CHAPTER 7

BUILDING TEACHERS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE THROUGH MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that building teachers’ social-emotional competence, including via mindfulness training, can improve teachers’ overall effectiveness and well-being, help equip them with the tools needed to respond to the unique stressors of the teaching profession, and potentially reduce burnout and attrition. This article reports on a longitudinal action research study of integrating mindfulness practices into my teacher education courses. I discuss how the process evolved over time and present key themes in student perceptions of the practice. This study has implications for any practitioners interested in mindfulness incorporated into education settings.

“I am so stressed out and overwhelmed by everything on my plate that I almost feel paralyzed.”

“I am really worried about being judged harshly with the new evaluation rubric for teachers, and I am afraid of losing my job or status if my students do not score highly enough on the state standardized exams.”
“I am at wit’s end with how to deal with Celia’s defiance and unwillingness to follow my directions in class and get on task.”

“I snapped at a student when he questioned my authority in front of the class.”

These comments reflect the kinds of emotional stressors and pressures that contemporary educators may face on a daily basis. Many teachers, especially those in urban or low-income settings, are stressed out, as widely cited (e.g., Abel & Sewell, 1999; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Weaver and Wilding (2013) report hearing repeatedly from teachers across the country that in the current educational climate, “they have become overloaded and overwhelmed with new policies and standards, and it has become difficult to find the time and energy to engage in anything beyond what is absolutely required by schools or districts” (p. 1). But to what extent do teachers have opportunities to develop concrete strategies and internal dispositions during their teacher preparation programs to help them address these increasingly challenging scenarios? Practicing teachers are rarely provided with resources for how to alleviate stress and maintain well-being (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). As Michalec argues, “In addition to technical expertise, 21st century teachers and teacher-leaders need a steady supply of passion, heart, and inner resiliency to resist burnout and effectively respond to the curricular, societal, and institutional conditions of teaching” (2013, p. 27).

This article reports on the process and lessons learned from a three-year action research project of integrating mindfulness and contemplative practices into my pre-service and master’s level education courses as a way to build teachers’ social-emotional competence, including the “inner resiliency” to which Michalec refers. The paper is guided by three research questions:

1. What are my students’ perceptions and attitudes about the integration of mindfulness practices into our teacher education courses?
2. What evidence exists, if any, that the mindfulness practices contribute to teacher education students’ social-emotional competence?
3. How has my facilitation and implementation of this process evolved over time?

This article is directed towards other practitioners who aspire to or currently integrate mindfulness practices into their courses, as well those interested more generally in mindfulness in education.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Colleges (and teacher education programs) as institutions have been criticized for focusing too much on knowledge development and not enough on personal reflection of one’s self and larger purpose and how to seek meaning in one’s life (Lewis, 2006; Taylor, 2010). However, “neuroscience, learning theory, and teach-
ing experience all illustrate that the social and emotional dimensions of learning are not only inextricably linked to academic success, but are indeed at its very foundation” (Weaver & Wilding, 2013, p. 1). Methods of teaching and working with students that are grounded in contemplative modes such as mindfulness training “provide the opportunity for students to develop creativity and insight, hone their concentration skills, and deeply inquire about what means the most to them. These practices naturally deepen understanding while increasing connection and community within higher education” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 8).

An exponentially increasing body of neuroscientific research supports the claim that mindfulness training can help reduce stress and increase overall well-being. Mindfulness is defined by secular mindfulness expert Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (1994, p. 4). A number of studies specifically have examined the use of mindfulness interventions for reducing teacher burnout and stress (e.g., Jennings, 2011; Loonstra, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2009) and for improving overall teaching efficacy and performance (e.g., Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Other studies have shown that mindfulness can enhance many brain functions, including but not limited to the following elements that are particularly important for teachers as well as their students: attention and focus, social and emotional awareness and self-regulation, and cognitive flexibility and non-reactivity (see, e.g., Carboni, Roach, & Frederick, 2013; Jennings, 2015; Kemeny et al., 2012; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011; Smalley & Winston, 2010; Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015).

As illustrated through the body of research cited above, mindfulness skills appear to cultivate the types of social, emotional, and cognitive skills and competencies that teachers need in order to respond to the ongoing and unpredictable demands of interacting with colleagues, students, and families as well as the larger social and institutional context of schooling in the 21st century. Social-emotional competence is “a broad construct viewed as an outcome of social and emotional learning (SEL)” (Jennings, 2011, p. 134) and contributes to teachers’ ability to respond to stressful situations such as those noted in the opening of this paper. SEL includes the following five elements, according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012, p. 9):

1. **Self-awareness**: The ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

2. **Self-management**: The ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.
3. **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

4. **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.

5. **Responsible decision making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others. (CASEL, 2012; “Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies,” n. d.)

These five elements also overlap with the “Engaged Teaching” framework (Kessler, 2000; Weaver & Wilding, 2013), which helps teachers understand the importance of cultivating an open heart, engaging the self-observer, being present, establishing respectful boundaries, and developing emotional capacity. This framework stems from a contemplative approach to teaching and includes mindfulness as one of its primary tools for developing the five dimensions. These dimensions help teachers develop social-emotional competence through connecting and integrating “social and emotional learning with academics, heart with mind, inner life with outer life, and content with contexts” (Weaver & Wilding, 2013, p. 2). As the authors note:

The Engaged Teaching Approach is not a prescriptive or linear process, but rather a lifelong learning journey. This approach involves becoming a reflective practitioner, studying our own experiences, learning from successes and mistakes, cultivating social and emotional intelligence, and developing a deep understanding of what effective teaching looks and feels like. (Weaver & Wilding, 2013, p. 8)

Research suggests that building teachers’ social-emotional competence, including via mindfulness training, can improve teachers’ overall effectiveness and help equip them with the tools needed to respond to the unique stressors of the teaching profession (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012). However, according to a recent national survey of 605 educators, only about half of teachers receive some form of SEL training (23 percent of them in-service) while “four in five teachers (82 percent) report wanting further training in SEL” (Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013, p. 33). Additionally, Schonert-Reichl (2013) examined the ways in which social-emotional learning is being integrated into pre-service teacher education course work and field experiences at the state and higher educa-
tion institutional level and discovered that most programs and state requirements include little emphasis on social-emotional competence.

Few publications describe the extent to which pre-service teachers are being taught within their professional education programs to develop skills such as mindfulness to increase their social-emotional competence. Reports from the inside of actual teacher education classrooms where forms of social-emotional learning, including mindfulness, are integrated as part of the pedagogy are scant. Although some publications document the classroom contemplative practices of higher education faculty in other disciplines (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Gunnlaugsson, Sarath, & Scott, 2014), more investigation is needed of what is happening in terms of social-emotional learning and contemplative practices, such as mindfulness, inside teacher education classrooms, and the attitudes and perceptions of teacher education students to these approaches. This article responds to this gap in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

Innovation

The following vignette illustrates a composite example of how I facilitate the innovation of classroom-based mindfulness practices, which I call “silence and centering,” in this action research study.

“Please disconnect yourself gently from your electronic devices…Find a mindful seat where you can be both alert and comfortable…Close your eyes if you are comfortable with that, or just look down…Let go of whatever it took to get yourself here to class—any rushing or scurrying or scrambling…Take a few cleansing breaths as you let yourself settle in to your seat and to your body…. [The sound of a single chime from the Insight Timer Light iPhone app indicates the beginning of silence and centering.] Take refuge in the breath…Notice any tension in your body, and relax into it, let it go….Take a deep, slow, relaxed breath in as you silently count to four…Hold your breath momentarily…Then slowly exhale as you count silently to five or six…Pause at the bottom of your exhale….Then I invite you to continue on your own with this or any other silent practice of your choice.” [After four minutes, three chimes signal the end of silence and centering, and I invite students to move their bodies in whatever way helps to energize them as we transition to the rest of class.]

Typically with silence and centering I teach a specific meditation strategy, such as certain techniques for focusing on the breath. I often preface the period of silence with a brief example or prompt from my own life, connected to a meditation-oriented teaching and relevant to students’ lives. I am not a trained meditation or mindfulness teacher, but I draw from the teachings of my own meditation and yoga teachers, what I have gleaned from additional study, and how I apply mind-
fulness skills in my daily life. I agree with Barbezat and Bush’s caution that “you need a deep familiarity with the practices before introducing them so that you can guide students through them and help them process their experience afterward” (2014, p. 68).

I deliberately maintain a secular approach to the types of mindfulness that I teach. Examples include various breathing exercises such as labeling and counting (Harp, 2011; Weil, 2011); myriad mindful movements (Nhat Hanh, 2008); practices drawn from yoga; nurturing oneself with non-doing (Weil, 2011); gratitude practices; focusing on physical sensations or emotions; substituting core beliefs which cause suffering (such as “I don’t have enough time”) with alternative thoughts (such as “I have the time I need”); practicing loving-kindness towards oneself and others (Salzberg, 1995); reminding oneself of the impermanence of things, that “this too shall pass;” noticing where one feels resistance in the thoughts or body and softening into it; repeating a phrase such as “May I feel peace, may I feel grounded and balanced;” or “be still/silent/simple;” and sending energy and compassion to others in the world who may be suffering.

To make the purpose and intention clear to students, and to develop buy-in, I frame the whole experience with the importance of teachers developing social-emotional competence to manage the stress and intensity of teaching and to find and maintain life balance. I informally refer to research that shows that well-developed teacher social-emotional competence tend to lead to higher quality teacher-student relationships and classroom organization and management (Jones et al., 2013). I acknowledge the stress and overwhelm that they feel in their intensive teacher education programs and invite them to experiment with using these practices to help soothe themselves and reduce stress while they are still students as well.

Very importantly, I emphasize that students are never required to participate in any of the practices that I teach. In fact, I explicitly say, “I am not the boss of what happens inside your head.” However, I have learned over the years through analyzing and reflecting on data in this action research study to establish clear expectations around the importance of absolute silence and stillness in the room (except for guided mindful movement practices) and to hold that container very deliberately. Students are also welcome to leave the classroom at the beginning of the practice time if they so choose, but they know not to enter or leave the room once the opening chime has rung, so as not to disturb others.

**RESEARCH DESIGN, PARTICIPANTS, SETTING**

Throughout this longitudinal, three-year action research study (Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009), grounded in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) inquiry methods (McKinney, 2007), a total of 149 of my teacher education students have participated in mindful silence and centering in my courses. Most (99 or 66%)
were pre-service teacher candidates, primarily undergraduates but some post-baccalaureate students with prior degrees. The remaining students (50 or 34%) were practicing teachers enrolled in a master’s degree program. All participants were students in a variety of education courses at small liberal arts colleges in the Western United States where I taught. The vast majority of students were White, middle-class, and female, reflecting the demographics of most colleges of education nationwide.

DATA SOURCES AND ANALYSIS

The primary data source for this ongoing action research study is an open-ended survey (see Appendix A) that I ask students to complete anonymously, generally towards the end of the term. The survey questions ask students about their overall response to the practice (that is, their attitudes about and perceptions of it), what works for them, what they find difficult or frustrating, which strategies they tend to use, and suggestions to improve the quality of the experience. To preserve confidentiality and encourage honesty on the surveys, I ask students to type and print their responses without their names or any identifying information. Response rates have almost always been 100%. Other data sources include my notes and reflections on their survey responses; my observations of students’ behavior; and my lesson plans, on which I note which focusing technique I plan to teach. These types of data sources are commonly used in qualitative action research studies (Creswell, 2013; Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009; McKinney, 2007).

Qualitative data analysis was iterative and began with initial coding of passages and reflective memos to identify patterns in the survey responses (Creswell, 2013; Newby, 2014; Saldaña, 2012). The first level of descriptive coding came directly from the questions asked in the survey (Newby, 2014). Guided by the action research framework, using the ongoing analysis results, I adjusted various aspects of the silence and centering practice over the years based on the survey results and my own observations. For example, I increased the time period from three to four minutes, I have learned to make more explicit my expectations of maintaining silence and stillness in the classroom, and I now remind students repeatedly (or elicit from them) what the purposes are of these practices. Coded items were then systematically organized and labeled according to patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013; Newby, 2014; Saldaña, 2012), after which I wrote interpretative assertions using the methods described by Erickson (1986).

I then conducted a quantitative analysis to enhance and provide more support for the qualitative assertions. For example, using a Likert scale approach, I categorized the students’ overall responses into three strands (enthusiastic/positive [liked the practice a lot and expressed enthusiastic support for it], lukewarm [liked the practice but not overly enthusiastic], and negative [disliked the practice]). I also further broke this down into results by pre-service teachers and in-service
practicing teachers. I also counted prevalence of evidence towards each theme; as Newby (2014) explains, this is an example of quantification of qualitative data, a process that led to the percentages reported in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis showed that the majority of the 149 participants had promising experiences with silence and centering. Among pre-service teachers, 79 percent responded enthusiastically or positively, 17 percent responded in ways that I coded as “lukewarm,” and only about four percent (six students) responded negatively to the practice. Among practicing teachers, 71 percent were enthusiastic or positive, 29 percent were lukewarm, and none responded with outright negativity.

Many students made overarching comments such as these about the silence and centering routine: “It’s amazing! It has helped so much. Every class should do it.” “There is very little risk and extremely high reward for the use of this practice.” The opportunity to be present, to focus on one’s “interiority” (Hart, 2008) and “inner core” (Michalec, 2013) by practicing stillness and silence, was a welcome change in their typically busy, multitasking lives.

Comments from the few students who responded negatively (only six students total or four percent) included that they were frustrated or distracted by noise made by peers or by their racing minds, or were not clear on the purpose, as illustrated by this student comment in my first year of implementing silence and centering: “I personally am not a fan. I usually just sit there bored thinking it’s a waste of time.” However, the overall analysis shows that the majority of students had positive attitudes and perceptions about the mindfulness innovation and were open to developing their social-emotional competence through the practices. More specific themes emerged within this general analysis.

Key Themes: Students’ Attitudes and Perceptions about the Mindful Silence and Centering Innovation

Welcoming of the practice after initial period of disequilibrium. The majority of students embraced the silence and centering period and looked forward to it. However, 12 percent of students (18/149) commented that it took them awhile to get used to the practice. For example, one student remarked, “I spent the first two or three silence and centering times trying to figure out how much money I was paying to sit quietly in a classroom. Since then, my opinion of it has improved.” Another representative student comment included:

At first, I struggled with the silence and centering because I am one of those people who likes to always be doing something… I also thought that it was kind of a strange thing for a teacher to have her class do. I had never had a teacher do something like this in class before, and I wasn’t quite sure how to react to it. However, after a few
weeks of doing it, I learned to really appreciate the fact that there was some time
during my day where it was perfectly acceptable for me to just relax and not have
to be doing anything.

Another student addressed how odd it can feel in modern American culture to
nurture oneself with stillness and silence:

Unfortunately, we live in a world where we are constantly doing something, so tak-
ing a moment to just breathe is such a foreign concept in our society. However, once
you get used to the idea, I think everyone loves it.

These comments illustrate ways in which my students appear to be building
their social-emotional competence by cultivating self-awareness and self-man-
agement through being present and engaging the self-observer. Comments such
as these also helped me realize over time that I need to make the purpose and
intention of silence and centering crystal clear to students, at the beginning of and
throughout the term, so that they understand why we are devoting time to these
practices.

**Nurturing oneself through compassion, self-love, and reduced judgment.**
Some participants reported developing a strong sense of self-compassion and self-love
and reducing their tendencies towards judgment through doing these prac-
tices. As one student noted, “The practices help calm me down. I beat myself up a
little too much, and these techniques help me love myself more.” Another wrote,
“I have found more patience for myself and the mistakes that I make.” Others not-
ed the importance of nurturing oneself with silence: “It is a powerful experience
to take the time to be quiet and listen to your inner voice and personal needs.”

Teachers and teacher candidates in college settings are constantly under pres-
sure to meet the high expectations placed on them for their own performance and
that of their students, especially in the current climate of high-stakes teacher eval-
uation processes. Typically, their lives include little time and space for self-care,
although I frequently emphasize the importance of making the time for this top
life priority, especially when things feel overwhelming. I share with students how
my own self-judging tendencies have diminished through my meditation practice.
Taking even a short period of time to nurture oneself with silence and stillness
provides a powerful antidote to these pressures.

The comments above illustrate some of the ways in which the practices are
helping my students develop social-emotional competence through being present,
engaging the self-observer, developing self-awareness and self-management, and
cultivating an open heart, including reducing reactivity such as being judgmental
towards oneself or others.

**Helps focus one’s mind on the class and content at hand.** Many students
(32 percent, 48/149) commented that the silence and centering practice helped
prepare them to focus on the day’s lesson and activities. As one student noted, “I
am able to ‘take inventory’ on myself and see where I am and how I might need
to make mental adjustments in order to better participate in class.” This statement clearly demonstrates a developing capacity for self-awareness and self-management through being present and engaging the self-observer.

**Helps with transitioning.** An important subtheme among survey responses was that the practice specifically helps with making a transition from one context or activity to another. Forty-eight percent of students who noted that silence and centering increased their ability to focus on class (23/48) specifically stated that their concentration increased because the practice allowed them the time and space to transition from their prior classes, driving in traffic to get to class, or other commitments. Additionally, 15 percent of all respondents (23/149) specifically commented on the transition benefit of silence and centering. For example, one representative commented included, “It gives you a chance to change gears from whatever you just came from into what you are about to start in this class. In that way it is like a nice lemon sorbet, cleansing the palate.” Similarly, another student noted, “I know that transitions can be the hardest part of the day in schools. If you have a routine in place like this, it can take away from the ‘out-of-control’ feeling that comes with transitioning.”

As noted earlier in this paper, increasing the ability to concentrate, focus, and purposefully direct one’s attention is among the most commonly cited benefits of mindfulness practice (e.g., Smalley & Winston, 2010) and contributes to social-emotional competence, most specifically through building self-awareness skills. The comments above illustrate some of the ways in which spending a few minutes in class quieting oneself and opening oneself to sensory awareness encourages students to leave behind other stressors and distractions and become more receptive to the learning experience at hand.

**Transference of contemplative practices to other contexts.** Thirteen percent of students (20/149) mentioned in surveys that they applied some of the strategies taught during silence and centering to other settings in their lives. Many of these students discussed some of the specific breathing exercises I taught to relieve general stress, such as from schoolwork overload. A few specifically mentioned using the 4–7–8 breathing technique1 in situations outside the classroom. One student remarked, “If I had a really busy/stressful day and am not able to fall asleep, I will use this breathing technique to relax.” Another named this strategy as helpful “not only for class but also for my sport. I do this before the games as well as before I go in and play. This really calms my nerves and allows me to play well.” Additionally, one student reported practicing “a lot of chilling out and breathing” techniques and “giving myself mental reminders to be calm” while s/he was on the way to take the Praxis teacher exam.

I am pleased to see that some students offered unsolicited comments on ways that they use the practices outside of class time to support themselves in their lives, especially since the survey did not ask directly about this. Most of the com-

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1 See Weil, 2011, for a description of this technique.
ments referred to situations in their personal lives. However, a few students (such as the one below) noted intentionally incorporating the practices in their own classrooms with P–12 students, although the survey does not ask about this transference of practices: “With my students, before a test, we take 2–3 deep breaths to focus ourselves before testing. I guide my students to leave all the frustrations of the hallway in the hallway so they can focus on the test.” Since a major goal of mine in introducing this practice is to help pre-service and in-service teachers learn strategies that they will actually use in their personal and professional lives to reduce stress and increase well-being, it is important to explore this transference further. In the future, I also want to ask students how likely they would be to incorporate these kinds of strategies with their own future students, and their rationale for their response. To synthesize, the comments in this section illustrate ways in which the mindfulness practices appear to build students’ social-emotional competence by allowing them to cultivate being present and engaging the self-observer, practices which lead to increased self-awareness and self-management skills.

Relational influence/social awareness. In survey responses, about 15 percent of total participants (22/149) made comments indicating that the classroom-based mindfulness practices appear to have influenced their social awareness, going beyond just an internal benefit to address something more relational. As one person remarked, “These practices enlighten me about the lives of others. I am going to have a relationship with my students and I need to have compassion for their problems. These exercises help me to develop this empathy and enlightenment.” Similarly, another noted, “This helps me develop patience and love for my precious students. The practices help me keep my ultimate purpose at the front. They help me clear the clutter and know what is my mission.” Another student commented that the mindfulness practices “eased the judgment I made of others and opened up more compassion within me for my fellow students.”

As noted previously, two important aspects of social-emotional competence are building social awareness and relationship skills. The student quotes in this section suggest that the classroom-based silence and centering practices contribute to the development of these skills.

Challenges Encountered by Participants

Resistance to the silence and stillness. Almost 20 percent of total participants (28/149) surveyed mentioned difficulty with sitting quietly and silently, even for just four minutes. This is a common response for beginning mindfulness practitioners (see, e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2013) and is illustrated by comments such as, “Being silent and sitting still is too hard. I want to think about other pressing issues;” “Quiet is VERY hard for me;” and even the self-judgmental “I suck at the silence part.” Interestingly, among the practicing teachers, almost a quarter of respondents (23 percent, 12/52) indicated that they resisted the stillness and silence.
They came to evening class after teaching all day long, and many expressed much difficulty slowing down, the most ironic comment of which was, “I have too much stress to be able to focus on silence and centering.” However, repetition of mindfulness practice over time allows the mind and body to settle (Zeidan et al., 2010), an experience of which we see evidence in this quote: “At first, the silence made me very uncomfortable. I have soooo much going on in my head that eventually this time helped me to slow the chatter down.”

These comments reflect our 21st century culture of constant activity, multitasking, connectivity, and overscheduling. Although research shows that multitasking actually makes us less productive (Rosen, 2008), and that taking time for simple mindfulness practice can reduce our stress (Smalley & Winston, 2010), some students in this study did not appear to be ready to take advantage of an offered period of silence and non-doing. For example, one student remarked,

I get frustrated sometimes because I want to be using that time to do something. I know this goes against everything silence and centering is here for, but I cannot help it. Sometimes I will be silent for a minute but then get too fidgety and have to write notes or something.

Teacher candidates and practicing teachers and have so few opportunities in their lives for stillness, silence, and simplicity, that it is perhaps not surprising how difficult they found it to just stop. Their reported experience is reflected by Smith (2010): “We live much of our lives within a state of restlessness and discontentment because we are continually seeking distraction from stillness” (p. 28).

Some participants noted that they liked the concept of slowing down but found it difficult to actually implement, as seen in this quote: “I think I could benefit from this practice, but it’s hard for me to do so. I’m such a task-oriented person that by the time I show up for class, I’m ready to jump in and be done.” The fact that participants even noticed how restless their minds and bodies were when faced with an opportunity for stillness and silence is an example itself of self-awareness, a central piece of social-emotional competence, fostered by being present and engaging the self-observer.

Concern about using class time for contemplative practice. A few students (6/149, four percent) over the three-year data collection period expressed concern that class time was being used for mindfulness practices instead of some other course content, as seen in this comment: “We’re in class and shouldn’t need to meditate before starting a lesson.” Similarly, the following quotes speak not only to concerns about class time mindfulness but also the difficulty of slowing down in contemporary culture:

The only thing I find frustrating about this practice is that the days I do not participate mentally (or feel like I can’t slow down), I feel like it’s time wasted. In three minutes I can update my planner, send an email, complete a graphic organizer, order at Starbucks, exchange stock options, walk to the mailbox, fill up my water bottle,
Teacher Competence Through Mindfulness

etc. Not all at the same time, of course. In all seriousness, the days I am frustrated by this practice are the days that I need it the most.

Like the respondent above, the following student mentioned the class time concern but also acknowledged its potential benefits:

I do think silence and centering can be very useful, but there are definitely days where it seems like a waste of time. I do think it is important; my issue with it was that it is during valuable class time. However, looking back on the semester, it is hard for me to argue with it because I have learned more in this class than most of my classes this semester, so something is working.

Although only six students expressed this type of concern, and most of these comments are from the first year of implementation, this evidence points to some degree of student confusion and concern about the appropriateness of integrating even secular mindfulness (see Kabat-Zinn, 2013) into an academic classroom. Reflecting on these critiques as part of the action research framework has led me to be more explicit about the purposes of the silence and centering mindfulness practices for teachers (see Jennings, 2015), not just at the beginning of the term but also throughout. Also, as I have learned more about contemplative pedagogy, I am deliberately using these practices in my courses as a mode of inquiry, a way of knowing, rather than just something separate that we do at the beginning of class, before we get to the “real content” (see Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

**FINAL REFLECTIONS, CONCLUSIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Overall, the evidence suggests that integrating silence and centering into my teacher education courses appears to have helped prospective and current teachers develop aspects of social-emotional competence that will equip them to respond to the stressors and challenges of teaching in the 21st century. Reflecting on the student survey comments through the lens of the five elements of social and emotional learning as codified by CASEL (2012), it appears that three aspects are particularly well-nurtured by the silence and centering mindfulness practices: *self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness skills*. As seen throughout this article, students wrote about developing clear awareness of their own responses and habits (even including difficulty being present with stillness and silence); regulating their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors through centering practices (including directing their focus towards learning); and developing the empathy and compassion that contribute to understanding and connecting with others. Cultivating the Five Dimensions of Engaged Teaching (Weaver & Wilding, 2013), particularly those of being present, engaging the self-observer, and developing an open heart, appears to have contributed to the teacher participants’ developing social-emotional competence.
Moving forward with these practices, I want to make sure that I continue to frame silence and centering as an invitation rather than a mandate. As noted previously, although I explicitly tell students that these practices are not required, and that if they would rather not participate, they can leave the room or simply sit quietly in a way that is not distracting to others, this is a delicate balance to strike. I now say, “Don’t believe me. Try this out, if you would like, and see how you respond, what you notice.”

As a teacher educator, I greatly look forward to beginning each class session with a time for all of us—teacher and students alike—to center ourselves and prepare our minds, hearts, and bodies for the learning experiences at hand. It is a way for me as an instructor to shed any stress or distractions and be mindfully focused on my students’ needs and the cultivation of a caring learning environment characterized by self-awareness; the social-emotional competence of teacher educators is just as important as that of P–12 classroom teachers, teacher candidates, and their own P–12 students. This has become a powerful routine in my classes that I hope to continue throughout the rest of my career.

**APPENDIX A: STUDENT SURVEY ON SILENCE AND CENTERING TIME**

*Please PRINT without your name and submit to instructor. Thank you very much for sharing your honest reflections.*

1. What has been your response to our daily practice of 4 minutes of silence and centering at the beginning of class? In other words, how would you describe your experience and impressions of the daily 4 minutes of silence and centering?
2. What “works” for you about it? What, if anything, do you find beneficial about it? (Be specific.)
3. What, if anything, do you find difficult or frustrating about it? (Be specific.)
4. Do you ever try any of the suggested strategies/approaches such as thinking about nurturing yourself with non-doing, focusing on your breathing or your physical sensations or emotions, reminding yourself that “this too shall pass”—the impermanence of things, repeating a phrase such as “May I be free from suffering,” or “be still/silent/simple,” practicing loving kindness towards yourself or others, or sending energy and compassion to others in the world who may be suffering?
   a. Which have you tried?
   b. If you have tried any of these approaches/strategies, how would you describe your experience and impressions of them?
5. What suggestions do you have to improve the quality of your experience with the daily practice of silence and centering?

REFERENCES


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