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Supporting Teens' Professional Identities and Engagement in Mindfulness Practices Through Teens-as-Teachers Programming

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Abstract

*This study was situated in the context of the University of California 4-H Positive Youth Development Program. A convenience sample of teen teachers (*N *= 11) represents variation in age (11–17), gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. All teens delivered the* 4-H Mindful Me *curriculum from the University of California 4-H Program. Qualitative analysis provides evidence of positive developmental outcomes that support teen teachers' personal professional identity and engagement in mindfulness. Teens described how involvement in the teens-as-teachers program provided the context in which they could explore their personal professional identity, build on self-efficacy as an instructor, and develop an improved understanding of mindfulness-based practices and mindful-based skills. Results inform the delivery of teens-as-teachers programming, specifically, an integrated approach to teen mindfulness programming.*

Key words: mindfulness, teen teachers; professional identity, positive youth development, social–emotional health

Background

The California 4-H Healthy Living program is focused on providing learning opportunities that address physical, social, and emotional health. Mindful practices connect each of these domains. Mindfulness is defined as intentional awareness, being in the present moment, and experiencing life nonjudgmentally (Kabat Zinn, 1994). Current research has demonstrated the importance of mindfulness training in promoting favorable academic, social–emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes for youth (Broderick & Frank, 2014; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Zenner et al., 2014). The existing infrastructure and goals of the California 4-H Positive Youth Development (PYD) Program can be used to provide youth with basic concepts in

mindfulness practices (e.g., mindful eating, affirmations, identification and management of emotions, and self-awareness) through their engagement as teen teachers. Although we know a lot about program effectiveness, we really do not know how mindfulness—especially a mindfulness program delivered by teens—influences teens themselves. Engaging teens as teachers in mindfulness can have important, yet unexplored, influences on not only their own mindfulness practices, but also their own development.

Out-of-school-time (OST) youth leadership programs such as teens-as-teachers serve as a model for providing adolescents with an opportunity to take an active role in their own education and the education of others. As teen teachers of mindfulness programming, adolescents are provided a unique opportunity to actively participate in their own education. The teens-as-teachers program model provides adolescents not only with extended learning opportunities for individual growth, but also with an avenue for these youth to contribute in meaningful and valuable ways alongside adults. The experience of teen teaching can have a pivotal impact for teens, specifically those from traditionally marginalized groups, to see themselves in the role of educators, thereby creating a sense of agency in their own learning and helping to situate youth on a positive trajectory. Teen teaching capitalizes on the developmental assets of adolescence, assisting with identity development, career exploration, and self-efficacy. Further, utilizing teens as teachers of mindfulness programming has the potential to better position teens to develop the social–emotional skills necessary for improved stress and anxiety management and sustained healthy lifestyles (Arnold et al., 2016; Bird & Subramaniam, 2011; Bolshakova et al., 2018; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Worker et al., 2018).

Through delivery of *4-H Mindful Me*, teens teach youth aged 5–8 years old to build positive relationships through expressing care, concern, and gratitude for others; building beliefs in oneself; practicing self-discipline, self-control, and self-reflection; and serving others (Martz et al., 2009). The *4-H Mindful Me* curriculum includes ten experiential learning activities that engage youth in mindful practices through mindful eating, affirmations, presence, emotional identification and management, focus, reflection, and yoga. There is growing concern for the social–emotional health of youth in America, with rates of anxiety, depression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder on the rise (Ghandour et al., 2019). Empowering youth with skills in mindful practice helps them cope with the anxiety, stress, and lack of focus they experience (Garey, 2017; Kuo & Taylor 2004; Taren et al., 2015; Zenner et al., 2014). Studies demonstrate mindfulness programs for youth can support health behaviors, be effective when led by a

trained teen, and may be better suited for contexts outside of the classroom (Arthurson, 2015; Costello & Lawler, 2014; Jennings & Jennings, 2013).

Further, positive youth development programs, like teen teaching, yield improved outcomes of teen teachers themselves in self-efficacy, leadership, career and college readiness, and program content areas (Arnold, 2018; Bolshakova et al., 2018; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Ripberger & Blalock, 2013; Ripberger et al., 2009; Story et al., 2002; Weybright et al., 2016; Worker et al., 2018). Teen teaching empowers adolescents in their own learning, setting them on a path of positive trajectory (Arnold, 2018). Teen's delivering the *4-H Mindful Me* curriculum were trained in an overview of mindfulness, examples of mindfulness practices (body scans, breathing exercises, and meditation), an exploration of neuroscience as it relates to mindfulness, some key ways mindfulness can benefit younger children, an introduction to related educational theories, and best practices for teaching children 5–8 years old. Existing 4-H resources like the *YA4-H Teens as Teachers* curriculum were also used to support ongoing teen training conducted by adult mentors (Arnold et al., 2015). This study's purpose is to gain a better understanding of how teens describe their own growth and development in professional identity, sense of self-efficacy, and engagement in mindfulness as a result of program participation. The results presented in this paper are based on select sections of the author's dissertation work.

Theoretical Framework

The 4-H Thriving Model and social cognitive theory (SCT) shaped the process in which teens develop and acquire positive developmental outcomes through teen teaching (Arnold, 2018; Bandura, 1998). Specifically, the teens-as-teachers program occurs in a developmental context that utilizes PYD principles, supportive relationships, and engagement of youth to support teens in the exploration and development of their inner passions (Scales et al., 2011). It is through this context that adolescents develop a thriving orientation. Indicators of (a) openness to challenges, (b) hopeful purpose, (c) pro-social orientation, (d) positive emotionality, and (e) intentional self-regulation, explain how teen teaching resulted in improved developmental outcomes.

Further, SCT provides a frame for understanding how teaching mindfulness resulted in increased understanding and engagement in mindful practices. Through teen teaching, adolescents were able to (a) master the new experience of teaching, (b) witness social modeling of mindful techniques, (c) experience the benefits of mindful practices, and (d) be guided with supportive feedback from an adult mentor. SCT provides a theoretical lens for

understanding the process by which teens' mindfulness behaviors, skills, and knowledge change as a result of teaching mindfulness to younger youth.

Methods

Data Source

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on the experiences, motivations, and gains of participation as a teen teacher in the *4-H Mindful Me* program. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. The interview questions used were adapted from a similar research project that examined teen leaders' experiences serving as teen teachers in science and nutrition education programs (Worker et al., 2018). The questions focused on participant background (how they came to be a teen teacher and their leadership experience), participation, learning, and development. Additional unstructured follow-up questions such as "What was your favorite lesson?" and "What does mindfulness mean to you?" provided greater insight into the interviewee's experiences in the teens-as-teachers program related to teens' reports of professional identity, sense of self-efficacy as an instructor, and engagement in their own mindfulness practices. Closing questions provided the interviewee an opportunity to lead the conversation and share anything the interviewer may have failed to ask. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to use the predetermined questions informed by SCT determinants of behavior (McAlister et al., 2008), but also vary the questions to suit the conversation (Lichtman, 2013).

Participants

This paper reports on a convenience sample of 11 out of the $N = 15$ teen teachers (aged 11–17) delivering the *Mindful Me* curriculum from the California 4-H program from two counties and three different program sites in California. While there is no recommended sample size for qualitative research, data were collected to the point of saturation, when no new information or insights are evident in data analysis (Merriam, 2009). All teen teachers were invited to be interviewed, resulting in inclusion of 70% of the total participants, which balanced feasibility and provided a robust data sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants represented variation in age, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. Teens reported living in cities (9.1%), towns (36.4%), rural communities (9.1%), and on farms (45.5%). Age of teens varied from 11–17 years old, with 45.4% accounting for younger-aged teens (11–12 years) and 54.6% accounting for those aged 13–17 years. Over two thirds of the sample identified as female and just under a third identified as male. The majority of teens reported their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino (63.6%) and their race as White (80%). The teens in this sample also participated in a wide

variety of 4-H activities, including the traditional club program, after-school programs, and camps. Interestingly, few had prior experience in roles of leadership, like teen teaching and mindfulness. A description of each program site is reported in Table 1.

Table 1 Program Site Descriptions

	Northern California	Southern California	
	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3
Teen teachers	2	6	7
Teen teachers interviewed	2	4	5
Adult mentors	1	3	1
Curriculum recipients	Ages 5–9	Ages 8–9	Ages 5–9
Teacher to participant ratio	1:10	1:3	1:3
Delivery context	OST Program	In-school	OST Program
Socioeconomically disadvantaged (CDE, 2019)	10.3%	74.4%	79.0%
Interview type	In-person individual interviews	In-person group interviews	Zoom group interviews

Qualitative data were recorded, transcribed by scribie.com, and analyzed through an iterative process using an inductive hybrid approach. Following each set of interviews, analytic memos were created to describe emerging findings. Initial coding included a priori codes as well as open In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). Data were coded in NVivo 12 and analyzed for a priori codes specific to indicators of (a) intrapersonal competencies in mindfulness practices; (b) interpersonal skills; (c) career readiness; and (d) self-efficacy, specifically looking at mastery of a new experience, social modeling, improved emotional state, and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997). In Vivo coding employs the use of participants' actual words thereby increasing the likelihood of accurately capturing the teen experience and giving voice to an often-marginalized group (Saldaña, 2016). A second cycle of coding employed a patterned coding method in which data were grouped into larger themes and constructs. Inter-rater reliability was established through a peer-coding check process. Select pieces of data most reflective of each theme are presented in the following qualitative results as a means of telling a representative sampling of teen voice.

Results

Professional Identity

Teens describe gains in vocational exploration, emerging professional soft skills (specifically in confidence, preparation, patience, and communication), problem solving, and personal growth in responsibility and respect. For most of these teens, this was their first opportunity to be in charge of an educational experience for younger youth. An adult mentor provided an initial and ongoing training to the teen teachers throughout the program. One teen described developing confidence through the program's initial training,

> *Yeah. I think that [initial training] did help me a lot because I wasn't sure what I was getting into, and then we went through the whole curriculum. And it looked really good and fun. So, it did help a lot me realizing "Oh, okay, this is what we're doing."*

This teen is describing how exploring the curriculum with a supportive adult mentor enhanced their excitement and confidence in delivering the project, stating, "I wasn't sure what I was getting into," but then following the training developed confidence, "this is what we're doing," and "it looked really fun."

Confidence development was also connected to program training for this teen:

> *I did get a lot of feedback. People tell me like, they were always good feedback. I did really good at that. You're a really strong leader, whatever. And training, one of the ones had said, we did do that first activity together as a whole group and after or before the meetings, we'd get there early, so then we can kind of practice over what we were gonna do.*

This teen teacher is explaining the ongoing training received throughout the program. Teens would meet as a group before the delivery of each lesson to review and practice lesson delivery. During this ongoing training, teens would receive feedback from their adult mentor. This teen discusses the positive feedback received following lesson delivery. It is through this process of curriculum exposure, practice, and feedback that teen teachers developed confidence.

Teen training also aided in the development of preparation and communication skills. Teaching required teens to plan out each lesson prior to delivery, taking into consideration how many teen teachers were available, how many younger youth they expected, and the specific materials and supplies needed for each particular lesson. The teens collaborated to determine

who would lead which lesson and how to support each other. For example, one teen described the preparation process:

> *So, it was kind of a collaboration of us just talking and saying what worked and what didn't work. And then talking about the next class, kind of preparing for it. But I think a debrief. . . . It was really good to kind of hear [adult mentor] say like, "This is what went well with you, but this is also maybe what we can try next time so it goes smooth."*

This teen has described how they collaborated with their other peer teachers and the adult mentor. He described the debrief process the teaching team engaged in following delivery of each lesson and the way in which he received constructive feedback, noting both positive aspects and areas for improvement.

Similarly, another teen described how teen teaching improved their skills in preparation, patience, and communication:

> *I think I gained more of communication and maybe more patience, especially with the little kids. And to also just to make sure to be . . . just keep everybody controlled, have it all controlled, and yeah. Be more prepared and stuff like that.*

This teen described general gains in communication and patience, but more specifically noted gains in communicating with younger youth and being more patient with younger youth. As teens experienced younger youth from the perspective of "teacher," they were better able to understand the abilities of younger youth, needing to prepare for how they would effectively communicate and deliver the lesson content. This is particularly evident in this teen's description of keeping "everybody controlled." This is an example of teen teachers' being able to develop not only improvements in their preparation, patience, and communication, but also the ability to recognize the connection between those skills and maintaining order in a chaotic environment. This ability to maintain order through preparation, patience, and communication is a critical skill that may contribute to teens' emergent sense of how they will effectively pursue professional and career goals, despite challenges.

Through participation in the program, teens were able to explore career avenues. Teens described being "unsure, but still exploring," yet also described a process of that exploration whereby they take inventory of strengths and weakness, "Well, I had a few [careers] that I wanted to do, but I kind of eliminated them based on what I'm good at and what I'm not as strong at." This teen was describing the process of assessing personal professional strengths and weakness as a way of determining which types of careers to pursue. Another teen specifically described teen teaching as contributing to this assessment process,

> *Well, it [teaching mindfulness] taught me . . . because I know that well now, I know my strengths, in talking in front of a group. So, and now I know that in my future jobs to pick stuff where I can get out more, be more interactive and stuff.*

By taking inventory of strengths and weaknesses, this teen realized that they want to find careers that play off their strengths. As a result of teen teaching, this teen described an increased directionality in selecting jobs that will allow for them to "get out more," whereby being in "front-facing" positions that allow for social interaction.

Teen teachers described development of workforce preparedness through the development of personal values of empathy, respect, and helping. When asked what it means to be a leader, one teen said, "you're gonna be the one stepping up and leading, leading some very important program like this [teen teaching]." Several teens described taking initiative and responsibility in the program as "stepping up." These teens described an intentional decision to assume responsibility for aspects of the program. One teen described how she shifted from literally "standing in the background" to "stepping up" and becoming a "role model": "I was just standing in the background and then I started going out and talking more and becoming more of a role model kind of." Another teen described the embodiment of "stepping up"; for example, she used emerging skills in problem solving to take an active role in teaching the lesson:

> *I've had to step up a lot and just from following the curriculum and doing my own, like when we're in charge and figure out how I'm gonna lead this class, and then working with [co-teacher] and [co-teacher], and then working with the kids. I have had to kind of step up a little bit as leader and learn.*

This teen also described "stepping up" as taking the lead in delivering the lessons. Additionally, this teen mentions the collaboration that occurred as responsibilities were divided. This teen described an acknowledgement that "stepping up" and actively taking the initiative is an important aspect of emerging leadership skills, but also an understanding that communication and collaboration of those responsibilities is needed. The experience of teen teaching was an opportunity for some teen teachers to "step up," thereby creating a positive orientation in their ability to assume professional responsibilities.

Engagement in Mindfulness

Teens provided descriptions of several different types of mindful techniques, how they acquired knowledge of mindfulness through teaching mindfulness, and some reported specific ways they used mindfulness to aid in stress relief, support interpersonal connections, and enhance healthy lifestyle habits.

When asked how leading the mindfulness lessons contributed to their own learning, one teen explained his recognition of what mindfulness is through reading the curriculum:

> *When I was reading off the paper, and where it told me what to do, I would see a few things where it'd be like, "Oh, mindful is this," or "being able to do this is being mindful," and that showed me a few things.*

This teen displayed metacognition in their reflection of gained understandings of mindfulness. This teen described "reading off the paper," meaning reading through the curriculum in order to prepare lesson delivery, as a mechanism for learning the mindfulness content. Through engaging in the processes of teaching preparation, this teen has gained deeper meaning of mindfulness.

Several teens stated that prior to becoming a teen teacher of mindfulness they had little to no understanding of mindfulness and that as they led the lessons their understanding of mindfulness increased. For example,

> *Well, at first, I didn't really know the definition of it [mindfulness]. But then as I kept on going, I started getting it and it's [mindfulness] done a lot to all these kids and everything. I've noticed their reactions and everything.*

Another teen described an increase in their depth of understanding mindfulness as a result of teaching mindfulness:

> *It gave me more understanding of what I was talking about 'cause I know if I was on the receiving end, I was gonna get a basic overall understanding. By actually teaching it, it gives you more depth into it.*

This teen explained how their level of understanding mindfulness was exponentially greater as the teacher. He described a need to be prepared and acquire a greater understanding of the mindfulness content, which was supported by their adult mentor and teen teaching team, so that he could translate those concepts to younger youth. This teen attributed their depth of understanding to the process of preparing and presenting information to others; essentially learning through teaching. Additionally, this teen reflected on the perspective of the students, acknowledging that in the role of teen teacher there is a responsibility to educate oneself on the content so that the recipients can increase their overall understanding. This teen described a hierarchical structure of knowledge acquisition in which the instructor must possess an in-depth knowledge base to transfer general knowledge to others.

Teens also described using mindful breathing and meditation to manage the stress they experience with their families, "The one that if you're stressed, just breathe. I use that

sometimes. When I get mad at my sister, I go in my room and I just sit there and I just breathe and just calm down" and "Oh, it's just that there's so many of us, that they're just all loud, and it's too loud for me, so I take a stroll outside." Both teens are expressing explicit ways in which they have internalized and directly applied the mindfulness skills they learned to manage emotions in their lives.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study can be used as a means to advocate for meaningful and purposeful opportunities for teens, including securing future OST funding, increasing investment in social–emotional learning for teens, and highlighting an effective model for inclusion of students in their own learning. Further, this study provides an innovative approach to OST mindfulness interventions, which have often focused on clinical populations (Beauchemin et al., 2008; Biegel et al., 2009; Bluth et al., 2015; Monshat et al., 2013; Sibinga et al., 2013). Since teens demonstrate improved outcomes in mindful practice in a non-clinical, OST setting, this study supports a tiered, in-depth, program approach where teens are engaged as both instructors and recipients of mindfulness training. Teen teaching as an intentional strategy may be embedded in existing mindfulness programs to enhance outcomes in non-clinical, OST settings.

While prior research has reported that competency and a personal practice in mindfulness are prerequisites to teaching mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli, n.d.), this study provides emerging qualitative evidence which further supports claims consistent with McCown, Reibel, and Micozzi (2010) that teaching mindfulness can actually lead to learning mindfulness. This study serves as an example of educators "learning by doing" and could be applied to adult educators who may be interested in providing mindfulness programming but have minimal experience with mindfulness themselves. Extension professionals and educators may feel hesitant to engage in projects that address social–emotional or mental health topics because of a lack of expertise, however, this project demonstrated that learning along the way can have positive impacts and increased understanding for the educators themselves.

This study supports the expansion of including more intentional reflection pieces to the teens-as-teachers program model. Teens described an increase in professional directionality as a result of reflecting on their own strengths and weakness in the role of teen teacher. Activities that build on the teens' experience teaching can help further support their growth and development. For example, teen teaching provided an experience for teens to build confidence, and increase skills in preparation, patience, and communication, which may contribute to how they purse future goals and respond to challenges. Additional activities that build on the

development of these skills, such as teens teaching other teens or teens teaching adults, could scaffold even greater outcomes. While the current study described teens engaging in mindfulness, it was usually more of isolated, one-off instances. This study supports an approach to mindfulness programming with teens that is more integrated beyond the teens-as-teachers program. For example, an integrated program would first start with in-depth training in mindfulness with the adult mentors. Then, those mentors would lead teens through mindfulness activities designed specifically for teens while also simultaneously preparing the teens to deliver the mindfulness lessons to younger youth. Ongoing reflection and discussion of using mindfulness in teen teaching teams could promote a more integrated approach that teens may see as a lifelong journey. Qualitative interviews of teen teachers give voice to youth, an often under-represented population. This study has documented teens' experiences, in their own words, of how teen teaching has influenced their learning and engagement in development of a personal professional identity, self-efficacy, and acquisition of mindfulness skills used to support behaviors that contribute to a sustained, healthy lifestyle.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include (a) researcher bias, (b) sampling bias, (c) confounding variables, and (d) lack of consensus coding. It is important to note that the researcher is also the author of *4-H Mindful Me* curriculum. Therefore, the researcher has some inherent bias in advocating for the program's success. In addition, teen participants have self-selected to participate in the program and therefore may be more likely to describe gains in outcomes or a positive experience because they were already seeking out this type of teen leadership experience. Further, some of the teens may have participated in or are currently participating in similar programs, and whatever results are described by teen participants cannot be separated from their other experiences outside of this teens-as-teachers program. Lastly, with only one researcher reviewing and analyzing the teen interviews there is less input on coding data. However, inter-rater coding was conducted with 18.2% of the teen interviews to mitigate this effect. Collaborative research teams can provide a more robust perspective when coding qualitative data.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research exploring the best practices for social–emotional health promotion in the adolescent years is critical. During adolescence, individuals are confronted with the task of identity formation, wherein they seek autonomy through exploration of different personas and commit to specific values, goals, and beliefs (Erikson, 1968; Evans et al., 2009). Since

adolescents are engaged in this exploration and commitment cycle, it makes sense to provide them with supports that enhance the process of identity formation. Teen teaching is one avenue to give adolescents autonomy over their own learning. Further examination of teaching as a means for learning can provide new models for supporting teens' self-directed learning, intrinsic motivation and meaning making. Research that examines teens' perspectives on their own growth and development, contributes to an expanded understanding of how roles of responsibility and meaningful contribution can affect teens' identity formation, learning, and adoption of prosocial behaviors.

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