you know what? We haven't stopped since we got home… Let's just have a
cup of coffee and just put it all away. Who cares? The dishes are not done, I don't
care, just stop."
In this case, acceptance allowed the participant to stay emotionally removed from the situation. Instead of reacting as might have previously occurred, she was able to choose a different response.

Acceptance also appears to bring freedom from feeling the need to change things. One teacher described an improved ability to accept that others simply have different ways of doing things and that does not make those approaches wrong.

Just recognizing those differences in each other and then being able, instead of immediately reacting to that, "Why didn't you do that? Why didn't you do this? That's the stupid way to do things." To be able to discuss it with the people… You just have a conflict of interest. Sometimes what you want and what they want is not necessarily going to be the same thing.

CALM and CONTROL. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the Calm and Control codes. After phase one, there were 53 combined occurrences (Calm – 36, Control – 17) which increased to 69 (Calm – 47, Control – 22) in phase two. These 69 quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The constructs of Calm and Control represent the “non-reactivity” aspect of mindfulness and includes participant descriptions of allowing experience (both internal and external) to be as it is without being pulled away. Additionally, this construct contains explanations of participants acting with calm, ease, and decreased agitation or excitability. Examples also provide an accounting of instances when teachers exercise control rather than being controlled by circumstances. Emerging from these data are the themes of calm and control as a tool used to manage difficult circumstances and as a noticeable shift in the way they reacted prior to practicing mindfulness.
As Tool

Participants describe the idea of remaining calm and in control as a tool used to positively impact interactions with others. One teacher describes how, once recognizing that she was feeling annoyed in the classroom, took steps to calm herself. “I’ve been doing this thing where I turn to the chalkboard and just breathe. I turn back and then I can talk to them.” Another credits mindfulness with equipping her with tools to assist in maintaining control during stressful moments:

I can't necessarily change who I am, but I can curb and control times where I may lose my temper. There are times where mindfulness has allowed me to step back from the situation that could get volatile and deal with it in a better way.

Teachers also convey an ability to simply not respond. One shares a particularly difficult interaction in which she chose to remain calm. When retelling this incident she states, “I bit my tongue. I knew that I should not say anything, because if I interfered, then there was the chance that more harm could come. I kept quiet.”

Another participant describes taking deliberate steps taken to communicate in a way that kept a situation from escalating:

I just specifically talked very, and I know this is hard to believe, very calmly and monotone and just kept it calm and kept asking questions. I found that the situation really deescalated. That day, I remembered it clicking for me like, "Okay, if I can use this approach, then it won't always be this back and forth." I've really been trying to be mindful in how I'm approaching conflict.

The following example illustrates how the decision to stay calm provides an opportunity to thoughtfully consider what was happening and change an otherwise predictable course:

I'm remaining calm. I'm like, "Okay you need to rethink. I know which way this is going" and I think it threw him... He's like, "Wait a minute, you're not doing the same argument you've always done" and it's helped because it solves problems more quickly.
Some noticed a shift in their ability to remain calm in situations that may have previously resulted in unconscious reaction. One teacher states, “I think that that's really where I'm seeing a difference, is just trying to catch myself before I immediately react at them, and realize they're kids and they want to know these things.” Participants also express an increased tendency to make conscious choices and an empowering sense of control:

Having that choice, making that choice, gives you a better sense of control. You’re not as vulnerable to the stresses that I previously was prey to. I think about it more, I classify it, I analyze it. I’m a little more selective about where my energy and attention is [sic] going. [I]t’s given me a sense of control, a sense of choice, a sense of empowerment, and I live a little more with intention. I set the goals, I set the objectives, I set the pace, the tone. It’s a good feeling.

One teacher recounts a story in which her mother was surprised by this teacher’s uncharacteristically calm approach. She is no longer the “nervous wreck” she once had been.

[My daughter is] not responding as well as I had wanted in speech class and her speech therapy but instead of being panicked and upset about it, I was being very objective about it. I’m like, “She’s not doing exactly what I wanted, but ...” and my mom started immediately like, “No, it’s okay, it’s okay.” Then, she kind of realized I wasn’t panicking about it. She stepped back a little and I think she was expecting me to immediately, like I’ve always done, freak out about it and I didn’t. Another participant explains a calmer and more thoughtful approach to student misbehavior.

I know that I took a calmer approach perhaps to handling situations. Just in general like people being late to class or who were consistently... I didn’t take the response of getting angry about it... I feel like I’m more thoughtful.
AWARENESS. The *awareness* theme comprises participants’ expressions of awareness of physical responses to stress and emotional arousal, an awareness of others particularly as it relates to reactivity and responsiveness, and self-awareness more broadly. Self-awareness includes an awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, stress, reactivity, and responsiveness.

**Awareness of Self**

The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the *Awareness: Self* and *Awareness: Self: Physical* codes. After phase one, there were 90 occurrences of *Awareness: Self* which increased to 94 in phase two. *Awareness: Self: Physical* occurred 23 times in phase one and 27 times in phase two. These quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The construct of *Awareness: Self* explores the ways in which participants describe an awareness of their thoughts and emotions. When describing thoughts, participants recounted an awareness of self-critical talk and rumination. Emotions were noted as descriptions as well as the ways in which they were regulated. The construct of *Awareness: Self: Physical* describes the participants’ awareness of physical responses to stress, anxiety, and general upset.

The following themes emerged from this analysis: *observing, thoughts and emotions*, and awareness as the *first step* in responding. The *observing* theme explores teachers’ observations of awareness and the effect this had on their experience. The *thoughts and emotion* theme contains descriptions of how participants experienced an increased awareness of their thoughts and emotions and how they relate to and manage
them. The *first step* theme explores the ways in which participants describe awareness as the first step toward generating a mindful response.

*Observing*

Teachers were able to observe and explicitly describe their physical reactions to stress. The following excerpts provide examples of these descriptions along with how this increased awareness allows some to “catch it sooner” and take action to then calm these reactions to stress:

I think when I am stressed I usually keep it inside. It always seems to go around my heart, like my chest feels very tight. I start feeling like my heart is racing. It always seems to be in my chest and around my heart.

I'm catching myself sooner than I used to, where I would get stressed. I would notice like, when we first started doing it [meditating] I would just notice like the tightness of the chest and feeling like pressure is building up. But now I'm catching it earlier. It's almost like I can catch it in my toes instead of being all the way up to my head already.

This awareness not only prompts overt action to inhibit the cascading effects of the stress response, it also serves as a warning of its damaging effects:

Sometimes we don't even realize we have those things until we pause and look at ourselves and how our body is physically reacting to the stress of being angry. I think it's so important. We don't even know how we're hurting ourselves.

Participants often describe the ability to observe themselves from a distance as if from a third person point of view. This was often described as distinctively different from previous perspectives. One participant noted that, while previously recognizing when she was feeling upset, it usually stopped there.

I knew that I was upset, but I never really stopped and said, “Oh, that’s interesting. I reacted that way.” Kind of like observing myself on the outside, like stepping back and looking at my reactions apart from myself, in a way.
Thoughts and Emotions: Taming the Squirrel

Participants describe a more acute awareness of thoughts and emotions along with the ways in which they now relate to and manage them. When discussing the nature of thoughts, they describe a critical inner voice, rumination, and mind wandering. They recognize the power the inner critic has had and, in changing their relationship with it, diminish its control over them:

[N]ow what I try to do is not let this voice in my head control me because I don’t think that’s the most effective thing so I just observe my emotion, how I’m feeling at the moment, and then try to think about it. One participant reflects on the active nature of thoughts and the wandering mind.

When considering the “taming” of these thoughts, she observes how all things have changed for her. Her thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions are all connected and as one aspect changes, so do the others:

All things changed. They're all connected. That's what I noticed, that they're all directly related to each other. Because the thoughts affect the feelings and physical sensations, to not separate them.

Another teacher describes how an increased awareness of thoughts and emotions has impelled her to change her approach with students:

After we started going through thoughts and the emotions [in the course], it kind of made me more aware of things that I was feeling. I started thinking to myself, well maybe if I don't approach it with, "You did a, b, and c," if I approach it with, "This is what the paper says. What, from your perspective, happened?"

Another describes how, once aware of her wandering mind, she is able to redirect it:

Even though I'm in a moment with somebody, I would be thinking about the five, six, seven other things. This has really taught me to say, "Wait a second. You're drifting, come back to this." Or, "Wait a second. You're thinking about something you shouldn't be thinking about. This is the moment we're in. This is what we have to focus on."
Finding Your Rock

Awareness is recognized and described as the first step away from one’s penchant toward reactivity and toward the engagement of a mindful response. One participant states, “…awareness is always the first part, or a big component of change. You want to be aware of it, and then you can change it in yourself.” Another relates bringing this awareness to that internal dialogue that can arouse intense emotion:

I think step one is doing it, noticing. Being the watcher that notices, "You're getting fired up and you're having a conversation with yourself, and you're having a conversation with this person and it's not even a live conversation. It's all in your head." I think that's step one…

One participant describes an awareness of the physical manifestations of the stress response and how that is now a recognizable signal prompting her to pay attention to what’s happening in that moment:

Sometimes you’re in the middle of a scrum, whatever, and you have to have some kind of ... something in your pocket that you can use. I don't think I'm there yet. I think I'm just at the point where I can start getting sucked into something, and then be like, "What's going on? You're getting hot. You're blood pressure's rising." I can feel the feeling. That's where I'm at. I can pull back a little bit, but I don't know how to always diffuse the situation…

This teacher describes how, once awareness surfaces, an evaluative process is initiated. After a consideration of thoughts and feelings, an appraisal is made and a response chosen.

[Where I'm just kind of realizing what's going on, processing the action in my head, and then talking, in my head, my emotions, like what am I thinking, what am I doing, why am I feeling this way, and then taking a minute to kind of choose my responses to certain situations.

In the following example, one participant describes a moment in which she becomes aware of her mind creating lists while taking a hike with her family. This awareness jolts her from habitual thought patterns and compels her to take action:
Spring break, I was hiking with my husband and my dog, and I was listing things like I tend to do: my schedule, what we have to do, what's next, my future, 10 steps ahead. I realized what I was doing, and I just stopped. I was like, "What are you doing?" I found a rock. I was like, "I just need to stop for a minute." I stopped, and I sat on this rock. They followed me not knowing what I was doing. I said, "Just need to be quiet right now and listen." I zoned in. I was like, "I need to be here right now." My mind was everywhere but on this beautiful day, in the Poconos, on this hike, and I'm sitting there planning. Literally had to take myself out of that, and just think about it... I thought of the practice, her [course instructor] voice in my head... I didn’t have it [recording] there. I listened to the birds, and I focused on the sun. I tried to be in that moment, and then enjoy the rest of the hike.

AWARENESS: OTHERS. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the “Awareness: Others” code. After phase one, there were 58 occurrences which increased to 64 in phase two. These quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The construct of Awareness: Others explores participants’ descriptions of others’ reactions and responses. Participants describe others’ tendency to react instinctively without the buffering effects of thought and deliberation. With regard to observations of responding, participants describe others’ ability to resist instinctive reactions in favor of thoughtful and deliberate responsive actions.

Through the analysis of this construct, the following themes emerged. Participants describe how an awareness of others promotes an awareness of oneself. This theme includes descriptions of the ways in which an awareness of others informs what they see in themselves. The theme of empathy and compassion explores how increased understanding and awareness prompts empathy and compassion. The acceptance and connection theme highlights how awareness might suspend judgement while promoting a sense of connection with others. The final theme examines participants’ observations of
responses and reactions. These observations, from both perspectives, proved to be instructive for the participants.

**Awareness of Others, Awareness of Oneself**

Participants describe how what they notice about others informs what they see in themselves. Teachers share that observing others prompts them to consider the ways they might behave in similar situations and reflect on ways to avoid reacting similarly:

[I]t's making me think about my own triggers and how I respond to them and you know, trying to get ... This is what I look like when I'm ... When I'm in that situation, this is what I look like. I know that that's what I look like. How can I not look like that?

I'm seeing other people getting stuck on someone who's irritating them or something that has frustrated them. I've noticed things like that more and then that makes me question myself like, "Am I doing that in my own life? Where can I improve?"

This awareness of others brings about an awareness of oneself and a call for introspection. At times, teachers express a discomfort with the thought that what they are witnessing is a reflection of themselves. This provides both an opportunity for increased empathy and self-improvement. The same teacher continues,

I think it's helped me be more reflective to understand how other people are feeling about a situation and then to also think for myself. How does this affect me and can I improve?

**Empathy and Compassion**

Participants share that an awareness of others, coupled with a deeper understanding of themselves, encourages feelings of empathy and compassion. One teacher describes how being slighted by someone in the hallway takes on a different meaning in light of this increased awareness:
[Y]ou’re walking down the hall and someone may not say hello to you. That first response is, “Well, they’re not saying hello to me,” but maybe that person has thoughts in their own head that’s [sic] affecting them.

Another participant considers the multitude of struggles others face and use this as a filter through which to view others’ actions:

What I'm adding to the conversation or in a work situation, it's going to go through all of that filter. They already have 30 things on their mind and my priorities are not their priorities. I think that helped, to recognize you have to understand more of where other people are coming from.

An awareness and understanding of the complexity of thought and emotion lying beneath the surface generates a sense of empathy and with it a desire to communicate thoughtfully and clearly. One participant describes the care with which messages are delivered. This teacher shares that teachers simply can’t know all that a child is going through but they can at least bring this awareness to their daily interactions.

They have these other thoughts and maybe I'm even using words that they've heard at home that have a negative connotation. That could immediately spark something in them, you don't know. Just trying to be thoughtful about how what I'm saying… Yeah, I said it a certain way and I know what I means to me, but maybe it doesn't have the same interpretation for them.

Acceptance and Connection

Having an awareness of others also has the effect of promoting a sense of acceptance of and connection to others. One observation highlights the fact that people are not always responding thoughtfully and with intent. People often react emotionally and without measured control. This awareness is not made with judgement but rather with an understanding and acceptance of our common struggles.

I recognized that people don't always think before they say something. I always take things pretty to heart when someone says it. If it's a critique or a problem or whatever it is, I generally accept that as their truth, that's exactly what they mean. Now I'm realizing, no, it's very emotional. People usually say things because
maybe they're upset with someone else and they're almost taking it out on you a little bit and I can see that more now.

I guess what I noticed about others would be that not everybody is thoughtful, but then that also helps me to understand. I start thinking about that. I acknowledge that someone is responding that way, but I’m not from a negative perspective…

This awareness can help to build connections even in the midst of circumstances that might otherwise cause conflict or frustration. One teacher reflects on how this might play out in the classroom.

[When] I feel a little frustrated, what I just started doing is just noticing and noticing my reaction to it and then instead of responding I will just say, “Oh, they’re just kids. Just enjoy them right now.”

Another expresses that this awareness and understanding helps to draw her closer to others stating, “it helps me to understand other people that … It actually makes me feel more connected to people to understand that they’re feeling that way, too.”

React vs. Respond

Participants describe observing human interactions through a new lens and in the process, seeing the stark difference between reactions and responses. In multiple instances, participants describe the ways in which their observations provide opportunities to analyze and critique others’ reactions. These experiences provide insights into the nature of both thoughtless reactions and thoughtful responses. In the following example, the teacher describes witnessing an interaction between a member of the group and another faculty member.

It was interesting for me because I understood why our group member was very frustrated. Knowing the other person as I do, I was knowing where she was in her head about just wanting to be right. It was hard to change that dynamic between them. I just found it to be very interesting how both of them were reacting, and they were both frustrated, but for very different reasons. It’s interesting. It [mindfulness] made you look at human interactions in a different way…
Another participant shares that something she has become increasingly aware of is the reactive nature of her colleagues. In this accounting, the teacher describes a variety of strategies used when constructing a mindful response. She references “taking a step back,” taking “some breaths,” and clearing “your head space” in order to choose a response.

I've been noticing they're very reactive, as opposed to trying to put themselves in the moment, put themselves with the student, like is this really why I'm upset right now, type stuff. Instead of just being so aggressive with kids, possibly taking a step back and handling things a different way, or realizing that you are very upset with a child, and then maybe you need to take a step, go take some breaths, or clear your head space, or whatever it is that you need to do in order to have an appropriate response.

Participants also share instances in which they observed other group members interacting with others while putting what they’ve learned into practice. These examples illustrate teachers’ recognition of others resisting automatic reactions and instead exerting thoughtful effort to engage in a mindful response. The first example shows how the observer was aware of the other person’s body language along with other signs of control.

[S]he was having a difficult time because he was giving her a hard time, and I could see her being mindful. I could see it in her body language. I could see the restraint that she was exercising, practicing.

The next excerpt illustrates a participant’s admiration for a colleagues response when engaging two students in a potentially difficult interaction.

One of the other participants in our group, we were standing in the hallway, and she had an encounter with two students, and I remember thinking to myself, “That was an awesome response.” I liked the way she dealt with it.

RESPONSE. The *response* theme comprises participants’ expressions of responding and its mechanisms of pausing and distancing. Pausing includes descriptions
of stopping or slowing down, often as a tool used to buffer reactivity while facilitating the active choosing of a response. Distancing includes descriptions stepping back, observing dispassionately, and maintaining an objective (third person) perspective.

**Response: Self**

The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the **Response: Self** code. After phase one, there were 96 occurrences which remained unchanged in phase two. These quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The **Response** construct is inclusive of the **Pause** and **Distance** codes which will be explored in subsequent sections. This section examines the construct of **Response: Self** which explores the ways in which teachers describe analyzing a situation and choosing a response rather than reacting to internal or external experience reflexively. This construct also examines participants’ descriptions of the mechanisms of a response including pausing, distancing, and reappraisal.

In addition to the descriptions of responding and its mechanisms, the themes of **coaching** and **choice** emerged. The coaching theme includes expressions of how participants would use self-talk to encourage and guide their responses. The **choice** theme contains descriptions of participants’ abilities to choose a response when averting the sweeping influence of reactivity. This theme also includes the power of choosing not to respond as valid and sometimes preferable.
Coaching

With increased awareness comes increased control. One of the ways participants describe this is through a “self-coaching” during which they talk themselves through a response. The first example shows how one participant gives herself directions for a thoughtful response in order to come back to the present:

If I know it’s coming on, I can take that moment and just stop and take a breather, figure out what’s stressing me out, and then get myself the directions to whatever reaction I need, to either act in a way that I need to act or redirect myself into what I should be focusing on instead of worrying about whatever is stressing me out at that particular moment.

This next example illustrates how the participant offered herself words of encouragement followed by thoughtful consideration of the next steps and subsequent choice:

I remember specifically saying to myself, “I know where this is going to go if I react to his reaction.” I stepped back and I worked every scenario through my head. I said, “I can do this, I can do this. What is going to be the most appropriate way to do it?” I just listed it in my mind and I said, “I’m going to go with this direction.”

As part of their responses, teachers share the ways in which they analyze their experiences. One participant conveys how refraining from interpreting another’s behavior as a “personal attack” allows for a dispassionate response that also mitigates defensive reactions from others:

It’s not a personal attack on me and I think that helps because instead of reacting emotionally to a situation, you react with, not necessarily positive, but a better attitude that allows them to not feel like you're coming at them and immediately get them defensive.

Another participant, emphasizing the importance of increased awareness, expresses how an improved understanding of the stress response and the difference between reaction and response help to discern and choose:

[B]ecoming more aware of that in myself and in others. To take that moment to understand where it's coming from, and realize if it's something that needs a
reaction in the moment, or something that I can just take a deep breath, step away, and realize that it's not the most important thing at that moment.

Choice

When articulating the ways in which they would respond rather than react, participants often describe having the ability to choose a response, something that is simply not available when in the throes of an unabated reaction. One participant describes an ability to break from previously entrenched thought patterns and instead choose a new direction. This process starts with slowing down the thought process:

Especially not reacting to where those brain patterns are that you're immediately going zero to 60 all the time. I have definitely noticed that I have stepped back from that a little and I'm trying to take a different path in my relationships with people that I've had for a long time and not go right to a preordained result. Whatever the conflict is, I'm going to change it up and go a different route and it helps.

One teacher credits mindfulness with providing a frame of reference that allows her “to get myself back to a place where I can choose my response, instead of responding or reacting to the situations that I was finding myself in.” The following excerpts share this sentiment along with the positive effects this approach has on interactions and outcomes.

[I]t's really made me more aware of what's going on inside of my head, and allowed me some strategies to kind of take a step back and really go through it in my head at the moment, and know how to choose my response, instead of just reacting to my emotions.

[Choos]ing a response rather than reacting, as I thought about it later I thought, in doing that I affected the outcome in a positive way, in a way I would have preferred it to go. I thought that if I hadn't done that there would have been a need if not immediately after, then soon after for another reaction of some sort, for another choice.

Several participants also note the importance of not responding as a choice. In addition to understanding the importance of choosing appropriate and productive
responses, many express the value of making the choice not to respond. At times, this might be used as an intermediate step. One describes an interaction that, when appraising the situation objectively, was nothing more than irritating. “It was something that in the past I could have reacted to differently, or probably would have, and I chose not to react at all, and just walk away, and think long and hard, and choose a response.”

I think there's [sic] times when you have to ask yourself, "Is your response going to be in any way helpful? Is it going to perpetuate the snowball that's already started, or is it going to melt the snowball? I feel like no response was the best response there, which I think sometimes is appropriate.

The choices that I'm going to make in how to react is going to affect this child, maybe short term, maybe long term, maybe both, but you're going to have an impact every single day. I think that that is something that, it's shifted me from ... Like I have a more positive outlook on it.

Pause

The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the code Pause (52), originally inclusive of Pause, Stop, Breathe. This was not coded during phase one. It was one of four codes that emerged as a result of the second round of coding captured in phase two.

The construct of Pause is part of the larger theme, Response and explores the ways in which teachers describe stopping, taking a breath, and slowing down. It also attends to notions of the utilitarian use of pausing to buffer reactivity and facilitate the choosing of a response. Also noted are occurrences in which participants recognize the value of pausing for themselves and for others. The following analysis categorizes these data as pausing to calm or slow things down and pausing to appraise and reappraise what’s happening in one’s experience.
Pause to Calm/Slow Down

Pausing is an experience described as the first of a series of steps guiding the participant toward enacting a mindful response. It has been described as the first part of a tandem of behaviors used to disable spontaneous reactivity and allow for thoughtful deliberation. One described this as running through everything. “It's this pause. It's this, ‘Stop and think. Stop and name it. Stop and choose a response. Stop and breathe.’” This two-step process is credited for helping to establish a sense of control. “I wasn't simply reacting, bouncing off the walls just spinning. I could direct myself now.”

As a precursor to gaining control, teachers describe an ability to use this pausing technique as a way to slow things down in the midst of a flurry of activity. One participant describes noticing herself moving as if she were running. “I don’t always remember this, but when I see myself almost in a run getting from one place to another, I say like … I actually did that today. I just started breathing as I was walking.” Another describes the ability to pause as providing an opportunity to self-coach using strategies learned.

I think by stopping and doing that, it keeps you present. I find myself really getting it when I'm in transition times in my day whether it's in the morning or when the kids are coming into school or there's a transition in the classroom. That tends to be when all the events are happening and I could be in five different places in my mind, but then I'm being forced to like, "Okay, use it. Stop here. What are we going to do? How am I going to react? Name my emotion. Is that the right way to respond right now?" and just walk myself through it.

The practice of pausing or stopping is also used as a way to manage stress and strong emotions. One participant describes using this to settle emotions. ‘I would try to do something to make my emotions go back down, whether it was walking, go sit at my
desk for a minute, and then approach a student, or tell them, ‘I need you to sit. We'll talk in a few minutes.’”

**Appraisal & Reappraisal**

Participants describe the use of pausing as a way to create an opportunity to assess what is happening in that moment. This section explores how this pause is used to appraise a situation, often in an attempt to construct a mindful response.

Participants describe an increased awareness of the stress reaction and its physical markers. At times, teachers would pause to better understand the source and effects of that stress:

To take that moment to understand where it’s coming from, and realize if it’s something that needs a reaction in the moment, or something that I can just take a deep breath, step away, and realize that it’s not the most important thing at that moment.

Another teacher shares how pausing has helped her to recognize the effects of stress where previously this had gone unnoticed. “Now I'm stopping and pausing and I'm like, ‘Oh, look at what you're doing to yourself. This isn't healthy.’”

The next example illustrates the ways in which pausing helps this teacher negotiate difficult situations. The teacher is thereby able to respond productively and realize a positive outcome:

I slowed down. I assessed the situation and we kind of got through it. We did all right. I said, “Hey, why can't I do this all the time?” Again, the whole idea of responding, reacting, I was able to do that and it worked. It may not always work, but on that particular day, I felt that we had a small victory. It was a good thing.

The following examples illustrate the use of pausing as a tool to assist with reappraisal. The first shows how this teacher used the “pause” as an opportunity to examine and challenge her thoughts:
I think the biggest thing is, stop. Breathe. That technique, stop, breathe, not react… Not only what you might say because, for me, it’s mostly what’s going on in my head and just stop. Breathe and kind of look at the situation in a different way.

In the following example, the participant shares an uncharacteristic reaction from a family member who was giving her “a hard time.” The participant considered the reasons for this unusual behavior and while she might have normally let this person know of her disapproval, she didn’t feel the need to do that. “I didn’t do the reacting. I just stopped and thought, ‘Oh, she is probably feeling a little irritated right now and not herself.’ She doesn’t normally… Like I started thinking and I just chose to ignore it, and it went away.”

*Distance*

The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the codes “Distancing: Step back” (31) and “Detached” (17) in phase one. During phase two, the Distancing code increased to 51 with the Detached code remaining the same. These codes were combined to become *Response: Distance*.

The construct of *Response: Distance* explores the ways in which teachers describe the ability to resist becoming emotionally engaged while maintaining an objective perspective. Participants describe dispassionate observation and an ability to depersonalize various experiences. Teachers specifically note behaviors such as observing from a distance; taking a clinical view; and creating space between themselves and events, emotions, and thoughts.

As participants describe “distancing themselves” or being “detached” from a situation, they often describe a desire to separate emotion from their experience. This disposition is viewed as a way to gain an objective perspective on what is occurring,
weaken the strength of negative emotions, protect oneself, and serve a useful tool with which to craft a more mindful response. Participants also reflect upon the effect of the absence of *distance*.

*Observe Dispassionately*

Participants describe engaging with an omniscient perspective on their experiences. One describes maintaining a clinical, third person point of view allowing her to temper the effects that her emotions might otherwise have:

I can take a step back and I feel like I'm... more clinical viewpoint I guess. Almost seeing it from above. Seeing what's happening and it's not necessarily me involved in the situation. I can take a third person point of view and understand what's happening. Be more objective and not have personal feelings interfere with it.

Another shares a kind of “pulling back” that allows her to remove herself from a situation:

I feel like sometimes I can take myself out of myself, and it's more of an objective kind of view, or perspective on what I'm thinking, what I'm doing, or how I'm behaving. It's that “pull it back.” Be mindful of the fact that it wandered, and pull it back to where you want it to be.

Teachers express the ability to engage experience dispassionately by creating a physical distance between themselves and the event. Participants describe this as a way to better cope with the difficult emotions that might otherwise disable their ability to respond in a way they might prefer. In this example, one participant uses a metaphor of an expanding ball to illustrate the concept of stepping back.

[T]here's a ball that grows and it gives me space between myself and whatever the problem is. That allows me to step back from the problem and observe it dispassionately I guess and that way I can handle it.
Calm and Protect

Stepping back has been identified as having both a calming and protective effect. In one account, a teacher describes a long-held tendency to perseverate over issues that she considers to be quite minor and having a difficult time separating from those thought patterns. This participant describes how mindfulness has helped her manage these thoughts and feelings:

I've noticed myself stopping that. I'll address whatever the problem is, if it's a parent email that had me upset or even at home like my kids are irritating me or whatever it is, if I'm driving and somebody cuts me off, then I can't get off that. I'm stuck on that. I've realized that because of the Mindfulness I'm immediately recognizing, “Okay this is what you're doing. You're perseverating again. You're stuck on this,” and I take a step back from it and it's been so much easier to acknowledge what I'm doing and recognize it and then it actually stops, which is great because it's so helpful. I used to get stuck on every little thing that irritated me or hurt my feelings or whatever and now, it still happens, but much less frequency [sic] than it used to.

In the following example, the participant describes how mindfulness has served to protect herself through separation from a difficult personal situation involving family members.

[B]eing mindful about what's happening has allowed me to almost protect myself and be separate from them. I would always try to become a part of their problem and fix it. It allowed me to listen and really think about what they're going through, and be more objective, and not put my own feelings into things.

Without Distance

The following statements illustrate what participants began to notice in others. One describes what was observed in those teachers who did not distance themselves from emotionally charged experiences.

I've had a few colleagues this year who I've been noticing, instead of ever taking a step back, it's constant reaction, and it's reaction to things that I don't even think
they're upset about with the kids. It's other things that are going on, and they've been taking it out on the kids.

Another describes the result of not “pulling back” as creating an accumulation of negative energy and potentially trapping her in situations while obscuring possible solutions.

You carry around a lot of negative energy because you don't have that skill of pulling back and seeing yourself and being the watcher. I feel like... You're fully immersed in a situation, and you can't even see your way out of it.

One participant describes noticing others’ behaviors in meetings and the importance of taking time to consider responses as discussed in the previous section. She recalls thinking, “Wow. You really need to step back. You need to re-evaluate what you're doing, and just process and think.” This participant continues with the observation that many, including herself, will often react without thinking and emphasizes that, while we often act before thinking, the thinking is more important than the action itself.

COMMUNICATION. The communication theme comprises participants’ expressions of responding through reception (listening) and transmission (speaking). Reception includes descriptions of attentive listening, posing questions, and careful consideration of what is being communicated. Transmission includes descriptions of a careful and deliberate choosing of words, phrases, and tone while communicating.

The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the codes Communication (33) and Listening: Active (25) in phase one which were subsequently combined to become the construct, Communication: Reception and Transmission, in phase two.

The construct of Communication: Reception explores the ways in which teachers receive communication from others, inclusive of students, colleagues, and family. The
three themes that emerged from this exploration includes understanding, empathy, and listening as tool. The construct of Communication: Transmission explores the ways in which teachers communicate with others. The themes that emerged here includes pausing, questioning, and choosing words wisely.

Listening

The following section explores the ways in which teachers experience the ways in which mindfulness influence how they listen to others. Specifically, participants discuss increased effort to truly understand what is being communicated to them and how this in turn leads to feelings of empathy for the person with whom they are communicating. Listening is also seen as an effective tool used to curb reactivity, maintain focus on the present moment, and enhance interpersonal connections.

Listen to Understand. Participants describe an improved ability to listen with a focus on gaining understanding as opposed to listening with the intent to diagnose and solve a perceived problem. In one case, a teacher shares a personal account detailing a tense personal situation. The teacher describes times when, instead of “snapping,” she would take a step back and ask, “Okay. Tell me what it is you want… This is why I’m asking… Please tell me where you’re coming from and how we can compromise or have a situation that’s amenable for both of us.”

Another teacher shares how she has been able to communicate better with her father as her parents go through a difficult divorce.

I notice that he's more willing to talk to me about things, because I'm not going to tell him why it's bothering me. Just letting him have his moment… I would always try to become a part of their problem and fix it. It allowed me to listen and really think about what they're going through, and be more objective, and not put my own feelings into things.
There were also descriptions of teachers listening to more accurately understand what students might mean as opposed to making quick and potentially erroneous judgements. One teacher expresses being able to re-appraise one student’s harsh criticism:

“You listen and try to figure out what the person means by that. In school with children, it’s challenging because, you know... what they say to us sometimes. The kids are saying, "I hate this class," but it really means, "I don't know how to do this." Just listening and trying to understand, not judging yourself, not taking it personally when somebody says that.

One teacher shares how she began to “ask more questions, as opposed to… [drawing] my own conclusions… before I interact with a student.” Another expresses how she actively asked questions of herself in order to gain a better understanding prior to arriving at an interpretation. “What is this person doing? What are they talking about? I try to make sure that I make sense of what is actually being said to me.”

*Listening as Empathetic.* Listening to understand also leads to increased feelings of empathy. Listening is expressed as an expression of and prerequisite for compassion and empathy. One teacher describes listening beyond the words to better connect with her students. “I’m much more attentive, not only to the words, but to the person… and can look into their eyes, and think about what they're thinking, and what they're feeling, and live more in that moment.”

Some teachers described a “listen first” approach. In the following example, a teacher expresses using this strategy in meetings and other interactions.

I've started listening more. I do know that I like to talk a lot, and I am usually pretty active in participating. I've tried to really stop saying what I think in the beginning of a meeting, or when somebody approaches me with something, and just kind of listen and take it all in before I offer out advice. I feel like, in that respect, I've tried to become more of an active listener and take in how other people are feeling before I say things.
The following teacher describes the value of allowing a “listening first” disposition to be instinctual.

I think… to not talk, to not have that be your first instinct, whether you're giving the information or you're getting the information … Sometimes you're getting the information and you're already speaking before the information's even done coming to you.

Maintaining a listening stance as one’s default position may foster an openness to alternative interpretations while potentially limiting a natural tendency to make quick judgements.

*Listening as Tool.* Listening is also conceptualized by some as a tool used to resist habitual reactive patterns, remain present, and subsequently choose responses over reactions. Listening in this way is found to not only improve communication but to also enhance connection with others.

In this example, the participant describes in detail the process of assessing how and if to respond. She illuminates the possibility that it is not always necessary to respond and the difficulty this may present.

Yeah, I think stopping, I guess, and breathing, and taking in the information, and waiting. Maybe not always responding, which I think is hard, especially for me, because I'm always going to want to say something. I think that's probably my biggest struggle, is to have somebody say something and I'd be the listener, and if it doesn't always require a response. Sometimes we always feel like we have to respond to the person that's speaking, but we don't.

Some notice a difference in the quality of their listening. One remarks, “Where I thought I was listening before, maybe I wasn't because I was eight steps ahead, thinking of something else. I think that it was nice to realize I might really be present in the moment.” This notion of being present was often noted as an integral quality of a
mindful response. This was thereby seen as a way to foster stronger connections with others. One teacher considers our conversation as an example of this.

I think then I’ve been trying that ‘staying in the moment,’ like right now what we’re doing, staying in the moment is always very hard to do, to really listen, to have that connectiveness [sic] because when you’re in the moment you’re connected with that other person.”

One teacher sums up the importance of the aforementioned qualities and dispositions from both a personal and professional perspective.

[...]

COMMUNICATING. The previous section was devoted to the effects of bringing the quality of mindfulness to a person’s role as listener. This section will turn its attention toward the qualities of our behaviors as transmitters of communication. Participants explore the value of “pausing” prior to communicating with others and adopting an “ask first” disposition. These qualities appear to help teachers communicate more effectively with intention and thoughtful word choice.

*Pausing*

Many comment on the value of pausing as a first and powerful step. In some cases, it is described as a way to slow things down instead of simply powering through an interaction. One teacher describes a circumstance illustrating this.

I just stopped. I stopped trying to push it and push it and push it and just kind of stop. Then just listen. I was like, “Guys, how… are you all feeling? How are you doing? What's going on in your life?” We just stopped.

As discussed in the previous section, this behavior helps to support the building and reinforcement of connections among the teacher and students. The following
example illustrates how this pause is used to provide the space to “think” and consider a measured, precise, and parsimonious message.

I think, first, I think like I will just think. I'll just look at you and think for a minute about exactly like, “What do I want to happen,” so that I can just say what I want to happen, like, “Return to your seat,” or whatever, to keep it really simple and not convoluted with other things. I can think about… communicate what's the most important thing to me right now, versus other things.

**Questioning**

Questioning was sometimes used as an “ask first” approach that serves to temper the influence of preconceived ideas, as a strategy to keep emotions at bay, and to allow the teacher to toggle between the person giving and receiving information. In this first example, a teacher describes being prepared with simple questions and developing an “ask first” disposition rather than entering into a conversation with preconceived ideas. The responses to these questions then serves to direct the conversation while also helping to keep the teacher’s emotions at bay.

I'm going to say that part of this has to do with learning, too, and planning, so that in your mind, you have like things that you're going to say, like, “What's going on?” Ask a question, and then let somebody else give you their information, because half the time they have some crazy story you just couldn't even have imagined what was going on over there. Letting the other person talk first, a lot of times, really helps to weed out any lack of communication, so I think that's probably the most important thing. Planning, having a few strategic questions that you are always ready to ask.

One teacher describes how mindfulness has changed the way she communicates with her students. Beginning with questions is described as a way to remain neutral and lessen the influence of preconceived ideas.

It's made me more thoughtful in my approach with them, and to try and be like a neutral party, no matter what kind of stuff I'm approaching them with. Whether it's really positive or really negative, I've tried to start to question them more, as opposed to coming to them with preconceived notions… That has definitely changed the way I talk to them.
This same teacher goes on to describe how she mentors students who have received discipline referrals. Previously, she would automatically take the written account as fact and discuss the situation from a teacher perspective. She’s noticed a shift in the way she communicates these referrals with her students.

If I approach it with, "This is what the paper says. What, from your perspective, happened? Or, “Why would the person write down that you did this?” Just to try to give the student an opportunity to feel like they had a chance to voice their side.

Choosing Words Wisely

Maintaining an “ask first” disposition, keeping pre-conceptions from exerting unchecked influence, and pausing in order to consider desired outcomes were expressed as influenced by adopting a mindful approach to communication. The careful use of words as measured, precise, and parsimonious, emerge as the final theme we will explore.

One teacher describes attempts to employ the use of more skillful language. “In general, I think I try to be more aware of how I approach kids with my language. I don't know if I always thought about that in the past. I think it's made me choose my words a little bit wiser.” Another expresses an emerging clarity of message.

I try to be very clear about what I'm saying, and making sure that ... instead of me being all over the place, like I normally am, I try to make sure that the topic that I'm saying or whatever I'm discussing with someone else is clear and that I articulate it that way.

While in many ways the idea of asking questions might appear obvious, its intentional use as a strategy to empower others, most notably students, is important to emphasize. Toggling between the purveyor (teacher) and seeker (learner) of information
empowers students, engenders trust, and more effectively equips teachers with the skills, information, and capital necessary to nurture thriving teacher/student relationships.

COMPASSION. The *compassion* theme comprises participants’ expressions of self-compassion along with compassion and empathy for others. Self-compassion includes descriptions of kindness toward oneself. Compassion and empathy includes descriptions of feelings of care, kindness, and thoughtfulness in response to another’s suffering; “feeling with” others; and expressions of concern for another’s well-being. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the *Compassion* code. After phase one, there were 43 occurrences (*Compassion* – 10, *Compassion: Self* – 12, *Empathy* – 21) which increased to (50) in phase two (*Compassion* – 12, *Compassion: Self* – 12, *Empathy* – 26). These quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The construct of *Compassion* is inclusive of expressions of empathy and self-compassion. It explores the ways in which teachers describe “feeling with” others and expressions of compassion toward others and themselves. The themes emerging from this analysis include how empathy facilitates understanding of the common struggles shared by others (*Normalizing*), feeling and acting empathetically, and contributing to a mindful response. Additionally, the concept of self-compassion is discussed as both uncomfortable and appreciated.

Throughout this study, participants often use the terms compassion and empathy interchangeably. I coded these data using empathy to indicate a “feeling with” and compassion when participants described their experiences using that term. There is no
significant distinction between how these are used and are therefore presented as one concept in the following analysis.

**Normalizing**

One of the ways compassion and empathy are expressed is through the concept of *normalizing*, the notion that we all share common struggles. Empathy is noted as an outgrowth of self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the common plights we all endure. The following examples illustrate these insights. In the first example, one participant expresses a sense of compassion that arises from the understanding that everyone has that internal voice.

I realized that everybody has their own voice inside their head that’s telling them things and I am not privy to what they’re saying, but it could have an effect on that person, and so I could learn to be more compassionate because they’re struggling, too, with that negative voice.

In this next example, the teacher describes the ways in which a student might challenge her and how increased understanding promotes a shift in thinking and feelings of empathy:

If someone says, "Well, why didn't you do this?" And we yell at them, well, understand where they’re coming from. We have some of the same issues that they do. So if I get on a student for something, understand that they can turn around and say the same thing to me. So, I try to be mindful of that, and before, maybe I wasn't. Now, I'm thinking, again, by putting yourself in someone else's place... They're not always right, or their opinion may not be something that we welcome, but understand that they may have a valid point sometimes.

**Empathy**

Another theme relates to participants noticing others’ struggles while feeling and acting empathically. One participant shares an increased tendency to reflect on her students’ frustrations. This teacher made several comments during the interview process
regarding the difficulty her students were having with other adults. These adults had a
difficult time relating with their students and would often engage in negative interactions
with them:

I was just watching the interaction between adult and child, and I was like, “I
might've done the same thing at 13,” because I probably would've been frustrated
in that moment too. It has made me more reflective in that manner.

This increased openness has improved participants’ abilities to communicate with
empathy. The following examples illustrate the ways in which empathy has influenced
interactions with students and family members alike. The first expresses a changing
perspective with students. “I've been more successful doing that [taking a step back]
since taking the Mindfulness course by being able to take a student's side, talk to them,
listen to what's going on and communicate by finding out why is this happening.”

Mindful Response

Empathy is described as helping participants interrupt automatic reactions in favor
of a more mindful response. In this way, empathy provides an impetus for reappraisal:

How to think of these things, instances through their eyes ... “Why are they doing
what they're doing? Is there a better way to handle it?” And there are times where
we have done that, where I've said, “Let’s take a look at it.” We’ve approached it
a different way.

In this next example, the teacher describes how maintaining an empathetic
disposition affects her response to student conflict. The teacher recounts the incident and
the internal dialogue used to assist in her response to a student who was being unkind to
members of the group.

This kid was really giving the group a hard time. I said, “Why don't you take a
step back, and listen to yourself? These are the things that you just said,” and I
repeated three things. I said, “These are the things that you just said to her. Would
you want someone to say that to you?” “No.” I said, “Well, you need to think
about that. If you were me over here, and I'm listening, what would you think?”
Another participant describes engaging in a mindful response as an act of compassion. One’s ability to control emotions and respond in a way that does not allow the interaction to become a negative experience removes that potential moment of suffering.

[You immediately take control, not squelch it, but deal with it in the moment, and move on. I think whether the other person is mindful, probably not, but whether they’re mindful of what just happened or not, you took control of the situation and alleviated it for that person as well.

Self-Compassion

Expressing compassion toward oneself was seen as an uncomfortable experience yet sincerely appreciated. The course instructor asked participants to first think of a time when they expressed compassion toward someone they cared for. They were then asked to think of a time when they offered this kindness toward themselves. Many reacted with surprise and discomfort. One shared, “I know all of us were like, ‘What?’ for a minute. You have to really think about it because if you're doing it for someone else why aren't we doing it for ourselves first”:

You can picture yourself putting your arm around someone and being kind and compassionate. When you try to do it to yourself, it feels so awkward and so uncomfortable and really something that we should be able to do. Be kind to ourselves.

Teachers realize that they typically are not kind to themselves and walked away believing it to be an important yet neglected practice. One states, “I don’t think anyone really does that to the degree that they should.” Another confesses a practice of harsh treatment.

I think I’m not kind to myself at all. I’m harder on myself than I would ever be on anybody else. Just the constant reminder to be kind to yourself. Stop beating
yourself up all the time. I think that was just nice to hear and it could be repeated often.

Self-compassion was also described as reinforcing expressions of compassion toward others. One participant acknowledged, “[B]eing more fair and kind to myself, yes, it opened up a door to being that way with others, kids, grown-ups.” Another describes self-compassion as a way to manage thoughts and emotions:

It made us a little more kind to ourselves, and compassionate to others. That was a huge thing that came out, I think for everybody, that self-kindness. Huge to be… “It's okay to feel this way.” One of the huge things is just that they're all thoughts, it's all thoughts, and you can control your thoughts. That's powerful.

NORMALIZING. The normalizing theme comprises participants’ expressions of a recognition that others share in common human struggles derived from stress, an internal critical voice, thoughts, emotions, and reaction patterns. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the Normalizing code. After phase one, there were 38 occurrences which increased to 39 in phase two. These quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The construct of Normalizing is inclusive of expressions of a recognition that others’ share common struggles including stress, emotions, thoughts, and reaction patterns. The themes emerging from this analysis include a realization that participants were “not alone,” an acceptance of sharing in common struggles as “okay,” expressions of kindness toward themselves with a growing belief that they are in fact “okay,” and how this cumulative understanding supports feelings of empathy and compassion toward others.
Normalizing: I'm Not Alone

Participants would often express feeling alone, isolated, and insecure. As one participant noted, “Sometimes you do feel like you're on an island. You get involved in your own experience, and sometimes you feel like you are the only one.” They share previously held convictions that everyone else is okay and stand in harsh judgement of their own perceived inability to handle the same stressors. Hearing other teachers share their struggles helps them to see that they are not alone but instead joined by those whom they hold in high regard.

[I]t shouldn't be this hard. There are plenty of people who are adults and they work and they keep their house clean, and they, you know, take of care kids, even. Everybody's fine. People seem fine. Then you kind of get to hear about the stressors that everybody's going through. Everybody's stressed out about having to do all those things.

The following teachers describe coming to the realization that others have some of the very same challenges they face. These struggles, both personal or professional, often belie an exterior expression of the calm confidence to which they aspire.

Aha! I'm not the only one who has a problem getting out the morning. I'm not the only one who feels that they're less than perfect in front of the classroom. I'm not the only one that can't understand why they can't connect with everybody that they meet.

To hear that they're not as calm on the inside makes me feel a little better like, "Okay, so they have all that, that they're just able to maintain a calm façade." Again, it makes you feel better when you know that everyone ... We're all dealing with the same stuff.

Participants share the realization that these experiences, while not identical, carry with them similar thoughts and emotions.

If people were sharing their different experiences, even if it wasn't the same experience, they were having similar emotions which definitely made me feel like, okay it's not just me, or I'm not the only one who sees things this way.
As participants begin to see that their struggles are actually common and in fact shared by some whom they had previously seen as “having it together,” there emerges a sense of relief and optimism.

Acceptance: It’s Okay

An understanding that negative thought patterns are common leads to an acceptance of the inner critic’s existence. Recognizing that others experience similar struggles extinguishes some of that self-critique. Instead of unrealistically seeing others as being effortlessly adept at handling the very same stressors with which one struggles, a healthier perspective, one that acknowledges our failings, prevails.

Participants share their battle with wanting things to be different. They express feeling how they or their experiences “should” be different rather than accepting things as they are. In the following excerpt, the teacher describes how being self-critical and ruminating over these critiques hinders her ability to remain present. This chorus of “shoulds” is replaced with acceptance.

We talked a lot about the “should” and how much personally I should and ... Just, you know, I’m very hard on myself. I think that, you know, being able to accept that and hear other people’s challenges really helped me feel less by myself in that matter. But then, the flip side of that is once I start doing that and telling myself, “I should have done this, I should have done that,” I can rehash an incident over and over in my head and completely lose my focus on what it is that I'm supposed to be doing. I've noticed a few times where I've started doing that. I said, “No, this is where I need to be.” I've taken a minute to just kind of get myself back together and go back to what I was doing the way I was supposed to be doing it.

Self-Compassion: I’m Okay

With this growing sense of acceptance emerges a belief that not only are the circumstances normal but they, as people, are normal as well. Participants recognize that
they are not “oddballs,” “freaks,” or “crazy.” Growing in kindness toward themselves allowed them to confidently say, “I’m okay.”

Participants invoke or allude to the aphorism “misery loves company” when reflecting on the idea that there is somehow comfort in the realization that others share in common struggles. In this case, teachers express solace in knowing that others battle with the very same negative thought patterns.

The thoughts I had, all of them, all of those negative thoughts were not exclusively mine, that other people feel it, too. It's a sense of not feeling like an oddball, or somewhat of a freak. I don't want to say misery loves company, but there's a comfort in knowing that you're near these people who you think are so confident, and not that you don't want them to be, but you think they have something that you don't, or there's something you lack, or something you don't do right that might bring that about, everybody felt it. There's just a comfort.

Teachers describe having conversations with themselves, replaying past conversations, or acting out conflicts that have not ever occurred. They describe feeling those emotions as if they were engaged in the actual conflict and the toll that these mental experiences might have.

I thought I was the only crazy person and honestly, the stuff people were saying, I could have been the one word for word saying what they were. It helped so much to know I'm not the only one who hears the voice in my head arguing with someone else and preparing an argument ahead of time.

One participant ensures others that they are not alone admitting to behaving in similar ways.

I was like, “No, I do it all the time. My best conversations are with myself.” I think that was really good to hear, because sometimes saying, “I think I'm crazy. What are you doing? Shut up. You're talking to yourself.” She was like, “I do the same thing.” That was probably my most relieving moment because she was like, “I do the same thing. I have conversations.”
One participant describes how realizing the extent to which others share common struggles and difficult experiences illuminates the damaging effects these thoughts can have.

It was like turning a light on all these dark, unhealthy thoughts. When the light went on, I wasn't alone in that room. That's healthy to know that it's normal to feel some of the things we felt. I think everybody felt that because there was always just this sigh, you could hear it. You could physically hear it, walking down the hallway, and some of us even talked about it, that it was helpful to know that we're not alone, that we all struggle.

Transcending feelings of isolation, participants express the effects of their deepened understanding of our common struggles. Teachers express that simply knowing that others experience the same stressors, thoughts, and emotions helps them to feel more connected to others. Knowing that others suffer in the same ways that they do gives rise to feelings of empathy and compassion.

You have these thoughts about yourself. “Oh God, that was so stupid, why did I say that?” Just being able to share that and recognize that other people are experiencing that. I think it makes you feel closer to people, too, because you have something that you share in common and that you understand. You can have more empathy for other people. It maybe gives you a lens into their world.

CONNECTED. The connected theme comprises participants’ expressions of feeling a close connection to other participant’s taking the mindfulness course. This theme also includes expressions of comfort, trust, support, safety, understanding, and the sharing of common experiences and vulnerabilities. The following is the result of an analysis of the data that emerged from the Connected: to group code. After phase one, there were 51 occurrences and remained unchanged in phase two. These quotations were used as units of analysis with themes emerging from them.

The construct of Connected includes participants’ descriptions of feeling a close connection to those taking the course; and expressions of comfort, trust, support, safety,
and understanding. It also includes a recounting of shared common experiences and vulnerabilities during course sessions. The themes emerging from this analysis include *empathy and compassion, family, and support*.

*Empathy and Compassion: They’re OK*

Feelings of empathy toward others in the group helped to strengthen connections among them. Participants note that, although they were experiencing this work together, many did not normally associate with the others and some were in fact hesitant as they were unsure about their ability to develop a sense of trust. As the course progressed and teachers expressed personal struggles and insecurities, these heart-felt exchanges fostered familiarity, cultivated deep relationships, and resulted in a collective sense of trust.

One teacher expressed not having relationships with many in the group and, while they do not interact with each other outside of the group setting stated, “I felt so much empathy for them and understanding for them and it did give me a totally different perspective of who they were.” This improved understanding and the connection that subsequently arose was expressed by another participant.

I feel a much deeper relationship with people I probably wouldn't have talked to before just because we didn't see each other. Now, definitely a bond that came out of this and just a better understanding of who they are and where they're coming from.

Another conveyed this felt sense of connection resulting from sincere sharing of experience that at times evoked strong emotional responses. “[S]ome people were crying. You really felt some heartfelt emotions, and when you have that experience with others you can’t help but… care about them.”
These feelings of empathy sometimes transformed into a sense of advocacy and support. Participants describe “rooting” and “cheering” for members after sharing personal vulnerabilities.

[W]hen she was sharing her problem, I was like... “You're a fabulous teacher! The kids respect you. They know that you care about your subject. You explain it well to them.” In my mind, I'm her cheerleader. She's sitting there saying she doesn't know, she can't do this, did she even end up doing the right job, to the opposite extreme.

Sharing experiences and insecurities allowed participants to see in others reflections of the common struggles they themselves endure. This realization of a common struggle not only helped individuals to see themselves as normal but also developed in them feelings of empathy and compassion toward those sharing in this common suffering.

*Family*

As teachers discuss their experiences as being a participant in the course, a variety of terms are used to describe feelings of connection. Among these include “family,” “fraternity,” “club,” and “pack.” These descriptors connote a positive sense of community and the comfort, security, and support accompanying a close-knit group such as these. This section explores the notion of community with the subsequent section addressing notions of support through both overt and tacit expression.

As the previous section describes, a sense of empathy toward others in the course developed as teachers shared personal experiences. The following teacher describes how this sense of community extends beyond the confines of the course’s classroom walls.

Being able to hear about them and their lives and hear about their feelings really, sort of like what was brought up was just ... You see them in the hallway and you just have this different connection to them… This really did bring about a sense of community within the group of people that were there.
Teachers often work together in small groups providing opportunities to develop connections with colleagues. In this school setting, teachers work together in disciplinary and interdisciplinary teams of teachers and meet daily in Professional Learning Communities. Additionally, teachers often work together in committees both at the school and district level. This course however appeared to offer something substantively different. One teacher shares, “When we were in this group, it was just a different family, part of something that I'd been part of before, having friends in that group, but this is our group. It's a special thing.” Another describes the value of the group to her experience. “[I]t was like a little pack. We were our own little club, even though I didn't see most of the people in there. I'd just see a few of them. I think that was probably one of the best things that came out of it.”

A sense of security and comfort was cultivated and a culture of trust emerged. The following expresses the power of this community and its ability to build, sustain, and strengthen relationships.

That was a wonderful thing to be able to share that with people in such a secure environment. I think everybody really respected that. That's powerful. That's building a sense of community, there, and that permeates everything, your workday, it makes it a better place.

[As] we started to work through the activities, and do some of the things, and share with the group, that relationship kind of evolved between all of us. You got that comfort level. I felt like having that experience together built a relationship between us that I don't think I ever would've had with other people in the building, because of our experience.

During one session, a teacher describes a very challenging personal situation and the support expressed and felt by the group.

I had troubling news that happened one day when I came to class, and I felt supported. It made me feel better to know that there were other people that were
hanging in with me a little bit. It was good. It was nice. And that was... a type of family. And again, we scratched the surface, but it was nice having that group.

Closely tied to the notion of family is the concomitant support often expressed. The following explores how participants describe support expressed in both obvious and more subtle ways.

Support

The support expressed ranged from explicit acts to subtle recognition and reminders. These acts are described as appreciated demonstrations that strengthen relationships and serve to encourage and comfort each other. One describes gratitude for the group stating, “I thought the group supported one another and, also, we all expressed our vulnerabilities, and then that changes the dimensions of relationships.” Another describes how another member of the group might send a text message as a reminder during staff meetings. “She would say something like, ‘Where's your flashlight?’ or, ‘You need to breathe.’ Stuff like that that nobody else would've known, in the room, what it meant. I thought that was really good.”

The following example expresses both explicit and subtle expressions of support and the effect it had on that individual.

When you've in a hallway, it's kind of like in your fraternity, a “hi” sign. Everybody has what they have, saying, "Are you going to be mindful today?" Or "Listen, hey, you remember what we’ve talked about." ...I think that's pretty amazing. If I showed anger or frustration, someone would say, "Listen, it's not so bad." That would calm me down. That to me was very telling, that it affected somebody else and they were trying to help me. That meant a lot to me, and I think to other people, too, as we talked about that. It was a big deal.

The subtler expressions are evidence of the invisible bond that has developed among the participants:
There's like an unspoken connection and a bond there that I feel like I could approach them about things that maybe I wouldn't have been able to in the past. I feel like we have a different understanding of each other, which is very comforting.

One describes it in this way, “[I]t's almost like a wink and a nod, like, ‘We got this. We're okay.’” There’s a sense of “knowing,” a kind of shorthand developed through their common experience that allows them to communicate effectively and nonverbally.

It makes a difference and you sure do feel connected to them, even the ones that you don't see all the time and just the way they say, or the way they look at you, or smile. You just know. You know something, something about them that you didn't know before. You're kind of like rooting for them.

It is interesting to note that many describe interactions in the hallway as the environment in which expressions of caring and support were experienced. In this way, the hallway might be seen as symbolic of the stream that connects the otherwise insular condition of the solitary classroom. The hallway is described as an impromptu meeting place for the group, a place where they put their learning into practice and coach each other along the way. The following is a description of one such interaction. It involves four members of the group who happened to be in the hallway at the same time. It was an opportunity for participants to both practice mindfulness and support others in that moment.

As I was walking down the hallway, [one teacher] was in a discussion with a student at a locker, and she was having a difficult time because he [a student] was giving her a hard time, and I could see her being mindful. I could see it in her body language. I could see the restraint that she was exercising, practicing. I walked up behind her, and I hugged her, and I said, "Mindfulness."

Just at that some exact moment, [a second teacher] is trying to herd a classroom of kids into a classroom, and at the same time they're giving her a hard time, and the three of us, just with a look or a word, 'mindfulness', a nod. There's definitely an understanding, and a shared understanding. The connectedness was not only the understanding, it's the reminder, essentially, that if she hadn't been practicing it, or hadn't been mindful at that particular moment, that any one of us would have walked along.
At the end of the hallway was even [a third teacher], and [she] was smiling, and we were all in a different place. It was not as... I don't want to use the word stressful. Not as aggravating, I guess, because you can somewhat rise above it, and there is strength in numbers that we all had that tool, and we all were reminding each other to be mindful.
**Theme Summaries**

Table 4.10 provides a brief summary of each individual theme as represented by this study.

**Table 4.10. Theme Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>The <em>mindfulness</em> theme comprises participants’ expressions of focusing attention, present moment awareness, acceptance of experience, non-reactivity as characterized by a sense of calm and control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>The <em>awareness</em> theme comprises participants’ expressions of awareness of physical responses to stress and emotional arousal, an awareness of others particularly as it relates to reactivity and responsiveness, and self-awareness more broadly. Self-awareness includes an awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, stress, reactivity, and responsiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>The <em>response</em> theme comprises participants’ expressions of responding and its mechanisms of pausing and distancing. Pausing includes descriptions of stopping or slowing down, often as a tool used to buffer reactivity while facilitating the active choosing of a response. Distancing includes descriptions stepping back, observing dispassionately, and maintaining an objective (third person) perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>The <em>communication</em> theme comprises participants’ expressions of responding through reception (listening) and transmission (speaking). Reception includes descriptions of attentive listening, posing questions, and careful consideration of what is being communicated. Transmission includes descriptions of a careful and deliberate choosing of words, phrases, and tone while communicating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>The <em>compassion</em> theme comprises participants’ expressions of self-compassion along with compassion and empathy for others. Self-compassion includes descriptions of kindness toward oneself. Compassion and empathy includes descriptions of feelings of care, kindness, and thoughtfulness in response to another’s suffering; “feeling with” others; and expressions of concern for another’s well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalizing</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
This study recognizes the taxing demands of the teaching profession and seeks to understand the ways in which mindfulness might impact the lived experiences of teachers engaged in this work. Teaching, more than deploying a set of technical skills in static and predictable environments, is truly an emotional endeavor (Hargreaves, 1998). Teachers are called upon to manage their thoughts and emotions while also managing those of the dozens of students sitting before them. This, coupled with the ever-increasing complexities and quickening pace, intensity, and extensiveness of institutional change, sets the stage for increased teacher stress and burnout (Hargreaves, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

These conditions have led to an increase in teacher attrition and, while the institutional pressures expressed above contribute to this problem, emotional stress and poor emotion management are cited as common contributing factors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Shakrani, 2008). Yet there has been little attention given to either pre-service or in-service training that might equip teachers with the Social Emotional Competence needed to assist with this ubiquitous challenge. This chapter will review this study’s research question, summarize findings as they relate to a review of the literature, consider potential implications, and pose questions for further research.

*Summary of Findings and Connections to Research*

In response to my research question, “What is the lived experience of middle school teachers engaged in mindfulness practice?” the following is a summary of the
findings with relevant connections to the literature review found in chapter two. Some of the research cited supports multiple findings from this study. In these cases, I’ve situated that research with findings that are most closely correlated. There is significant agreement with regard to increased mindfulness; improved somatosensory and emotional awareness; decreased reactivity and an increase in calm affect; and improved ability to positively appraise and reappraise emotions and experience.

The first finding reveals that mindfulness increases awareness of self and others and is critical to teachers’ ability to respond. The literature suggests that the simple act of bringing awareness to the stress reaction immediately changes our relationship with it. Instead of being controlled by our thoughts, emotions, and accompanying tension, we can work with them (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Research also indicates that improved awareness helps teachers to recognize habitual reactions, maintain a clear mind and calm affect, and respond skillfully in stressful situations (Hwang et al., 2017).

Siegel (2007) describes awareness of inner experience as internal attunement. As we continue to bring awareness to inner experience including physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts, we strengthen our internal attunement making it more likely to bring this awareness to the next moment. Once a stressful event enters our field of awareness, we can then pause, buffering the effects of the stress reaction. In this way, the stressor can become a tool used to signal and initiate a mindful response. As Kabat-Zinn (2013) so aptly suggests, stressors “can become like wind for the sailor, here for you to use to skillfully propel you where you want to go” (p. 342).

Multiple neurological studies have shown physiological changes in the brain corresponding to various aspects of awareness. Lazar et al. (2005) found that regular
meditation increased the cortical thickness of brain regions related to somatosensory and interoceptive processing (sensing of internal bodily states). In their systematic review and meta-analysis, Fox et al. (2014) find that the brains regions correlated with meta-awareness and body awareness were among the regions altered through the practice of mindfulness.

Schussler et al. (2016), in addition to finding an increase in somatic awareness, also found participants in the CARE program to improve awareness of physical and emotional health along with developing strategies to ease stress. Improved awareness of stress and emotional reactivity leads to emotional regulation and caring for others (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2011). In their systematic review, Emerson et al. (2017) found that MBIs improved awareness in teachers assisting them in the recognition of habitual reactions, the ability to maintain clarity of mind and a calm affect, and improved ability to skillfully respond to stressful situations.

The second finding illuminates common components of a mindful response. These distinct practices include pausing, distancing, appraisal/reappraisal, and choice. A third closely related finding shows improvements in communication when enacting a mindful response. With both findings, participants’ develop an increased ability to resist reactivity and objectively assess the sometimes difficult situations they face. Kabat-Zinn (2013) emphasizes the importance of “recognizing that our instantaneous appraisals of threat are often inaccurate and generate unnecessary fear and suffering” (p. 319). The acts of pausing and distancing preserve our ability to more precisely appraise our experience and choose a response rather than react based upon faulty interpretations.
Siegel (2007) refers to this ability as observing to decouple from automaticity. Teachers’ descriptions of distancing illustrate this concept. They express an ability to observe experience without always “grasping onto the inevitable judgements the mind creates” (p. 74). This, at times, frees them from the pull of experience and the automatic appraisals that often accompany them. Decoupling provides teachers with the space with which to appraise experience more objectively.

Similarly, Greeson’s (2009) review finds that mindfulness promotes the ability to decenter in order to repercieve, facilitates secondary appraisals of stressors, and encourages the use of positive reappraisal as a coping strategy. Mindfulness in educational settings has been found to have a positive effect on emotion regulation with teachers, including a decrease in emotional reactivity through present-centered awareness of emotions and emotional reappraisal (Jennings et al., 2011). Additionally, mindfulness increases teachers’ ability to experience and subsequently reappraise difficult emotions (Jennings et al., 2017).

A fourth finding recognizes that increased awareness fosters a greater sense of empathy and compassion. Distancing in this context provides a broadened perspective enhancing participants’ ability to respond with compassion. Multiple studies reveal that the CARE program effectively promotes awareness of stress and emotional reactivity leading to improved emotional regulation and caring for others (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2011). As is also true with my findings, Sharp and Jennings (2015) express, “One of the most promising mechanisms of action of the CARE training is its ability to aid participants in broadening their mental perspectives of the situations they encounter” (p. 215).
Finally, normalizing and connectedness emerge as significant themes. The fifth finding reveals that mindfulness reduces feelings of isolation through an increased recognition that negative experiences and struggles are common. Additionally, participation in the mindfulness course also resulted in feelings of close connection and community within the group. First, normalizing, discussed in more detail below, describes a transformation from feeling isolated to being comforted in the knowing that the struggles participants experience are common. While the work of Kristen Neff was not explored in the preceding literature review, her research has developed an understanding of a shared common human experience as part of her construct of self-compassion (Neff, 2016). This is explored more fully below, including the ways in which this research resonates with this finding. Second, teachers describe feeling closely connected to others taking the course. Sharing each other’s vulnerabilities cultivates a community of trust and caring, an important takeaway expressed by the teachers in the study. This finding has not yet been explored in a significant way and suggests an area for future research.

Attention, Awareness, and Presence

We all experience struggle with circumstances both large and small. Regardless of our estimation of their magnitude or the strength of the thoughts, emotions, and concomitant stress awakened by the ensuing agitation, their effect on us is undeniable. Their disturbance at the very least clouds our perception, inhibits our ability to thoughtfully respond, and may at times invoke an all-consuming paralysis. We might stand by helplessly as reactivity pushes through the floodgates that might otherwise stem a torrent of reactivity. Throughout this study, the lessons learned and shared through
these teachers’ stories provide simple yet powerful insights. These experiences might serve as maps with which to better understand the complex terrain of experience and the ways in which mindfulness might serve as a wise guide.

Shine a Light

“It was like turning a light on all these dark, unhealthy thoughts. When the light went on, I wasn't alone in that room.” Light is used to describe both focusing attention and bringing awareness to internal experience. When used to describe attention, the metaphor of a flashlight, borrowed from the course itself, represents an ability or struggle to focus one’s attention in a direction of one’s choosing. Teachers describe having “1,000 flashlights” or an undisciplined flashlight that flitters from one object of attention to another.

Teachers also use light to describe the ways in which mindfulness illuminates what might otherwise remain obscured. In the description above, this teacher reveals an epiphany that the unhealthy thoughts once believed to be exclusive and abnormal experiences were in fact universal. This sentiment reflects similar notions expressed by other teachers in the study. Mindfulness cultivates a quality of awareness foundational to the ability to see, understand, and accept one’s experience.

Taming the Squirrel

“I think I'm like a squirrel. Because of my personality and how I'm all over the place most of the time. Now I'm more aware… present in the moment.” As teachers describe the wandering and sometimes spastic nature of the mind and its wild and undisciplined thoughts, they often express these as similar to the unpredictable actions of squirrels. Descriptions of the challenge to focus the mind often includes the language of
“taming” its unpredictable tendency to jump from one thought to the next in a seemingly endless chain of thoughts. Awareness of the active nature of our minds and thoughts makes possible our ability to call attention to them, observe them more objectively, and tame their feral spirits.

This, however, does not imply that one should reject the nature of the mind but rather change our relationship with our minds and the thoughts they produce. We can more readily accept the mind as it is and thereby intentionally, with kindness, gently tame the squirrel.

Finding Your Rock

Spring break, I was hiking with my husband and my dog, and I was listing things like I tend to do: my schedule, what we have to do, what's next, my future, 10 steps ahead. I realized what I was doing, and I just stopped. I was like, "What are you doing?" I found a rock. I was like, "I just need to stop for a minute." I stopped, and I sat on this rock.

This experience provides a clear example of how bringing awareness to the incessant preoccupations of the mind provides an opportunity to choose a different path than the one we habitually, and so often mindlessly, travel. We quickly forget even our simplest of intentions. Taken off course by our wild and wandering minds, we can easily tread miles in forgetfulness. Mindfulness has been described as waking oneself from this self-imposed trance.

Finding one’s rock, a stable perch upon which to observe what is happening in the moment, is one way to arrive in the present. Rather than hiking through a litany of thoughts, ruminations of the past, or anticipation of an uncertain future, we have the opportunity to stop. To be. To find our rock and witness the present moment as it exists in its only place and time, here and now.
Two Streams: Common Humanity and Mindful Response

As I consider the relationship between and among the themes that have emerged and the findings expressed herein, I am compelled to consider a metaphor that captures their interconnected nature. Mindfulness and its effects appear to be more ecological than mechanistic. I envision two mountain ranges, each with a river running through it and tributaries merging as they descend. One river represents our common humanity, described by participants as normalizing, and the other river representing a mindful response. The tributaries feeding these rivers are aspects of each that flow in a cumulative and strengthening way. Mindfulness, like the sun, is the energy that fuels this system. Awareness, like the clouds, rains onto the system feeding each tributary and the larger rivers themselves. The following details each of these streams, their tributaries, and aspects of the findings they represent.

Common Humanity

Neff (2016) describes self-compassion as compassion directed toward oneself and how we are in relationship to our perceived failure, inadequacy, or suffering. This construct includes three components, self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. While all three aspects are relevant to this study, the notion of common humanity maps onto what participants describe in the construct I labeled normalizing. Given its significance and emergence as one of the major themes of analysis, I will expand upon the construct as defined by Neff.

Participants in this study describe a change in their perceptions of themselves as isolated and in some way “odd” or “crazy.” Feelings of isolation give way to a
recognition that they are not alone but instead joined by others in what are understood as common struggles and insecurities. Neff (2016) explains, “Common humanity involves recognizing the shared human experience, understanding that all humans fail and make mistakes, that all people lead imperfect lives.” This description accurately captures the experiences shared by the teachers in this study and my conception of normalizing.

It is the awareness of self and others that leads to the understanding that our experiences are not as unique as we might think. We all share similar struggles and suffering. Once aware that we and our experiences are common and in fact, normal, we gain an acceptance of this in ourselves and others. We are afforded the permission to be compassionate to ourselves and extend this compassion and empathy to others. These realizations foster a sense of connection and community.

*I’m not alone (normal experience).* Participants described feeling as though they were the only people experiencing the struggles they expressed during the group sessions. This sharing reveals just how common these experiences are and leaves them feeling less alone and normal.

*It’s okay (acceptance).* This new understanding allows for an acceptance of the struggles they face. This acceptance helps to buffer the effects of their insecurities, the incessant inner-critic, and the desire for things to be different.

*I’m okay (self-compassion).* Teachers’ understanding that they are indeed normal, along with this sense of acceptance, becomes the ground upon which self-compassion can grow. A counter-narrative begins to emerge, one that encourages participants to be kind to themselves, give themselves a break, and acknowledge that they are in fact, “okay.”
They’re okay (empathy/compassion). This more developed understanding of one’s own suffering and its similarity to others’ experience might be considered a prerequisite to empathy and compassion. Identifying with our own suffering allows us to “feel with” another more intimately. We understand the other’s feelings more deeply as we have developed a more intimate understanding of our own.

We’re okay (community). This increased sense of our common humanity has given way to deeper connections with others, particularly other members of the group. The participants express the “connection” they feel with other members of the group as a significant benefit and takeaway. While less pronounced, participants also mention an improved ability to connect with those outside of the group. A growing sense of community has evolved.

Mindful Response

Awareness is likewise required in order for one to notice the need or desire to “pause” as the first step in the initiation of a mindful response. With this pause comes the ability to create a distance between oneself and the event experienced. There is now an ability for one to thoughtfully appraise the situation or, if an immediate appraisal has already been made, an opportunity to reappraise one’s original interpretation. This process allows one to choose from a variety of responses rather than succumbing to the automatic reaction that, when left unchallenged, might forcefully exert itself.

Pause (stop, breathe). While it can certainly be argued that awareness is the first step toward a mindful response, awareness itself does not guarantee its practice. For this reason, it seems reasonable to consider the “pause” to be the first step. The data suggest
that through stopping, breathing, and slowing down, one can remain or regain calm. This disposition is critical to enacting a response.

*Distance (stepping back).* The ability to distance oneself results in an improved ability to regulate emotional reactions and observe experiences dispassionately. Participants describe a meta-awareness that is described as a “third person perspective” or seeing oneself as if an observer. This disposition allows one to generate a more objective view and without which accurate appraisal and/or reappraisal may be unlikely.

*Appraisal (What’s happening? What does it mean?).* Pausing and distancing allow one to more accurately appraise what is actually happening in the moment. Appraisal can take place with decreased influence of the veils of spontaneous thoughts, emotions, and stress. In this way, a more accurate interpretation might emerge.

*Reappraisal (What does it REALLY mean?).* Reappraisal is supported by both pausing and distancing oneself. Without these, thoughts proceed unchecked and may become instantiated beliefs. Instead, these behaviors allow thoughts to be challenged and changed in favor of a more accurate interpretation.

*Mindful Response (Now what?).* A mindful response is the result of the choosing that takes place when one is able to resist the automatic reaction that would otherwise dominate. A mindful response is the result of thoughtful deliberation and choice. It is enacted with intention rather than being left solely to chance.

**Exploring My Impact**

As I considered my role as participant observer, I wondered from this study’s onset how my participation might impact teachers’ experiences. As discussed in the methodology section above (p. 35), I chose the role of participant observer in order to
gain a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the participants’ experiences. I considered how this role might enrich dialogue through casual conversations and during interviews and focus group discussions. In consultation with members of this dissertation committee, we considered the potential negative impact of this role in spite of actions taken to mitigate this risk. What we did not anticipate was the possibility that my participation might affect teachers’ experiences in positive ways. The following is an exploration of participants’ views of my role and their perceptions of my impact on their experiences.

During a follow up interview, I asked the study participants to consider my role as an administrator taking the course. I asked if my presence had a negative, neutral, or positive impact on their experience. I interviewed nine of the 12 original participants. The following represents the themes that emerged from those conversations.

My Role. The participants interviewed indicated that they believed my role was either neutral or positive with no participant claiming that my role had a negative impact on their experiences. It is important to note that at the time of the follow up interviews, my role as administrator and supervisor had not changed. One might argue that this role might affect the nature of the responses provided. This concern mirrors the concern originally expressed prior to initiating this study and reflected upon throughout.

Many of the participants described my impact as neutral. In these instances, participants expressed that they did not feel my presence affected the manner in which they shared nor did it affect what they expressed. Several added that it was their perception that others felt similarly, at times citing the sensitive nature of the things others shared as evidence. Some described moments during which participants shared
personal stories. Others reflected upon the difficult emotions sometimes expressed including tearful recollections of deeply personal events.

Those who viewed my presence as neutral often shared that they simply saw me as an equal participant and learner. One participant thought for a moment and shared that she had not even considered my role as administrator during the sessions at the time. Others also expressed not giving my presence much thought, some stating they hadn’t until I posed the question during this interview.

Four of the participants interviewed explicitly stated that they felt my presence had a positive effect on their experiences. Some shared an appreciation for my participation as a learner rather than observer. One participant expressed that this was an unusual experience for her. In her view, when administrators attend professional development sessions, their role is as observer. The administrator is there to oversee or facilitate the learning. The administrator may at times deliver the professional development and outline expectations. This teacher had not previously experienced an administrator participate as a learner sitting alongside teachers and valued this experience as a “unique opportunity.”

Another participant expressed an appreciation of the ways in which all participants accepted a level of vulnerability.

I think what I like particularly about you being in the class, was that because you're an administrator, and you're kind of meeting with people on a different level, because there's a certain level of vulnerability there for everyone. So, I liked it because we got to see you in a different way. Others shared the value of my role as someone who would provide support.

Some described this support as the simple knowledge that I valued what they were learning as evidenced by my role in bringing mindfulness into the school and facilitating...
the opportunity to take the course. My commitment to learning and practicing along with them further reinforced this belief. Others saw my support conveyed by the casual and spontaneous exchanges I would have with them outside of the course sessions.

Some described this support as coaching. One teacher shared how she would come to me with a difficult situation and described my approach as assuming the role of mentor and coach.

[E]ven when we're coming to you and we might be very passionate or heated in the moment about something, not being very mindful, you take that in. You remind us of the practice and how to apply it to that moment and then don't read too much into our emotions when some of us are still working through that process. You, kind of, talk us through that almost like a coach…

Clear Articulation. Another factor contributing to the participant’s comfort was a clear and explicit articulation of my role in the course. Some remembered me specifically stating that my role in this setting was not as an administrator but rather as a fellow learner and participant. Another participant recalled a statement made in which I expressed that we all have common experiences and that we would need to respect that in each other. One teacher remembered me assuring the group that I wanted everyone to feel comfortable and that there would be no judgement.

One teacher shared that I would remind the group on occasion that I was a participant and not an administrator while we were in the class sessions. Another recounted a moment early on when a teacher seemed hesitant to share what she was thinking. At that time, the instructor reminded her, “It’s just Al.”

“Oh, it's just Al.’ Like, not to look at you as … an administrator judging what we're saying. And that comment, I think, resonated with me a lot because it gave a human lens to it as well. You know, we can all speak freely in the setting and kind of work through these things together. So, I thought that having you there and that having that perspective, not necessarily my principal is here looking and seeing what we're doing, but as a support system. I thought that that was really positive.
General Dispositions. Teachers described various dispositions as helping to foster a safe environment. These dispositions include nonjudgement, approachability, empathy, and calm demeanor. Several described my nonjudgmental disposition as facilitating an open sharing of thoughts and feelings. They believed that I would view teachers’ expressions of negative emotions with understanding, not criticism. One described this disposition as being “down to earth” with an ability to express that “I’m human too.” Some of this sentiment grew out of the experiences while taking the course itself. Others referenced interactions shared in the past. In these cases, the importance of having a relationship with the teachers was seen as an asset.

Participants expressed approachability as a byproduct of a trusting relationship. Some teachers expressed confidence in the belief that I would not use information shared for retribution at some future point in time.

I feel like people can go to you and talk and know that you're not going to keep that in your back pocket for retribution later. Or, I'm not going to go through this experience and change and Al's still gonna [sic] see me like he saw my two years ago. He's gonna [sic] recognize that in me. And he's gonna [sic] recognize that I'm trying something. And I think it's your approach that makes it easier for people to put themselves out there.

Several participants described me as having an empathetic disposition and a willingness to openly share emotions. One participant shared how this enabled people to see me as a member of the group rather than an administrator overseeing an activity. “[P]eople empathize with you as a person, not just you as… the administrator. So, I think that enabled people to say, ‘In this moment, he is part of the group, not overseeing the group as an administrator.’”
Some participants described me as having a calming presence. They described this disposition as having the ability to help others also feel calm and contributing to a safe environment.

Trust. In addition to these general dispositions reinforcing feelings of trust and safety, participants commented on credibility and relationships as contributing to a sense of trust. Participants who expressed the value of credibility highlighted the fact that I had a knowledge base as well as a personal practice. This fostered a sense of trust and comfort for some. These participants expressed how this credibility allowed others to view me as “listening from a place of understanding” and as a “role model.”

Having established relationships was noted as contributing to a sense of comfort and ease resulting in an increased ability to be open and share. Most participants were staff members for much of my tenure at the school. As a result, I have developed relationships with many of the participants spanning as many as ten years. Teachers also shared that previously engaging in conversations around mindfulness specifically helped them to feel comfortable in this setting.

One participant did express that she was curious about how I might react to what teachers shared. She described how participants might share difficult experiences from the school day. This particular teacher watched to see how I responded in those moments. My lack of reaction and expressions of empathy helped confirm for that teacher that I would observe these expressed experiences and view them with an open mind. “I wondered how you were responding to it. But the sense that I got was that you were empathetic and maybe, like, you got it. That yes, we are going to have those moments of frustration.”
Conclusion. This line of inquiry has provided some valuable insights. While not a focus of this study, it is important to note the ways in which leadership can indeed enhance the experience of teachers exploring mindfulness practice. I do believe that my participation did serve to enhance the experience for some participants. Consequently, it is clear that fostering a community of trust is paramount. First, clear articulation serves to unveil the “elephant in the room” and begin the journey with an explicit indication of the leader’s espoused views and values. This, however, is only the beginning. Subsequent behaviors will either prove or disprove these values as authentic.

Second, there are general dispositions that serve to facilitate a culture of trust. Teachers in this study valued nonjudgement as foundational to feeling able to share freely without the threat of repercussions. A leader’s open and approachable demeanor that includes the ability to listen well has the potential to instill confidence. Openly sharing emotions and experiences allows others the opportunity to empathize with the leader as equally human. This consequently provides the leader with the opportunity to express empathy to those willing to share with reciprocity.

Third, the cultivation of trust requires authenticity. Teachers in this study indicated that their belief in my credibility was important to their ability to become involved and remain invested throughout the process. Having established relationships served as a valuable asset that allowed participants to see my involvement and interest as authentic. These relationships reinforced their belief in my authenticity and contributed to a community of caring and trust.
Implications

In addition to the impact expressed through the findings, teachers also explicitly share the impact this work has on their lives. Teachers, some prefacing their comments with the understanding that their comments might sound cliché, convey sentiments including, “I’m life changed,” “Wow, I really don’t get stressed out about that anymore,” and “[I]t has changed my life… From where I was in the winter to where I am now, I am a totally different person and I know it’s in part because of this. It has helped me immensely.”

One teacher referred back to an activity performed during an in-service several years prior and the results of taking a personality inventory using the Personality Compass (Turner & Greco, 1998). This teacher took the inventory again after taking the mindfulness course and found that a significant change had taken place. When she originally completed the inventory she was considered to be “North” (natural leader, goal-centered, fast-paced, task-oriented, assertive, decisive, confident, determined, competitive, independent). The teacher was excited to share the significance of the change that had taken place. This teacher was being reunited with a teacher with whom she worked when the inventory was originally completed several years prior. She explains to that teacher, “I was in the North before. I’m now not in the North. I was in the South.” The “South” is characterized by the following: natural team player, process-centered, slow-paced, good listener, non-confrontational, sensitive, patient, understanding, generous, and helpful (Turner & Greco, 1998). She informs her colleague of this shift to his disbelief: “__, I’ve changed.’ He was like, ‘That can’t be.’” The
observations made by this participant is indicative of the kinds of changes voiced by others.

The results expressed through the findings along with participants’ testimonials convey the promise of mindfulness as a practice with significant benefit to teachers and those with whom they interact. As previous research asserts, there has been an absence of training in social and emotional competencies for teachers (Hargreaves, 2000; Jennings, 2015; Jennings et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schussler et al., 2016). Educators are engaged in a work that continuously increases in scope, complexity, and emotional demands (Hargreaves, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000). Teachers are leaving the profession in staggering numbers, a trend that is not sustainable and jeopardizes the quality of our educational system (Farber, 2000; Shakrani, 2008). In order to maintain good teachers, it is necessary to provide our educators with the tools needed to cope with these challenges and thrive in a profession that seeks to serve children, the most vulnerable participants in our society. These findings agree with previous research and recommends the inclusion of mindfulness training for teachers in both pre-service and in-service settings.

Future Research

There is a clear connection among the constructs of mindfulness, awareness, and response. What is less clear and worthy of additional research is the nature of the specific mechanisms underlying these connections. In what ways does mindfulness increase awareness? In what ways does increased awareness facilitate the enacting of a mindful response? How might explicit instruction regarding the components of a mindful response influence teachers’ ability to respond skillfully to difficult circumstances?
Developing a greater understanding of how these constructs and their individual components interact with each other may help to further develop and refine pre-service and in-service programs.

An additional area for future research relates to the enduring effects of the changes experienced. Do these effects become permanent dispositions or do they fade over time? How might these impacts be maintained? Due in part to mindfulness research being in its nascent stages, this is an area that has not yet been thoroughly researched and important to consider, particularly in the educational setting. In the ever-changing context of education, it is challenging to maintain consistent focus over an extended period of time. In order for the results of this work to be sustained, just such an effort may be required.

Another worthy line of inquiry includes the potential effects of mindfulness training on classroom and school culture. Research has begun to show improved teacher-student relationships (Jennings et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2017; Meiklejohn, et al., 2012). The extent to which this might impact school culture more broadly is not well understood.

Additionally, the leader’s role in cultivating these dispositions among staff and the influence this may have on school culture is deserving of research consideration. As a participant observer, I became a part of the community of practitioners. Teachers discussed valuing this space and the trust and caring expressed and felt. It is interesting to note that even with my presence as both a school leader and participant, teachers shared sensitive and sometimes intimate personal stories confirming the sense of trust
developed. Understanding these dynamics and the ways in which this level of participation influences relational trust is another potential avenue of study.

Finally, associated with the fostering of trust previously mentioned, teachers expressed the value of building community and feelings of connection among members of the group. Some members prioritize this as a significant positive outcome. Teachers describe having been part of other professional development activities, in some cases with the very same colleagues present during this experience, but recognize a substantive difference. This experience fostered a sense of community in a way that had not been realized before. It would be of value to better understand how and why this occurred and the conditions that promote this outcome. What are the factors that enable the cultivation of connection and community? How can this be fostered and maintained over time?

Looking forward, it is well established that the teaching profession is subjected to ever-increasing change, scrutiny, and accountability. Its teachers routinely experience the cascading effects of stress resulting far too frequently in subsequent burnout and attrition. These conditions will not likely change, leaving the educational community with the responsibility of finding ways to mitigate their effects. A growing body of research has shown the promise of mindfulness training helping in this regard. The research represented herein agrees with these assertions.

Education is among our society’s most critical endeavors. The educational community is tasked with serving children, our most vulnerable population. It is therefore incumbent upon us to provide our children with optimal learning environments that nurture their ability to learn and thrive. Our teachers and their well-being are critical to this moral imperative. Mindfulness has been shown to provide positive benefits to
teachers and their ability to manage their stress and emotions. Increased mindfulness positively influences awareness and the ability to skillfully respond with empathy and compassion to the difficulties that invariably arise. Mindfulness encourages optimism for classrooms of the future and present alike.
“What is the lived experience of middle school teachers engaged in mindfulness practice?”

The conceptual framework diagram maps out the potential influences of mindfulness in teachers’ lived experiences. It begins to draw connections between and among emotions, thoughts, and the automatic stress response. Emotional intelligence (EI) as a construct includes a set of competencies that describes the relationship that individuals have with their emotions. The better one is skilled in these competencies, the greater their emotional intelligence. This framework suggests that EI may influence how one interprets emotions, thoughts, and the stress reaction. Mindfulness may not only impact how one is in relationship to their emotions, thoughts, and reaction to stress, it may help to develop one’s EI, further enhancing its potential salutary effects.
Focused Group Interview Guide
(2 focus groups, 6 participants each, 45 minutes)

A. Introduction: The purpose of this discussion is to allow you to share your experiences with the Everyday Mindfulness for Teachers program and how you’ve experienced mindfulness in your personal and professional lives. Remember that you will remain anonymous and your identity will be protected as described in the consent form.

B. Conversation prompts: “I’m going to pose a few questions to the group. Respond as you feel comfortable. Think of this as a conversation and feel free to add to each other’s thoughts.”

C. Primary questions and follow up questions
   1. What from the course did you find most useful?
      a. Did you find a particular practice more helpful than others? If so, please explain.
      b. Was there a particular idea or concept that resonated with you? If so, please explain.
   2. Think of a time when you used mindfulness in your everyday life. Take yourself back to that event and try to remember as many details as you can. Describe the experience.
      a. What did you notice about your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations?
      b. What was the outcome?
      c. What impact do you think mindfulness had on the experience for you and others?
      d. How might this experience have been different prior to engaging in mindfulness practice?

D. Additional prompts I will use to include all participants:
   1. “Is there anything from each other’s responses that resonate with you?”
   2. “Would any of you like to expand on your responses?”
Interview Guide

(13 interviews, 45 minutes)

A. Introduction: The purpose of this interview is to allow you to expand on what you’ve shared about your experiences with the Everyday Mindfulness for Teachers program and how you’ve experienced mindfulness in your personal and professional life. Remember that your identity will be protected as described in the consent form. Would you like to take three breaths together?

B. In what ways has what you’ve learned during this course impacted you? Would you share some specific examples or experiences?
   1. What did you notice about yourself and others?
   2. How do you think the way you responded might have changed the experience for you and others?

C. From Focus Group Discussions
   1. Connectedness: One of the ideas discussed in the groups was the idea of feeling connected to others in the class. Would you talk with me about how you felt about/experienced this? (Probe)
   2. Normalizing: Another thing that was discussed was the comfort in knowing that other people were going through similar experiences and that their experiences weren’t unusual. Would you share your thoughts about this? (Probe)

D. Intrapersonal Experience
   1. What have you noticed about your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations during stressful experiences?
   2. What have you noticed about others since taking the course?
      i. What do you notice about their reactions and/or responses?
      ii. What have they noticed about your reactions and/or responses?
   3. In what ways has mindfulness affected the way you think and feel about your work life?
   4. In what ways has mindfulness affected the way you think and feel about your personal life?

E. Interpersonal Experience
   1. How has what you’ve learned through the course affected your relationships with your students?
      i. Can you think of a specific interaction? If so, take yourself back to that event and try to remember as many details as you can. Describe the experience.
      ii. What did you notice about your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations?
      iii. What was the outcome?
      iv. What impact do you think mindfulness had on the experience for you and your students?
v. How might the experience have been different if someone in the same situation had not responded mindfully?

2. In what ways has what you’ve learned through the course affected your communication with others?
   i. Would you share an experience when you were mindful in your communication with others?
   ii. Would you share an experience when you were mindful of your response to a difficult message?

3. Can you describe a time when mindfulness helped you notice someone else’s thoughts or feelings?

4. How might your experiences have been different if you were less able to respond mindfully?

F. How might what you learned during this course benefit other teachers?

G. Wrap up: Are there any other thoughts, stories, or examples you would like to share?
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