Pairing Mindfulness and Social Justice: Taking a Step on the Path to Change

Jill Ewing Flynn

University of Delaware

U. S. A.

ABSTRACT: This case study explores how teacher candidates responded to the inclusion of mindfulness practices in a course and how they understand mindfulness's relationship to equity. Findings show that participants responded positively and connected presence activities to social justice in several ways: fostering mental health, addressing systemic inequities, facilitating classroom management, making connections to curriculum, and empowering students. The study demonstrates that pairing mindfulness and equity goals has important potential; however, this is only one step of many needed to recruit and retain a thriving teaching force that can work for equity in schools.

KEYWORDS: Teachers, teacher education, equity, mindfulness, social justice

You have likely heard the panicked proclamations: Teachers are leaving the profession in droves and teacher education programs are shrinking. The National Education Association, the largest labor union in the United States, reported that 55% of U.S. teachers were considering retiring or changing careers as of spring 2022, and the numbers were even higher for Black (62%) and Latinx (59%) teachers (Walker, 2022)—an issue that is especially problematic since teachers of color are already profoundly underrepresented. School administrators and teacher educators, themselves burned out and struggling, have scrambled to try to support their staff and candidates in whatever ways they can, championing self-care. This is a welcome step, but one that only begins to address the problem. What else can

be done to foster positive teacher preparation and retention in these difficult times? Mindfulness practices can help, and they should be paired with a focus on equity. Linking mindfulness and social justice has powerful potential; however, this is only one step of many needed to recruit and retain a thriving teaching force that can work for equity in schools.

Since there is some research that shows that mindfulness can benefit teachers and teacher candidates (Kerr et al., 2017; Miyahara et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2016), I decided to integrate a mindfulness component in a student teaching seminar class in spring 2020, not knowing that a global pandemic and mounting racial injustice would follow. I did know that teacher candidates often struggled to manage their time, allay their anxieties, and—sometimes—relate to and effectively teach students who were unlike them racially, culturally, and socioeconomically, which is clearly an issue of social justice. I hoped "practicing presence" (Lucas, 2018) would help them be more caring, compassionate, and effective teachers. As the semester progressed, I also wondered how mindfulness fit in with my teacher education program's commitment to equity. During their student teaching experience, candidates grappled with justice issues, such as inequitable access to technology, a lack of culturally sustaining curricula, deficit views of students and families by school professionals, disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on marginalized communities, and the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor.[1] As a result, my study pivoted to directly address the connection between mindfulness and equity.

Research also shows that teachers and teacher candidates who have a focus on social justice and a belief in their own efficacy to make change in unjust systems feel empowered (Baker-Doyle, 2017; Picower, 2012) and their instruction has a strong positive effect on student outcomes (Quan et. al, 2019), including numerous benefits for racially minoritized students (Mize & Glover, 2021). Pairing the pursuit of equity with presence activities may help address our current teacher burnout crisis, as well as support movements toward social justice in schools. My research, presented here as a case study, addressed the following questions: (1) How do teacher candidates respond to the inclusion of mindfulness/presence activities and readings in a student teaching seminar? (2) How do participants understand mindfulness' relationship to equity?

Terminology

Different definitions exist for both "mindfulness" and "presence." Kabat-Zinn (1990, as cited in Kitchen, 2020) defines mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (p. 1). Lucas (2018) notes, "mindfulness is being aware of your thoughts and being content with

[1] The murder of George Floyd occurred after the course concluded.

whatever is," but she prefers to use "presence" instead, as "a secular, informal term, intended to be applicable to daily life" (pp. 2-3). To Lucas (2018), being present in teaching provides the ability to "shine a light on inaccurate or negative thinking to view a challenging situation more clearly and respond rather than react" as well as "to anchor ourselves so we aren't carried away by the ever-changing challenges of being an educator" (Lucas, 2018, p. 3). In this article, I use "mindfulness" and "presence" interchangeably, since much of the related literature uses one or both.

Two other key terms used in the study are "social justice" and "equity." Working for social justice entails acting with the intent to change individuals, practices, and systems that are oppressive. Boyd and Noblit (2015) note that social justice demands "a commitment to dismantling structures of oppression and to pursuing actions with the goal of social change," recognizing "we live in an unequal and stratified society and that racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and heteronormativity are pervasive but are often normalized" (p. 442). Teachers and teacher educators have the opportunity—indeed, many say the obligation—to center social justice in their work. Regarding equity, it can be helpful to contrast the term with equality, which means everyone has identical resources and is treated the same. Equity recognizes that everyone does not start at the same place due to things beyond their control: inherent problems with our institutions and systems, including education. The teacher education program in which I work has a mission that aligns with Cochran-Smith et al.'s (2016) "twin goals" of teacher education for equity:

> preparing teacher candidates who have the knowledge, skill, and dispositions to enhance the learning of students historically not well served by the system and, at the same time, to recognize and challenge the intersecting systems of inequality in schools and society. (P. 70)

Our program faculty work toward infusing this mission in the courses we teach, recognizing our efforts are incomplete and must be ongoing. As Boske (2015) recommends, we seek "to critically ground… practices and policies with an emphasis on… social justice to create proactive strategies that address disparities" (p. 122).

Review of Literature

In the last ten years, research has reported on the positive effects of mindfulness practices for those in the 'helping professions'—social workers, nurses, physicians, and psychologists—including improved regulation of emotions and enhanced overall health (Gockel, 2015; Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016; VanKuiken et al., 2017). Like these professionals, many teachers need support in finding work-life balance, attending to the emotional needs of themselves and their students, and alleviating stress. While an edited volume, *Mindful and Relational Approaches to Social Justice, Equity, and Diversity in Teacher Education* (Kitchen

& Ragoonaden, 2020), was published after I gathered data for this study, it focuses primarily on teacher educators practicing mindful approaches themselves and on theoretical foundations; empirical research on teachers and teacher educators using presence-centered pedagogy in classrooms is still relatively uncommon (Schonert-Reickel & Roeser, 2016). However, some research does address the need for teachers to engage in presence activities. Lantieri et al. (2016) showed that teachers' jobs can feel "never-ending" and referred to previous research attributing teachers' stress to the high volume of choices teachers make moment-to-moment, as well as "the great level of public scrutiny" (p. 120) they withstand. Shapiro et al. (2016) articulated potential benefits for teachers related to self-care, fostering reflection, and impacting classroom practices. Finally, Gorski (2015) found that self-care strategies such as meditation, tai chi, and yoga had positive effects for educational justice activists, including teachers, and helped mitigate burnout.

The stressful conditions experienced by teachers have been shown to affect teacher candidates, as well. Birchinall et al. (2019) noted these conditions are not well-researched, possibly since they are "accepted as a natural element" (p. 2) of the shift from student to teacher. While parallels can be drawn to research on in-service teachers, Birchinall et al. (2019) contended that teacher candidates tend to face greater anxiety over how they will be evaluated and how they relate to their students and colleagues. Two studies, Kerr et al. (2017) and Miyahara et al. (2017), did find that mindfulness benefitted student teachers in their research, helping candidates maintain a calmer demeanor and reduce stress.

It appears mindfulness can have benefits for teachers and teacher candidates, though more studies are needed. However, through reviewing the current literature, I found that there are three main missing pieces in the research on mindfulness with teachers and teacher candidates. First, many studies do not touch on equity. Second, while some studies do focus on related issues, they do not necessarily name equity explicitly or focus on systemic injustices. Finally, some of this work co-opts mindfulness in order to exercise power and control over students, particularly historically excluded students.

Presence pedagogy and research that do not attend to equity can be problematic. Some of the literature reports on how mindfulness practices can help students pay attention, practice self-control, and therefore 'behave better' in classrooms. This focus runs the risk of mindfulness becoming yet another deficit-oriented approach for controlling, not liberating, students. It also may ignore inequitable conditions in classrooms, schools, and society at large. For example, Lyons and DeLange (2016) found that mindfulness intervention "may improve self-regulation, thereby increasing student's [sic] ability to learn and succeed academically" (p. 271). Such framing locates the problem of low school achievement exclusively in the student, failing to interrogate the school and/or education system's responsibility to be engaging, culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2014), and meaningful. Similarly, Jennings (2016) observed that mindfulness can help reduce "the achievement gap among children at risk for school failure" (p. 133). However, characterizing students as "at-risk" and low-income, and urban

schools as “challenging” (p. 133) assumes deficits rather than assets and neglects to examine how the educational system itself may be failing students. As Shapiro et al. (2016) pointed out, mindfulness practices used to discipline or silence students are problematic. In one school, for example, students were punished by having “to sit in the corner on the ‘mindfulness chair’ if they had misbehaved” (p. 91), a chilling practice. Gorski (2019) cautions that mindfulness is one of the practices that can be used to try to “fix” students of color or offer them “coping mechanisms, rather than correcting in-school conditions” (pp. 58-59). Purser (2019) incisively argued that mindfulness in schools has been used to “maintain the status quo” as students “are taught to meditate away their anger and accept their frustrations” (p. 184)—essentially using mindfulness as a behaviorist-based means of controlling students. While mindfulness practices are generally viewed favorably in the research and in society at large, teachers must proceed with caution. Schwartz (2019) warned that, particularly for students who have experienced trauma, being asked to close eyes, sit in silence, or trust in a teacher or classmates without a prior established relationship can be harmful. Therefore, while mindfulness can have many important benefits, it needs to be examined with a lens of equity in order to foster the social justice goals that are imperative in education.

Methodology

This qualitative, IRB-approved research utilized a case study approach. A key feature of case study is its purpose of exploring one or more choices, including why they were made, how changes were implemented, and what occurred as a result (Yin, 1989). The bounded nature (Merriam, 1998) of this course, including the fact that it took place for a set period of time and was taught by one instructor, makes the approach a good fit for the research. Data were collected over a five-month period and were drawn from three sources to provide triangulation: a brief pre- and post-course survey, field notes on class discussions and assignments, and semi-structured individual interviews conducted on Zoom approximately a month after the class ended (after grades were submitted and candidates had graduated).

Following Hatch’s (2002) guidance, reflective memos were composed during the data collection period—after course sessions and after interviews—to track “impressions, reactions, reflections, and tentative interpretations” (p. 149) of the data. Data were ultimately analyzed using an inductive qualitative coding process (Hatch, 2002). After the creation of written memos to examine semantic relationships, eight codes relevant to the research questions were determined, one of which (“equity connections”) had five subcodes. All of the data were then coded using these 13 codes. Themes were determined within and across codes; connections were made between themes and the existing literature; and data excerpts related to the themes were selected to develop findings. As Samaras (2011) advocates, I then sought the input of two critical friends who provided

feedback on the codes, the matching of themes to the literature base, and the interpretation of the selected data.

Course, Participants, and Researcher

The course under study is a required class in a secondary English Education program at a public university in the United States' mid-Atlantic region. In the course, which occurs concurrently with their student teaching, teacher candidates study social justice issues, such as equity-focused classroom management (Milner et. al, 2019), students' and communities' funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), school funding disparities (Kozol, 2007), and teacher activism. As the dual pandemics of 2020—COVID-19 and racism—unfolded, we also addressed current events. For example, candidates discussed the highly visible and violent murders of Black people, as well as anti-Asian hate speech and crimes stoked by former U.S. President Trump. Moreover, during our course's final few weeks, data on the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on historically disenfranchised communities began to emerge (Mize & Glover, 2021), which some candidates were experiencing themselves and in their field placements. In class, we explored dealing with these injustices ourselves as well as addressing them with secondary students.

During the period under study, I incorporated a short mindfulness activity each session, typically halfway through our three-hour class, and added a new required book, *Practicing Presence* (Lucas, 2018). The purposes for these activities were to break up a long class session, to provide a variety of mindfulness strategies that may appeal to different teacher candidates, and to help them live and teach 'in the moment.' I sought to use some exercises that centered on breathing or meditation, some that incorporated art, and some that utilized movement. Dealing with stress and uncertainty, always a factor in a typical student teaching experience, took on a heightened importance during spring 2020. When the course moved to Zoom after its fourth meeting, teacher candidates requested that we continue our mindfulness exercises in the virtual environment.

Twelve out of 14 undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in the class participated in the initial phase of the study, and 10 of those 12 agreed to be interviewed. Figure 1 shows demographic information on the participants, with quoted portions in their own words.

Figure 1

Participant Identities

Participant Pseudonym	Description of Self/Identities[2]
Alejandra	female, multiracial
Aspen	female, white, first-generation college student
Callie	"overly sensitive, emotional"; "trying to overcome many hidden obstacles; positive, optimistic attitude"; multi-racial, first-generation college student
Diana	"middle class, first-generation Mexican-American in my early 20's"
Emma	female, white
Jon	"male, 23 years old, Caucasian, outgoing"; "enjoys playing sports and cooking"
Katherine	"22-year-old, female, white, Christian"; "from an upper-middle-class background"; "able-bodied but have been treated for anxiety from a young age"; "not raised in a religious (or politically progressive) home but somehow, I am both of those things!"
Lily	"24-year-old, female, white woman"; "privileged because I was raised by a single mother, who worked hard to make sure I wanted for nothing"
Miles	"21-year-old Black man, English Educator, aspiring actor and poet"
Nora	"22-year-old Mexican/Guatemalan woman"; "middle-class; raised by a single mother"; "adopted as an infant by white parents"
Stephanie	"22-year-old white woman"; "from a single-parent, middle class background"; "have experienced anxiety and depression since childhood"
Zoey	"22-year-old heterosexual, white female from the upper-middle class"

I am a middle-aged, white, upper-middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied woman who has taught this course five times previously. I seek to promote social justice in my pedagogy but acknowledge the work is in progress. I know that I must always be critically analyzing my selection of materials, my instructional choices, my assessments, and my overall course design through an equity lens; as a result, I have participated in research projects alone and with colleagues to achieve those goals. In terms of mindfulness, I have been practicing yoga twice or more a month for more than twenty years, and I have also meditated on and off for about the same amount of time, after taking a "meditation for teachers" course in spring of 2000. Despite this related experience, I still consider

[2] In an email after the interview, I asked participants to choose their own pseudonym and describe themselves using any social identity categories they found relevant (I listed ability status, age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and social class as possibilities). To supplement, and for those who did not participate in interviews, I used demographic information available in program reports.

myself a novice mindfulness practitioner. I came into the project believing that presence activities could benefit teacher candidates. I also acknowledge, as a reader of this manuscript pointed out, that modern, Western versions of mindfulness do not always adequately recognize, utilize, or honor some of the practices' original roots in Eastern cultures.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the study. Though there were three sources of data for this project, the interviews were the most rich. Interview data relies on self-reporting, which was, at times, not triangulated by other data sources. However, because the research questions focused on participants' experiences and ideas, the interviews still have validity. Another limitation is the small sample size. Future studies could draw on larger pools of participants.

Findings

Findings show that participants responded positively and connected presence activities to social justice in several ways: fostering mental health, addressing systemic inequities, facilitating classroom management, and empowering students.

Positive Responses

Teacher candidates responded positively to the inclusion of mindfulness readings and exercises. *Practicing Presence* (Lucas, 2018) was highly valued. For example, Zoe observed, "just reading it made me feel calmer… kind of like a deep breath."[3] Miles identified the book as "a gem." During class one week, Jon commented, "it feels like this writing comes from our own thoughts;" Callie agreed, saying, "every chapter is relevant to a chapter in our lives" (field notes, 3-31-20).

In terms of mindfulness activities, breathing exercises were the most popular, with seven participants rating them as the most helpful strategy on their post-course survey. Participants who indicated in interviews that they continued to do any presence/mindful activities mentioned breathing exercises most frequently. As Jon said, they "really … clear your mind." Zoey noted that, when stressed, "I always go back to [mindful breathing] to calm myself down."

[3] Unless otherwise noted, quotations come from interviews.

Some participants appreciated the opportunity to try out different activities to find what worked best for them. Stephanie remarked, "it's sort of become part of our culture to just say… 'Oh… I'm so mindful, I'm so present,' but nobody actually does it. You have to… figure out what that means." She cited the importance of having "concrete ways to … build it as part of your routine." Miles was teaching in a summer program, and explained,

> as someone who is … dealing with paperwork … dealing with kids. You don't ever take time to just sit down and … realize you're in your own body because you're so … on the move. So … that [breathing] exercise … is … one that I can catch myself doing anytime. It's just like, "Whoa … it's a hectic week," or, "I'm doing a lot right now. I need to sit down and find myself real quick."

Participants found some of the presence techniques helpful for their own stress reduction and self-awareness.

Using mindfulness to foster a positive mindset in teaching was another key theme. During one class, I asked students to select a favorite quotation from *Practicing Presence* (Lucas, 2018) and explain its significance; several participants' quotes related to this topic. Aspen's quotation was "the longer we are able to hold a positive thought, the stronger that energy around us becomes" (Lucas, 2018, p. 181), and Diana's was "you become what you think about all day long" (Lucas, 2018, p. 41) (field notes, 5-5-20). Considering the importance of a positive mindset, Stephanie explained that her colleagues had offered her advice for avoiding burnout, such as "not to volunteer for anything" in the first years of teaching; instead, "focus on being a good teacher because you don't want to over-stress yourself." However, Stephanie felt that a mindfulness "frame" helped her "feel less anxious." She explained, "I still have to be cognizant … about how I engage in my first few years … but having … actual strategies to do made it feel like it was actually more possible."

This finding echoes other research. Skinner and Beers (2016) found "mindfulness facilitates changes in teachers' stance toward teaching, converting it from one focused on chronic stress, coping, and self-protection, to one organized around broaden-and-build goals of long-term professional development" (p. 108). As Birchinall et al. (2019) asserted, the inclusion of mindfulness activities is important as a means to help candidates "manage stress and anxiety, and maintain their wellbeing," but such programs are "just one aspect of a range of initiatives" that must be integrated (p. 3). Birchinall et al. (2019) explained mindfulness activities "may enable pre-service teachers to more effectively navigate this stressful occupation until such time as these factors are dealt with via professional and political reform" (pp. 6-7). Teacher stress and burnout are real concerns, and integrating these practices early in teachers' careers can help them manage the pressure, though the conditions that lead to burnout must still be addressed systemically—a need that has become even more dire since 2020 (Kise & Holm, 2022).

Connections to Equity

Participants offered several ways that mindfulness and social justice approaches should be linked. They found presence activities could support mental health, start addressing systemic inequities, facilitate positive classroom management, make curricular connections, and help empower students.

Mental Health

Some participants made connections among mindfulness, equity, and mental health issues, both for themselves and for their students. Alejandra observed:

> If I am taking great care of myself and working to be the best person I can be, this will be reflected in my teaching and therefore in my students. Mindfulness/self-care practices bleed into everything we do and subsequently affect our thoughts, actions, and ability to react to the stressful life of a teacher. (post-course survey)

Nora observed that integrating mindfulness could help students be more present for learning and able to achieve academic success. Lily explained that presence activities had helped her "move on" from pain and regain a sense of control over her life; she thought they could do the same for students. Teacher candidates pointed out that the dual pandemics had a significant impact on young people, especially those who are underserved, and found it important to pay attention to students' wellbeing.

Diana reflected on the work ethic in her family and possibly in her future students' cultures in her answer. Thinking about the students she would be teaching next year at a vocational/technical high school, she explained, "if I were to tell them, 'Let's take some time to do this,' they might be like, 'Well, I have other things that are more important to do than to focus on myself right now.'" She saw this in her own background, but believed paying attention to one's mental state was important:

> in my family … we always talk about working, working, working, because a lot of times we can't afford to just stop and relax. But at the same time … it's part of your health, … and understanding that is … huge. … Always feeling anxious is not … healthy.

Mindfulness could therefore be of assistance to both teachers and students in facilitating positive mental health, something candidates saw as related to equity.

Starting to Tackle Systemic Inequities

Two participants considered their role as beginning teachers in unjust systems as they contemplated the connections between equity and mindfulness. Katherine and Zoey discussed the reality of inequitable funding for U.S. schools, how too many districts do not have the supports needed. Zoey explained such inequities can be daunting to face as a new teacher, so she considered a stopgap measure:

> We don't necessarily know when that will change and when they will get those resources. If teachers on their own and in their own classrooms can take the time to kind of provide those supports … granted, it won't be a replacement for a school social worker or school psychologist. But it can take little steps … And … that, in turn, could … benefit … their education as well.

While systemic inequities still must be addressed, these "little steps" could begin helping students in the here-and-now. In addition, having practices that a teacher could integrate right from the start of their career can provide a sense of hope and purpose. Of course, as with teacher burnout, it is important not to allow that to preclude systemic change: individual actions and institutional progress must go hand-in-hand. Skinner and Beers (2016) concurred, explaining, "mindfulness does not imply coping through passivity or accommodation to the current state of affairs. Acceptance refers to an attitude brought to awareness, but seeing things as they are does not mean leaving things as they are" (p. 112).

Classroom Management

Several participants anticipated how mindfulness could help them manage their classrooms more equitably. In *Practicing Presence*, Lucas (2018) discusses working with challenging colleagues, advising "everyone we meet helps us in some way. Although your inclination may be to avoid difficult people at all costs, those same people can be your greatest teachers" (p. 155). Participants also saw this guidance as relevant to their work with students. As Stephanie explained, without the "ability to respond rather than react, or process a situation calmly enough, you're going to have these bad reactions that kids don't deserve." She noted teachers need to be empathetic, not shut down students or seek to control them. She saw connections between mindfulness and our teacher education program's focus on equity, including to the "inquiry stance" (Bieler & Thomas, 2009) introduced in the very first course: an outlook originating from an asset, not a deficit perspective, requiring teachers to ask questions and seek to understand rather than make assumptions. Stephanie said,

> a lot of what we talked about throughout the whole program in terms of social justice almost requires mindfulness, so that you can take a step back

> and say, "Well, I don't think the kid is being nasty. I think that they're probably … reacting to something that's going on outside of this moment, and I need to keep that in my mind as I interact with them."

Skinner and Beers (2016) made a similar connection, showing,

> mindfulness, with its focus on self-compassion and compassion for others, also encourages teacher to rework their habitual patterns of blame (self-blame or blaming students) when things go wrong in the classroom. Instead, teachers can come to view 'failures' as essential steps in a larger arc of learning and progress. (P. 108)

Viewing students with an inquiry stance and seeing difficulties as opportunities to change and grow can help promote more caring, equitable classrooms.

Some participants considered the role of mindfulness in the creation of a classroom community. Both Jon and Katherine looked forward to connecting with students through mindfulness in their future classrooms. Miles thought presence activities that incorporated physical movement could foster a positive environment, making things more "interactive" and engaging. He also, as a Black male teacher candidate, was aware of the racial/cultural mismatch between the current teaching force and the demographics of U.S. public school children. He believed presence activities could help with relational aspects of teaching, particularly building community across differences, explaining that being mindful could foster understanding that "these students are dealing with a lot of things that you may not know." As Hufford (2014) advocated, "it is only when the teacher recognizes the reality of diverse individual *identities*—the existential 'I's'—that he/she can maximize the possibility of achieving a classroom *community*—a communal 'we'" (p. 12).

Curriculum Connections and Empowering Students

Several participants thought of ways they could relate mindfulness to their content area, secondary English Language Arts, seeing connections between the curriculum and equity. Zoey used a sensory activity in student teaching to help students interpret a Walt Whitman poem. She had students slow down their breathing, listen to "nature sounds," and "picture different settings" to help facilitate understanding of a difficult poem and center them during the lesson. Callie applied an activity from *Practicing Presence* (Lucas, 2018)—examining the positive and negative people in one's life—to her students' study of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597; 2004) as they considered characterization and plot. Zoey and Callie discussed these examples when I asked about social justice, as they felt they were giving students equitable access to academic success by helping them better understand challenging content.

Some participants saw presence activities as having the potential to bring students together for social justice causes. Lily and Nora believed mindfulness was

empowering to them personally and thought it could be the same for students. Miles noted something similar:

> Being unified—doing one activity all at the same time—can pose… a foundation for you to do so much more with your class because now you even see, "Okay. I can get them together on this mindfulness activity. So maybe let's actually try to do a push for… social justice."

He went on to note such unity could be empowering: "we all feel that… we need to be heard and that we are one and our voices are valuable."

In his chapter discussing reflective teaching, Hufford (2014) advocated for a teacher to be a partner and co-learner in the classroom, not the sole authority. He recognized that such an approach can be seen as dangerous:

> To invite student *presence* into the classroom is risky business. It is to say: be who you are. Express a sense of self. Ask questions, not just of content, but of meaning, purpose, instructional method, and classroom philosophy.… Bring the expressive, lived reality of your existentially authentic racial/cultural/political/economic self into this learning community. (Hufford, 2014, pp. 12-13)

Such questions— "not just of content, but of meaning, purpose…. method, and… philosophy" (Hufford, 2014, p. 13)—should be at the heart of equitable teaching. Participants in this study felt that integrating mindfulness into the curriculum could have benefits related to social justice through making connections to the curriculum and unifying and empowering students.

Addressing Potential Problems

Participants also offered insights about the critiques of mindfulness in schools. As Lily said, "I definitely believe that it's possible for teachers to kind of use it… as a weapon to… get [students] to be quiet." To counteract potential issues, they recommended sharing the intent of the activities and providing options in implementation. Jon returned to the idea of classroom community, explaining, "before you begin to instruct students, you have to earn their trust, and vice versa." Only then, he said, should a teacher begin to introduce mindfulness, and attend to students' comfort by allowing them to opt out. Callie agreed, saying, "If students decide they don't want to participate… they have the right to." Both Jon and Nora also advocated checking in one-on-one. Stephanie thought that making presence activities a part of a daily routine was key. Katherine emphasized mutual participation, saying a teacher could act as "a facilitator" rather than a "scary, authoritative figure." She, Lily, and Stephanie all recommended teachers be mindfulness practitioners themselves before introducing presence activities to students. Further, Lily noted teachers needed to constantly reflect on their intentions and be sure they are not using mindfulness as a means of control: "that's

something you just actively have to practice against.… everything you do has to have a good rationale."

Several participants highlighted the need to focus on the benefit of accepting feelings and beliefs. Diana advocated for teachers to remind themselves of the original purpose, centering and acknowledging responses and emotions: "work through strategies… about grounding yourself into… what you're actually feeling and accepting those feelings… [not] trying to erase people's feelings." Miles also focused on the inner benefits, explaining,

> I think mindfulness should be in tune with individuality, because that's what it is. It's being mindful of yourself. So you want your students to be themselves in your classroom. It doesn't necessarily mean that they have to … abide by necessarily every rule... and they can't talk… but it just means, realize that you're here and you're in this space.

Zoey thought mindfulness should never be linked with a way to "control behavior." Rather, she said,

> I look at it more internally.… When I think of mindfulness, I think of… finding yourself, and what you believe in, and who *you* are. So, I don't think of it in terms of behavior but more… helping students kind of find… their path and who they are and what they want to achieve in life.

Focusing on self-actualization and on the benefits for students, these participants felt, could be a means to avoiding the 'mindfulness-as-control' trap. Hufford (2014) concurred, explaining that presence pedagogy can

> open up possibilities to teach in counterpoint to the empiricist, technocratic, behaviorist mindset that dominates education today. It is to visualize a classroom in which the dominant metaphor is student-as-person (not student-as-product, consumer, human capital, or facts absorbing test taker). (P. 12)

Such a critical approach is needed when considering how mindfulness can be connected with equity in education.

Finally, Stephanie expressed wariness of school-wide, "corporately packaged" mindfulness programs, echoing other scholars' fear of the commodification of presence activities. She recognized that, as a new teacher, she may not have the power to change an approach mandated by a school or district, at least immediately. But she did feel confident she could use mindfulness in a productive, equitable way in her own classroom. Similarly, Shapiro et al. (2016) cautioned against "mandatory mindfulness training across entire schools and school districts" because "introspection cannot be enforced" (p. 92), and teachers should therefore invite, not compel, students to participate. They also noted teachers should be wary of any "prescribed lesson order" and instead "be attuned to the needs of the class in the moment and… respond with a toolbox of mindfulness practices" (Shapiro et al., 2016, p. 92). Therefore, while participants

understood the potential pitfalls related to mindfulness activities, they had helpful ideas about how to avoid such issues.

Conclusion: A Step on the Path

At times, both teaching and social justice work can feel like a heavy burden. However, writers like Goodman (2011), who referenced the "joy of unlearning privilege and oppression" (p. 101) and Pitts (2020), who explained how such joy itself can also be "a tool of resistance" (n.p.), show us how presence—and even happiness—can coexist with striving toward social change and justice. Given these realities, mindfulness can play an important role in fostering a positive mindset and, ultimately, an equitable approach to teaching.

This study's findings reveal that participants responded positively to the inclusion of mindfulness activities in a student teaching seminar. They valued the course text and continue to practice some of the presence activities, especially breathing techniques. They viewed these activities as potentially helpful in their future careers. Participants saw connections between presence activities and equity, including fostering mental health, starting to address systemic injustices, facilitating classroom management, making connections to curriculum, and empowering students. They had insights about how to avoid some of the problems raised by Purser (2019) and others, such as the 'mindfulness-as-control' trap. Participants advocated for two key ideas: being practitioners of mindfulness themselves first and providing justifications for the use of presence activities with students. They suggested that teachers give students choice and agency regarding their participation in mindfulness practices. They also advised that teachers foster positive relationships and recommended focusing on benefits for individual students. As an instructor of future teachers, I will continue to work to make explicit links between presence activities and the fostering of equitable educational conditions in my courses in order to prepare candidates who are committed to inclusive, student-centered teaching for social justice. I hope that educational and political leaders will also seek to support teachers in this and many other ways. The path is long, and we have to continue taking steps as best we can.

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Author Contact

Jill Ewing Flynn, jeflynn@udel.edu