Why Mindfulness Matters:

How Mindfulness of Paraprofessionals Affects Personal and Professional Well-being

by

Janet Rudzroga

BPHe, BEd

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF EDUCATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
Faculty of Education

© Janet Rudzroga, 2018

All rights reserved. This project may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without permission of the author.
Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................. 7
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .......................................................................................................................... 8

Chapter One: Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 9

   Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 9
   Personal Context ............................................................................................................................... 9

Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................................................... 11
   Impacts of paraprofessionals. ............................................................................................................ 12
   Promoting well-being. ..................................................................................................................... 13
   Defining mindfulness. ...................................................................................................................... 14
   Value of mindfulness. ...................................................................................................................... 15

Significance of Study ............................................................................................................................. 15
   Professional development of paraprofessionals. .......................................................................... 16
   Lack of training opportunities. ........................................................................................................ 17
   Professional development in Yukon. ............................................................................................... 18

Overview of Study ................................................................................................................................. 19

Definition of Critical Terms .................................................................................................................. 20
   Mindfulness .................................................................................................................................... 20

Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 21

Chapter Two: Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 23

   Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 23

Mindfulness - Context and Rationale .................................................................................................... 24
   Positive psychology. ....................................................................................................................... 24
   Character strengths. ......................................................................................................................... 24
   Mindfulness ..................................................................................................................................... 26

Western mindfulness. ............................................................................................................................. 26

Benefits of mindfulness. ....................................................................................................................... 27
   Effects on the brain. ........................................................................................................................ 27
   Self-awareness and life skills. .......................................................................................................... 29
   Happiness and fulfillment. ............................................................................................................. 29
   Health and well-being .................................................................................................................... 30

Overview of the Challenges Facing Target Populations in Education ............................................. 31
   The importance of self-regulation for special education students. ............................................. 31
Current Studies about Mindfulness in School Settings ................................................................. 38
Mindfulness training programs. ..................................................................................................... 38
  Modified mindfulness-based stress reduction. ................................................................................ 39
  Mindfulness training. ...................................................................................................................... 40
  Stress management and relaxation training .................................................................................... 41
  Cultivating awareness and resilience in education. ........................................................................ 43
  Community approach to learning mindfully.................................................................................. 45
Mindfulness-based wellness education............................................................................................. 45
Connecting current studies to my research question. ..................................................................... 46
Importance of this Study ................................................................................................................. 47
Summary....................................................................................................................................... 48
Chapter Three: Research Design .................................................................................................... 50
Introduction.................................................................................................................................... 50
Methodology & Methods ................................................................................................................. 50
  Ecological systems theory. ............................................................................................................... 50
  Action research................................................................................................................................. 51
  Cycles of action research. ................................................................................................................ 52
    Cycle 1.......................................................................................................................................... 52
    Cycle 2.......................................................................................................................................... 53
    Cycle 3.......................................................................................................................................... 54
    Cycle 4.......................................................................................................................................... 55
Participants....................................................................................................................................... 55
  Characteristics................................................................................................................................. 55
  Recruitment.................................................................................................................................... 56
  Ethical issues.................................................................................................................................... 56
Data Collection................................................................................................................................. 57
  Types of data. ................................................................................................................................. 58
    Applicability of data to question. .................................................................................................. 59
  Data collection instruments............................................................................................................ 60
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

Findings

Cycle 1

My Personal Transformation: Beginning Transformations
  Feelings of failure
  Different perspectives
  Intermittent calmness

My Personal Transformation: Mid-Point Transformations
  Heightened self-control
  More present
  Deeper gratitude and kindness
  Increased mental clarity

My Personal Transformation: Transformed
  Enhanced awareness and health
    Highlights of awareness questionnaire
  Improved sleep
  Finally grounded
  Recognition for ongoing practice

Cycle 2

Paraprofessional Transformations: Beginning Transformations
  Initial thoughts
  Establishing a need for self-care
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of routine</th>
<th>82</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 3</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional Transformations: Mid-Point Transformations</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater body awareness</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spreading kindness to self and others.</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased self-control for students.</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraprofessional Transformations: Transformed</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful characteristics</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of breath.</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved health and well-being.</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking of the future.</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 4</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Mindfulness Training Sessions</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining mindfulness.</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback of training sessions.</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding experience.</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for more time.</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of mindfulness training.</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarities of Transformations and Connection to Literature</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Conclusion</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restating the Purpose</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Discoveries</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Value of the Study</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Value of training:</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ongoing Territory-wide training:</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Small group settings:</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- School-based administration support:</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increased Time:</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1: Overview of Mindfulness Practices Discussed in Training Sessions ........................................ 119

Meditation .............................................................................................................................................. 119
  Sitting meditation ............................................................................................................................... 119
  Walking meditation ............................................................................................................................ 120
  Object meditation ............................................................................................................................ 120
  Loving-kindness meditation ............................................................................................................. 120

Body Scans ............................................................................................................................................ 121

Yoga .............................................................................................................................................. 122

Mindfulness applications ..................................................................................................................... 123
  Buddhify: ......................................................................................................................................... 123
  Insight Timer: ................................................................................................................................. 123
  DeStressify Stress Relief: ............................................................................................................... 123
  Headspace: .................................................................................................................................... 123
  Calm: ............................................................................................................................................ 123
  Relax Melodies: .............................................................................................................................. 123

Appendix 2: Coding Categories by Character Strengths and Virtues of Positive Psychology ............ 124
Abstract

This paper explores the action research question, *How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?* Starting as a personal journey to increase my mindfulness practice, an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program was followed. Knowledge and insights gained during this research cycle helped guide the creation of professional development workshops for nine paraprofessionals working in an urban school in Yukon. Participants met weekly for seven weeks to explore and practice mindfulness techniques for self-care and for use with students in the classroom. Participants completed initial and follow-up surveys, weekly exit cards, and contributed to group brainstorming prompts. In addition, two paraprofessionals completed interviews at the completion of the study. Data collection included researcher’s personal journal, mindfulness practice log, and awareness survey, as well as participants’ surveys, exit cards, group brainstorming, and interviews. Based on the mixed methods data collection and content analysis, it was evident that paraprofessionals noticed increases in overall health and well-being following the mindfulness training. All paraprofessionals expressed strong desires to continue meeting and practicing and demonstrated a commitment to ongoing self-care. Clearly, the self-care of paraprofessionals working with students with special needs should be a priority of the education system in Yukon. Further research in this area should be conducted with larger participant groups to generalize findings.

*Keywords: paraprofessionals, mindfulness, mindfulness-based stress reduction, positive psychology, self-care, Yukon*
I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Sarah Bonsor Kurki of the Department of Education at Vancouver Island University. Dr. Bonsor Kurki was always available to arrange meetings via Skype whenever I needed extra support or to help guide me in the right direction. Her willingness to provide helpful feedback and positive encouragement helped motivate and inspire my work.

I would also like to thank Dr. Mary Ann Richards of the Department of Education at Vancouver Island University who helped guide my initial thoughts on researching mindfulness and provided clear direction and support throughout my proposal and REB application process.

I would also like to acknowledge Christine Klaassen St. Pierre, instructor of Yukon Native Teacher Education programme at Yukon College as the second reader of this thesis. I am gratefully indebted to her valuable comments on this thesis based on her knowledge as an instructor of Mindful Schools and as a former administrator within Yukon.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to the participants in my research, for their willingness to attend mindfulness training sessions and their unfailing support throughout the research process. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them. Thank you.

Janet Rudzroga
Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter begins by sharing personal context that lead to the development of a study on increasing my own mindfulness. Struggling with my own emotional well-being due to difficult working conditions and strained relationships with students with special needs set the stage for the study. After discussing personal reasons of the need for self-care, I provide an overview of the current situation within special education and the role of paraprofessionals under the section ‘statement of the problem.’ After describing the increased need for paraprofessionals in the school to provide support in an inclusive model of education, I explain the impacts of lack of training on paraprofessionals. I then highlight the necessity for promoting well-being of staff in education settings. I connect the need for increasing well-being with mindfulness training, provide a definition of mindfulness, and discuss the value of mindfulness training within education. Following an introduction to mindfulness, I argue the significance of the study, professional development of paraprofessionals, lack of training opportunities, and current professional development in Yukon. I end this chapter with a brief overview of the study and define critical terms.

Personal Context

Upon graduating from my Bachelor of Education program, I took on different educational roles in three different provinces/territories in Canada. I served as a substitute teacher, grade 4 teacher at a First Nations school, and Educational Assistant (EA) in a segregated behaviour resource room. Through all of these positions, I worked with challenging students, some with multiple special needs. I knew that I wanted to continue my educational journey to learn how I could more effectively meet the diverse needs of my students, which led to the
beginning of my Master of Education in Special Education program. At the time of application, I thought I would be focusing my attention on students with behaviour needs and challenges, self-regulation strategies, or interventions for students with comorbid Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder, as this was the predominant diagnosis for the students in my class at the time. However, my plans and ideas started changing the longer that I stayed in that classroom setting.

Working with students with severe behaviour challenges had negative impacts on my emotional health and well-being. At the end of each day I often felt exhausted, frustrated, or hurt, due to the verbal abuse from students. As the days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months, I started feeling the effects of workplace burnout. My patience and tolerance for inappropriate behaviour plummeted and my negative reactivity to problematic behaviour occurred more frequently. I was having troubles sleeping and constantly felt anxious about my workplace situation, which is why I chose to go to counselling to help relieve some of my mental health concerns of stress, anxiety, and burnout resulting from working with challenging students. My counsellor suggested that I meditate and helped me learn some practical breathing techniques to calm my body and mind. I was diligent with doing these exercises at first, but then I let the busyness of life come between my ability to make time for myself. I have always placed others and responsibilities before taking care of myself, which I knew had to change if I was to continue working with students with challenging needs.

Throughout this year, I have been working full time as a teacher in a special education classroom, completing a graduate-level research project, and planning a wedding simultaneously, placing demands on both my professional and personal life. Preserving my mental health and well-being, required taking time to work on myself and improve my practice. I knew that if I let
the stress of everything take over, I would not be able to provide the support for the students in my class.

Reflecting on the need for increasing my personal well-being and the ability to offer the support that my students need with their own emotional development, I utilized strategies of mindfulness, based on my personal interests of yoga, meditation, and reading. I think practicing mindfulness, being in the present moment, is essential for living a healthy life. My personal struggles of not being able to live in the present moment and becoming stressed and anxious when thinking about the past, future, or things I cannot control, increased my interest in learning more about mindfulness and the effects on students’ well-being and learning. I questioned if I had learned to be mindful as a child if I would still be struggling as an adult. I wondered how developing my practice of mindfulness could indirectly affect my students’ attention, reactivity, relationship building, and self-regulation. I would share knowledge gained throughout my journey with other paraprofessionals within Yukon Education to broaden the impact of mindfulness training. Ultimately, I would be a role model for my students and other paraprofessionals and demonstrate how I use mindfulness to help improve emotional regulation, well-being, and relationships.

**Statement of the Problem**

Special Education, and the services provided to students, has gone through many changes over the course of its existence. When the pendulum swung towards inclusion, changes to the design of special education programs occurred because students with diagnosed academic, social, emotional, and behavioural needs were placed into regular classrooms. To overcome challenges associated with placing students with special needs into the regular classroom, more paraprofessionals were employed (Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012, p. 362). The increase in
paraprofessionals (paraeducators, educational assistants, teaching assistants, teaching aides) in the classrooms to support students with exceptionalities has impacted the dynamics and relationships within the classrooms. Within a team approach, teachers and paraprofessionals work collaboratively to help their students fulfill academic, social, emotional, and behavioural needs. “All students in a classroom community can benefit from a team of educators, which includes paraprofessionals and teachers working together in ways that promote meaningful learning and a sense of belonging for all students” (Causton-Theoharis, 2014, p. 40). Giangreco et al. (2012) support the use of paraprofessionals in the classroom by explaining that paraprofessionals “play a major role in the development, social and academic outcomes of students with disabilities” and Tarry and Cox (2013) agree that “paraprofessionals play an important role in student academic achievement, social advancement, and classroom control” (as cited in Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, p. 18). Although it is evident that paraprofessionals are important in students’ development, there is criticism in the literature due to the lack of training these paraprofessionals maintain. Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) explain these flaws by stating “we continue to assign the least qualified personnel to students who present the most challenging learning and behavioral characteristics” (p. 51). Paraprofessionals require more training if they are to be effective in meeting the needs of their students.

**Impacts of paraprofessionals.** Each year, children spend over one thousand hours at school with their teachers, paraprofessionals, and classmates. The adults in a child’s life can leave lasting impacts on their holistic development and significantly impact “a students’ achievement, motivation, and engagement” (Frias, 2015, p. 2). Paraprofessionals form close relationships with the students they work with. Unfortunately “the nature of these relationships is often impacted by their appreciation and job satisfaction” (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017,
p. 19). In addition, the adults in the room affect the classroom environment and climate of the room. If teachers and paraprofessionals struggle with their own health and well-being, their students will ultimately feel the impacts. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest “that deficits in a teacher’s social and emotional competence and well-being may provoke teacher burnout and have devastating effects on classroom relationships, management, and climate” (p. 492 as cited in Frias, 2015, p. 3). Larrivee (2012) explains, “Stress and burnout are common among teachers as they struggle to cope with an increasingly bureaucratic system, with more students who are needy and troubled, and with ever increasing responsibilities” (p. 7 as cited in Frias, 2015, p. 106).

**Promoting well-being.** Burnout affects teachers, support staff, and ultimately, students. Paraprofessionals report feelings of burnout and leave the occupation because of the stressful nature of supporting children with special needs (Giangreco et al., 2010). Based on the idea that “you cannot give as fully to others if you are not meeting your own needs” (Causton-Theoharis, 2014, p. 112), training in personal well-being of staff should be a priority of the education system. According to Aelterman, Engels, Van Petegem, and Verhaeghe (2007) teacher well-being can be defined as “a positive emotional state which is the result of harmony between the sum of specific environmental factors on the one hand, and the personal needs and expectations of teachers on the other hand” (p. 286). Interventions to help build teacher well-being, rather than treat mental health deficits, often fall under the category of positive psychology interventions, which “aim to improve an individual’s overall wellness and most notably contribute to the improvement of subjective wellbeing” (McCullough, 2015, p. 30). Some of the types of training to increase well-being include positive psychology interventions that focus on gratitude, hope, optimism, character strength, and mindfulness. Siu, Cooper, and Philips (2014)
implemented a training program focused on positive psychology concepts of optimism, character strengths, hope, gratitude, self-efficacy, and mindfulness training to help teachers increase positive emotions and workplace well-being. The intervention, delivered over 2.5 full days, provided specific training in each of these areas, as well as stress and coping techniques, such as muscle relaxation and emotion management, leading to increases in positive emotions and decreases in emotional exhaustion. Gibbs and Miller (2013) support the use of positive psychology interventions within education settings, suggesting these interventions help to create resilient teachers who positively impact their students and the learning environment.

“Mindfulness is an increasingly frequent target of positive psychology interventions intended to increase subjective well-being” (McCullough, 2015, p. 24).

**Defining mindfulness.** We live in a fast-paced world with constant bombardment of stimulation coming from a variety of sources, including advertisements, social media, cell phones, television, movies, and music. Overstimulation within our society affects the ability to live in the present without worrying about the future or ruminating about the past. Mindfulness has been defined as “the practice of purposely focusing our attention on the present moment – and accepting it without judgement” (Corliss, 2013, p. 24). There are many different ways to practice mindfulness, but ultimately, the goal of mindfulness techniques is to “achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation by deliberately paying attention to thoughts and sensations without judgement,” allowing “the mind to refocus on the present moment” (Corliss, 2013, p. 26). ‘Basic mindfulness meditation,’ ‘body sensations,’ ‘sights and sounds,’ ‘emotions,’ and ‘urge surfing’ are all forms of meditation described by Corliss (2013). Many of the elements of Western mindfulness training are rooted in Buddhist and Hindu traditions (Selva, 2017). Modern mindfulness practices have been largely attributed to Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Center
for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and developed an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training program for people that wanted to reduce their stress levels (Selva, 2017).

**Value of mindfulness.** Literature in the field of mindfulness agrees that attention to mindfulness is beneficial. “The emerging research on practicing mindfulness proposes that it can help adults improve their health and well-being by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression” (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008; Ruff & Mackenzie 2009, as cited in Frias, 2015, p. 3). “Mindfulness is a universal modern way to enhance life. Its practice can make us calmer and more centered, and improve our physical well-being” (Annesley, 2015, p. 9). In addition, mindful practice of adults has been shown to positively affect students. “As teachers acquire foundational skills and techniques for managing their emotions in the moment, student–teacher relationships develop and evolve so that student outcomes ultimately improve (e.g., classroom belonging, engagement, and motivation to learn). When teachers feel better, students benefit” (Eva & Thayer, 2017, p. 18). With increasing demands placed on teachers and support staff, the ability to practice mindfulness can impact the success of how adults react to difficult situations, perceive and manage stress, and build relationships with their students. Mindfulness training is a powerful tool to be used within the education system.

**Significance of Study**

Mindful practitioners or specialists are often brought into classes to teach students techniques on how to be mindful. However, without the teachers and paraprofessionals who work with the students on a daily basis also learning how to be mindful and incorporating mindfulness into their everyday practice, there is little hope that the training and techniques will have lasting results. Even if the techniques are validated by research, improper implementation
will affect the attainment and maintenance of the results (Cook & Schirmer, 2003, p. 202). These types of one-off information sessions for students do not allow a full understanding of the proper use of the techniques and when they can be most effective. Simply providing “a list of effective practices provides no real benefit to students with disabilities unless the practices are frequently and appropriately used” (Cook & Schirmer, 2003, p. 203). Therefore, there is a need for the adults to also learn about and practice the techniques. Research on pre-service and in-services for teachers and paraprofessionals has concluded that the information is rarely utilized and implemented effectively. Also, after a short period of time without desired results, the programs are removed from practice. Teachers and support staff are often unwilling to implement the techniques because they are overwhelmed with applying yet another technique or program with so many other programs and techniques already in place or they feel like they do not have adequate training to do so. Noticing the potential benefits of mindfulness practices on teachers’ skills for coping with stress and also as a tool to support the well-being of students, Frias (2015) suggests that “providing all pre-service and in-service teachers with the option for mindfulness training could be a simple, low-cost benefit to the profession” (p. 118).

Professional development of paraprofessionals. Currently in education settings, most mindfulness programs are designed for students (Flook et al. 2010; Mendelson et al., 2010; Black & Fernando, 2014; van de Weijer-Bergsma, Langenberg, Brandsma, Oort, & Bögels, 2014). From my review of the literature, it is clear that mindfulness education for teachers is only starting to be explored and there are still many limitations in the research (Frias, 2015; Harris, Jennings, Katz, Abenavoil, & Greenberg, 2016; Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). In addition, I have noticed that within the literature, there is little attention specifically paid towards paraprofessionals. For example, some research on the effects
of mindfulness training programs includes paraprofessionals as part of the participant groups, but these studies do not differentiate the results between the effects on teachers and paraprofessionals (Taylor et al., 2016; Schussler et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2016). Although paraprofessionals have slightly different roles and responsibilities than teachers, the job is still demanding and many paraprofessionals suffer from job dissatisfaction and stress, leading to burnout. According to Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) “low wages and unsatisfactory job conditions, including lack of appreciation and supports, are common among these paraprofessionals” (as cited in Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, p. 18). “Many paraprofessionals continue to express feelings of isolation and disrespect, fueled by low compensation and the fact that too many of them continue to be asked to assume teacher duties without adequate preparation, training, direction, or supervision” (Giangreco et al., 2010, p. 51). Clearly, more training, clarification of roles, support, and appreciation of these hardworking individuals is required.

**Lack of training opportunities.** One major issue with the increase of paraprofessionals in the education system is a lack of training. “Paraprofessionals, across countries, often lack formal educational training and background knowledge about children and teaching practices” (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, p. 18). In the United States of America, a high school diploma is the only requirement for paraprofessionals, which is problematic for principals, teachers, and students (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, p. 18). The lack of post-secondary education is also a problem in some places in Canada. According to Yukon Education (2017) the only requirement for employment is “grade 12 graduation or equivalent, and experience working with youth.” Although course work/certification as an Educational Assistant and experience working with students with special needs is desirable for employment with Yukon
Education, it is not mandatory. Therefore, there are many paraprofessionals working within Yukon with little to no training or experience to help them in their role of working with students with special needs. “Job training, for paraprofessionals, is imperative for both the social and academic progress of children, due to the large majority of time these paraprofessionals spend with the children with specific educational needs” (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017, p. 19). In response to the problems associated with undertrained paraprofessionals in Yukon, Yukon Education developed modules for paraprofessionals in order to increase their understanding of their roles and responsibilities (Student Support Services, 2013).

**Professional development in Yukon.** In October, 2013, The Student Services Advisory Committee created small inquiry groups to brainstorm and discuss prevalent issues within education in Yukon and plan potential actions to mitigate the issues. Two of the topics discussed were “Targeted training for Educational Assistants, especially because they are often employed to work with complex children” and “Mental health support for teachers and students” (Student Support Services, 2013, p. 4). Based on the expressed need for training, Cavell Burley, a consultant for Yukon Education Student Support Services, developed training modules for Educational Assistants to serve as in-servicing professional development opportunities (Student Support Services, 2013, p. 3). The first training module was titled, ‘Roles and Responsibilities of Paraprofessionals’ and was released to schools within Wave 1 in January 2017. During the 2017-2018 school year, more modules were scheduled to target communication disabilities, Autism, Aboriginal Education, etc. These modules are designed as an online program with readings, assignments, discussions, and due dates. The module design is like course-work, without components to address the practical, in-person work of paraprofessionals. It seems that a focused, on-going professional development opportunity concentrated on mindfulness would
respond to both literature about professional development and wellness, providing strategies for incorporating mindfulness practices into the personal and professional lives of paraprofessionals. I hope to offer professional development in-service opportunities to learn about mindfulness and how it could be incorporated into their personal and professional lives.

**Overview of Study**

Our society pressures us to always be on the move and think about the future, causing stress and anxiety. It is important to take time to slow down, enjoy life, and bring awareness to the present moment. Thinking about my own struggles with stress and burnout, I wondered how many other paraprofessionals were in the same position. I felt like unless I took control and made arrangements outside of the school day, nothing would be done to decrease the risk of burnout and stress. I did not feel like there were supports in place to prevent burnout of paraprofessionals, who work closely with students with behaviour, social, emotional, and academic challenges, both in my particular school and in Yukon as a whole. I thought about how I could improve my own mental health and well-being and I was reminded about what my counsellor taught me about breathing exercises and meditation. I wondered how my own practice of mindfulness would affect myself, my students, and my colleagues. Therefore, this study explores the following research question: *How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?*

Utilizing an Action Research design, which is explained further in chapter three, I worked on improving my own mindfulness practice and shared the knowledge gained with other paraprofessionals working with students with special needs. My intention was to create post-positivist, subjective knowledge in the form of a master’s thesis. The application of the knowledge gained throughout the action research project was the creation of professional
development PowerPoint presentations. Participants received a binder with all slideshow presentations, activities to use for self-care and with their students, as well as an accompanying CD with all presentations, handouts, and mindfulness tracks, including mindful meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, and body scans. The presentation materials linked scientific research with insights from an eight-week self-directed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) action research journey. I utilized a mixed-methods approach for gathering and interpreting data, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Research findings include personal insights from a research journal, mindfulness logs, and awareness surveys, as well as knowledge gained through working with other paraprofessionals within the professional development workshop sessions, surveys, and interviews.

A strength of this study was ongoing professional development opportunities for paraprofessionals, rather than a one-off workshop, which is generally ineffective for maintaining effective practice. Paraprofessionals had the opportunity to share how mindfulness impacted their personal and professional lives, while being supported by other paraprofessionals as part of the cycles of action research. Paraprofessionals were actively engaged in many of the cycles of action research, helping to answer the questions, “What do other paraprofessionals want to find out about mindfulness strategies and their effects on self and others?” (Cycle two), “How do the professional development workshops affect our practice?” (Cycle three), and “How do we affect change using our understanding of mindfulness?” (Cycle four).

**Definition of Critical Terms**

*Mindfulness.* Mindfulness has been defined as “the practice of purposely focusing our attention on the present moment – and accepting it without judgement” (Corliss, 2013, p. 24). In Roeser et al. (2013), mindfulness comprises three interrelated mental skills and dispositions:
(a) focusing attention intentionally on the here and now (rather than letting the mind wander into ruminating on the past or worrying about the future);
(b) perceiving situations and engaging in actions with the clear light of conscious awareness (rather than doing so emotionally, automatically, and nonconsciously or mindlessly); and
(c) experiencing each moment just as it is, without biasing emotional reactions or mental judgments (e.g., expectations, wishes, or fears that may or may not be relevant to what is actually happening). (p. 789)

There are a variety of types of mindfulness practices, which can be formal or informal. Meiklejohn et al. (2012) depict the differences between formal and informal practice by sharing:

Mindfulness meditation, which can be practiced sitting, lying down, standing, or moving, refers to the formal practice of intentionally attending to thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and sensory experiences as they arise moment to moment, with acceptance and without getting caught up or identified with thoughts about the experience. Informal mindfulness practice refers to the weaving of mindful awareness into activities of everyday life, such as showering, walking, eating, and interpersonal interactions. (p. 292)

**Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the current study and the rationale, beginning with a description of the personal context that led to an interest in studying mindfulness for self-care purposes. The impact that changes in special education have had on paraprofessionals involved, lack of training of paraprofessionals, and negative impacts on well-being of staff in schools was
highlighted next. An introduction to mindfulness training, impacts of mindfulness training, definition of critical terms, and the significance of the study conclude this section.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This purpose of this literature review on mindfulness is to determine what has already been studied, analyze the effects of mindfulness training programs for educators, understand the importance of self-regulation and mindfulness for targeted populations, and connect my current study to literature. This chapter begins by providing the context and rationale of mindfulness by exploring the field of mindfulness, outlining the development and impacts of mindfulness practices while linking mindfulness to many virtues of positive psychology and development of one’s character strengths. The chapter focuses on western mindfulness and organizes the benefits of mindfulness training as having significant effects on the brain, self-awareness and life skills, happiness and fulfillment, health, and well-being.

The next section provides an overview of the challenges facing targeted populations in education, as well as the importance of self-regulation for special education students, challenges faced by paraprofessionals, and stressors for educators. The final few sections of the review focuses on the value of mindfulness in schools, current studies about mindfulness in school settings applying the mMBSR, MT, SMART, CARE, CALM, and MBWE training programs, connecting current studies to my research question, and highlighting the importance of this study. Based on literature in the field of mindfulness training and action research data, this study targeted ongoing professional development of mindfulness strategies, for self-care and to use with students, towards paraprofessionals in Yukon. The review is guided by the research question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?”
Mindfulness - Context and Rationale

**Positive psychology.** Contrary to traditional psychology that focuses on curing disease through medicine and treatment, positive psychologists focus on improving the individual from within. “Positive psychologists argue that happiness and fulfillment are as real as distress and disease, and that individual strengths and virtues are as important for psychologists to examine as are individual problems” (Corliss, 2013, p. 13). Mindfulness and positive psychology are closely connected, whereby a person practicing mindfulness often increases their capacity to develop many positive character strengths while deepening the pathways to virtues of positive psychology (Positive Psychology Program, 2016). There are many aspects of positive psychology, but this study will only touch on the importance of the development of character strengths and virtues as a result of mindfulness training, due to the inherent connectedness between mindfulness and positive psychology virtues.

**Character strengths.** Wisdom, courage, humanity, transcendence, justice, and temperance or moderation are six virtues that are universally valued (Positive Psychology Program, 2016). Within each virtue are character strengths, which are “built-in capacities for certain thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (Corliss, 2013, p. 13). Figure one, below, shows the connection between character strengths and virtues in positive psychology.
Figure 1. Classification of character strengths and virtues. This figure shows symbols of virtues and underlying character strengths within each virtue (Positive Psychology Program, 2016).

Individuals are unique because they have different levels of each of the character strengths. Of the virtues, wisdom, humanity, moderation, and transcendence are the most applicable to mindfulness. Through the virtue of wisdom, one can hold a natural curiosity for learning and questioning, understand different perspectives, and refrain from judgement. Humanity is an interpersonal strength that helps one form and maintain relationships. The character strengths of humanity are social and emotional intelligence, love, and kindness. Moderation helps one reduce temptation to protect the individual and is highlighted as self-control and forgiveness as an inner character strength. Transcendence is about connectivity with the larger world and focuses on the character strengths of appreciating beauty, gratitude, hope, and spirituality (Corliss, 2013, p. 14). In positive psychology, gratitude is one of the most important character strengths and is “strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness” (Corliss, 2013, p. 16). As a thankful appreciation, gratitude “helps people feel more positive emotions, relish positive experiences, enjoy better health, deal with adversity, and build stronger relationships” (Corliss, 2013, p. 16). The virtues of wisdom, humanity, moderation, and transcendence were explored
throughout the professional development sessions, emphasizing the character strengths of curiosity, perspective, judgement, love, kindness, forgiveness, self-control, gratitude, appreciation of beauty, and spirituality.

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is a branch of positive psychology, focusing on paying attention to the present moment without judgement (Corliss, 2013). Mindfulness has a long history, but for the purposes of this study, only a brief overview of ‘western mindfulness’ is presented.

**Western mindfulness.** Although mindfulness has many roots in Buddhism and Hinduism, in Western culture, mindfulness practices and program are often considered secular, meaning separate from religious affiliation (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 292). The separation from religion is an important aspect of mindfulness training programs in the Western world, including those founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn. In the 1970’s Jon Kabat-Zinn developed an eight week program comprised of meditation and body awareness with yoga poses, to help reduce suffering due to chronic pain and illness. “Kabat-Zinn (1990) can be credited for developing the first standardized mindfulness-based intervention and demonstrating its benefits empirically” (Poulin et al., 2008, p. 35). In 1990, the training was relaunched as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), helping patients shift their thoughts from negative to positive, alleviating many mental and physical ailments. “Shifting our focus away from the negative, toward the positive, we can free ourselves from some of the debilitating thoughts and feelings linked with ill-health” (Annesley, 2015, p. 31).

Psychologists recognized the positive effects of Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness training and coupled his approach with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), creating what is known as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to treat patients with depression and anxiety
WHY MINDFULNESS MATTERS

(Corliss, 2013). These modern therapies utilize the power of meditation as their core and are not only affective for people with illness, “but can benefit anyone having difficulty coping with the relentless demands of modern life” (Annesley, 2015, p. 31). In addition, “psychotherapists have turned to mindfulness meditation as an important element in the treatment of a number of problems, including depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, couples’ conflicts, anxiety disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorders” (Corliss, 2013, p. 24). Mindfulness is becoming increasingly popular both in the media and in academia. The empirical support of mindfulness training is rapidly proliferating, both in clinical and education settings, with more emphasis placed on specific populations within schools (Schussler et al., 2016, p. 130).

Benefits of mindfulness. Flook et al. (2013) propose “mindfulness may make individuals less reactive to negative experience and more likely to notice positive experience” (p. 183). Mindful practice has been proven to have diverse positive psychological and physiological effects on an individual, which can be synthesized under the following categories: effects on the brain, self-awareness and life skills, happiness and fulfillment, and health and well-being.

Effects on the brain. Frias (2015) propose that “Practicing mindfulness, it appears, is as healthy for the mind and brain as physical exercise is for the body” (p. 5). Weare (2014) clarify that mindfulness practice “gradually modify habitual mental and behavioural patterns which otherwise create and maintain negative mental states, such as stress, depression and hostility, and enhance positive mind states such as calm, acceptance, compassion and happiness” (p. 4-5). Annesley (2015) claims that mindfulness practice can help to enhance many thinking skills, such as memory, mental stamina, intuition, brain function, concentration, decision-making, as well as speed up reaction times and mental processing (p. 12). This increased focus helps one to be
more efficient and accomplish more in less time. Therefore, making time to meditate actually saves time, which is important within a busy society (Annesley, 2015).

Based on the research by Davidson et al. (2003), Davidson and Lutz (2008), and Hölzel et al. (2011a), Weare (2014) summarized the effects of meditation on the brain, stating that:

Mindfulness meditation appears to reshape the neural pathways, increasing the density and complexity of connections in areas associated with both cognitive abilities such as attention, self-awareness and introspection, and emotional areas connected with kindness, compassion and rationality, while decreasing activity and growth in those areas involved in anxiety, hostility, worry and impulsivity. (p. 5)

Supporters of research on brain neuroplasticity, which is the ability of the brain to create new neurons and neural pathways based on experience (Davidson & Lutz, 2008), promote the benefits of mindfulness training, suggesting that “individuals can actively change their brain structure in ways that promote brain health and improve the quality of one’s life” (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 293). Based on the effects of mindfulness training on regions of the brain, Meiklejohn et al. (2012) suggest that “mindfulness training fosters enhanced resilience and more optimal brain function in adults” (p. 293). They add “Potential benefits [of mindfulness practices] include: fostering pro-social behavior via strengthening self-regulation and impulse control; alleviating the effects of stress that obstruct learning; and providing a skill set that promotes brain hygiene, and physical and emotional well-being across the life span” (p. 304). Considering the challenging needs of students with social, emotional, and behaviour difficulties, mindfulness training, leading to increases in self-regulation, could have huge impacts on students and teachers within the education system.
**Self-awareness and life skills.** Mindfulness has been demonstrated to improve emotional intelligence, empathy, mastery of emotions, self-knowledge, self-reliance, and resilience in adversity while freeing one from habitual responses (Annesley, 2015). Mindfulness also has positive impacts on communication by enhancing listening skills and public speaking skills (Annesley, 2015, p. 12). Empathy, perspective taking, compassion, and forgiveness are other interpersonal skills that are developed through mindfulness training (Taylor et al., 2016). The ability to forgive students and colleagues after conflict is an essential skill for educators (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Eva and Thayer (2017) add that mindfulness training can help develop other skills and traits, such as acceptance of uncertainty, focused attention, enhanced awareness in the present moment, compassion towards self and others, and emotion regulation, which can all improve overall well-being (p. 21). Kabat-Zinn (1990) believes developing skills for dealing with challenging, uncertain, and stressful situations in life is an essential part of mindfulness training.

**Happiness and fulfillment.** Mindfulness and happiness are connected in many ways. Practicing mindfulness supports a variety of pathways to happiness, such as gratitude, engagement, flow, and savouring (Corliss, 2013, p. 24). Mindful practices also help to increase self-fulfillment and joy. Increases in self-esteem, self-confidence, work-place satisfaction, enjoyment of leisure activities, better relationships, and ability to focus on goals to reach one’s full potential are all attributed to mindfulness (Annesley, 2015, p. 12). The body and mind require different forms of exercises. Mipham (2012) believes that “a natural harmony and balance takes place” by giving the body movement and the mind stillness, leading to a happy, healthy, and wise life (p. 20).
Health and well-being. Cortisol is a steroid hormone in the body attributed to stress. Mindfulness practice has been proven to reduce levels of cortisol, ultimately reducing stress and anxiety, improving the body’s immune system, and increasing mental and physical well-being (Annesley, 2015, p. 12). Interestingly, Flook et al. (2013) explain that “Mindfulness does not directly act on the target of stress, though a shift in perception and response to stressors could conceivably alter the nature of the stressor itself” (p. 183). They continue by stating, “A mindful approach to stress may involve noticing body sensations, observing thoughts, and emotions related to stress and practicing self-compassion” (p. 183). Practicing mindfulness has many impacts on overall health and well-being, helping to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and pain and improve sleep, resilience to fatigue, heart and circulatory health, immune system function, gastrointestinal difficulties, and control over addictions or self-destructive behaviour (Corliss, 2013, p. 24; Annesley, 2015, p. 12). Mindfulness helps to improve aspects of mental health and improve one’s outlook on life. Weare (2014) explains:

Mindfulness has been shown to impact on many of the complex and interrelated mental qualities which underlie well-being, such as the ability to accept experience, to manage difficult feelings, to be resilient, motivated, persistent and optimistic, to enjoy good relationships and experience a sense of meaning. (p. 13)

Clearly, becoming more mindful has many positive effects on overall health and well-being. These physiological and physiological benefits are empirically supported in the literature in both clinical and non-clinical settings, such as education (Harris et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Schussler et al., 2016).
Overview of the Challenges Facing Target Populations in Education

Throughout history, education has been through many changes, focusing attention on different populations and theories. Currently, the field of education and special education have joined forces in an attempt to promote the benefits of inclusion for students with special needs. Students with special needs are now placed in regular classroom environments and often have additional support available. Some of these supports include adaptations (strategies to support achievement of the learning outcomes) and modifications (changes to the learning outcomes or assessment practices) (Brownlee & King, 2011, p. 80). In addition, more paraprofessionals are placed in regular classrooms to assist in meeting the needs of students with special needs. The change in structure within education has led to issues in meeting the needs of all parties involved: the students, paraprofessionals, and teachers.

The importance of self-regulation for special education students. Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), and dyslexia are also often identified with having social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (Groom & Rose, 2005). “This highlights the diversity and complexity of pupils with SEN [special education needs] in inclusive classrooms” (Groom & Rose, 2005, p. 23). Social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties can be symptoms of their underlying condition or as a result of mismanagement or treatment within the education system by peers, teachers, or support staff (Greene, 2014). Many students with special needs lack necessary skills to deal with high demands of regular classrooms. As a result, many struggle with emotional regulation and display negative behaviours in the classroom (Greene, 2014). Pelco and Victor (2007) state, “it is becoming clear that children who have difficulty regulating their emotions and behaviour experience more conflict in relationships with parents, teachers, and peers and show lower
academic achievement than do their more regulated peers” (p. 37). Developing self-regulation skills should be a priority for these students. Woodford (2014) argues the importance of educators scaffolding the development of self-regulation skills (p. 16). Post, Boyer, and Brett (2006) add, teachers and support staff need to “be active role models demonstrating self-regulatory skills and supporting opportunities for each child to learn and practice these self-regulatory skills and attitudes for conscious metacognitive control on a daily basis” (p. 12).

Much of what we communicate comes in the form of gestures, facial expressions, or body language. The ability for one to pick up on the meaning of this form of communication is through specialized parts of the nervous system, called mirror neurons (Barry, 2011). Mirror neurons are distinct because they “fire both when we observe and when we take part in an action” (Barry, 2011). The mirror neurons trigger a response in the person viewing the action. For example “when we see someone smile, mirror neurons simulate our own smiling,” which can ultimately impact the person witnessing the action or emotion to feel increased happiness. In a school setting, a student’s nervous system mirrors a teacher’s. Teachers who demonstrates self-regulation skills and an ability to stay calm positively affects their students because of the mirroring of the nervous system. On the other hand, when dysregulated, a teacher negatively affects their students because the students may replicate feelings of distress by mirroring their teacher’s actions or emotions. Therefore, it is not only important for teachers to teach mindfulness skills and self-regulation skills to their students, it is also important for teachers and support staff to embody these qualities. Research has shown that when teachers dedicate time to practicing mindfulness themselves and have a good understanding of mindfulness techniques, the successful transmission of these skills to their students is increased (Gueldner & Feuerborn, 2016). With the support of teachers and support staff, students who learn self-regulation
strategies will be able to employ these skills to help stay calm, alert, and focused, which will ultimately help students reduce many struggles at school.

**Challenges faced by paraprofessionals.** In an attempt to overcome many of the social, emotional, and behaviour demands of the modern inclusive classroom, more paraprofessionals are employed worldwide (Webster & Blatchford, 2012, p. 77). Educational assistants help support the regular classroom teacher in managing behaviour in the classroom and supporting students with special needs (Groom & Rose, 2005, p. 20). Groom and Rose (2005) studied how teaching assistants are utilized in inclusive education settings. They suggest that the main roles of teaching assistants are “keeping pupils on task, observing and recording behaviour, listening to pupils, mentoring, helping pupils with their work, and helping pupils to resolve conflicts and disputes” (p. 25). As part of the study, respondents suggested the most important qualities when recruiting teaching assistants to work with students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. The qualities in order of importance were “ability to work as a member of a team – willingness to learn, adaptability, patience and sense of fairness, nurturing skills, listening skills, ability to work under pressure/work on own, and understanding and awareness of pupil needs” (Groom & Rose, 2005, p. 23). In a perfect world, the paraprofessionals working with students with special needs would have these qualities and have training to support their needs. However, as Giangreco et al. (2010) pointed out, paraprofessionals rarely have adequate training to support the most challenging students in the classroom. From personal experience, the responsibilities for meeting the needs of these challenging students is either placed on the classroom educator or negatively impacts the paraprofessional’s health and well-being.

**Stressors for educators.** Educators have an incredibly challenging role to fill in society, facing heavy workloads and pressure from the ministry, administration, parents, and students.
Educators do not simply teach curriculum material; they help foster social and emotional skill development of students. Many of the students in the classrooms have challenging social, emotional, and behaviour needs that must be met before they will be able to learn curriculum outcomes. Effective teaching and classroom management require high levels of social and emotional intelligence of the teacher, patience, and self-control to be able to respond to the needs of the students appropriately (Weare, 2014, p. 14). Without the proper tools of self-regulation and emotional coping strategies, the demands placed on educators can become excessive, leading to elevated levels of stress. Teachers experience stress stemming from a number of factors, such as challenges associated with classroom management, challenging relationships with students and colleagues, time pressures and workload demands, and being scrutinized by administration, parents, and students (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). However, the way that teachers perceive stress and are affected by stress is unique to the individual and based on interactions between personality, values, skills, coping strategies, environment, and circumstances (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Teaching has been cited as the second most stressful profession, surpassed only by ambulance driving (Weare, 2014, p. 9). According to Reichel (2016), within the first five years of teaching, at least 30 percent of Canadian teachers leave the profession. Although many teachers leave the profession, many that stay are also impacted by high levels of stress (Schussler et al., 2016). High levels of teacher attrition are affecting countries worldwide, including Canada, United States, United Kingdom, and Australia (Raichel, 2016; Schussler et al., 2016; Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005). Special education teachers report attrition is due to stress, deficiency in adequate training and support, significant job responsibilities, and feeling overwhelmed by needs of students (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller, 1997).
WHY MINDFULNESS MATTERS

When stress is left untreated or when individuals suffer from prolonged periods of high levels of stress, burnout is the result (Pillay et al., 2005, p. 24). Burnout is comprised of three components: emotional exhaustion, depolarization, and diminished personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Based on the work of Maslach et al. (2001), Sharp and Jennings (2016) describe each component of burnout in relation to education:

*Emotional exhaustion* refers to the manifestation of physical or emotional symptoms exhibited by an individual in a draining work situation. Typically, school personnel who experience emotional exhaustion have devoted a great amount of time and resources to their work, and eventually experience a depletion of those resources.

*Depersonalization* describes how an exhausted worker may experience decreasing levels of empathy for the students he or she serves, while growing increasingly detached from them. Both negative feelings and a cynical perspective towards work and students are hallmarks of depersonalization. The final component of burnout, *personal accomplishment*, refers to an individual’s feelings of efficacy as they relate to work. Burnout is generally accompanied by feelings of inadequate performance, lower levels of perceived and actual accomplishment, and ultimately, feelings of failure. (p. 210)

Burnout does not only affect the individual person suffering. Sharp and Jennings (2016) relate the effects of burnout to a virus, suggesting that burnout has a “damaging impact on its host environment and the cells with which it comes into contact: the educator experiencing it, their students, and their colleagues” (p. 209). Since the effects of educator burnout impact the entire classroom environment and the relationships within, more attention needs to be placed on eliminating burnout by effectively managing educator stress. “Teachers clearly need and deserve
professional development programs that directly address their psychological well-being and help them to develop better daily coping strategies” (Eva & Thayer, 2017, p. 18). Many studies have found significant positive impacts on the classroom environment when emotional and self-regulation skill development of teachers is intentional (Harris et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Schussler et al., 2016). Schussler et al. (2016) state, “When teachers’ physical and emotional health improves and the classroom climate improves, students will experience benefits such as better student-teacher relationships, increased academic achievement, and improved behavior” (p. 132). Mindfulness training program are showing promising benefits for improving overall health and well-being of educators (Harris et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Schussler et al., 2016).

**Value of mindfulness in schools.** Studies focusing on the positive effects of mindfulness of educators and school personnel are rapidly proliferating due to the understanding that mindfulness practices impact the health and well-being of the teacher, ultimately impacting the classroom environment (Harris et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Schussler et al., 2016). Roeser et al. (2013) summarize the benefits of mindfulness training for teachers, students, and the learning environment by stating:

By coping more effectively and being more resilient, we believe, teachers conserve physical and mental energies that are then available to invest in effectively managing, relating to, motivating, and teaching students. Furthermore, by assisting teachers in developing the kinds of self-regulatory strategies and qualities of awareness that are critical for stress management and effective teaching, teachers become role models for the kinds of skills and mind-sets that students in the 21st century also need to be successful in school and in life. In these ways, mindfulness
training for teachers is hypothesized to exert both direct effects on teachers’
capacities to teach more effectively and indirect effects on students’ capacities to
learn more effectively. (p. 788)

Roeser et al. (2013) explains the direct and indirect effects of mindfulness training
programs on teachers, students, and classroom environments, by stating that mindfulness teacher
programs affect teacher skills, mindsets, coping and resilience, leading to improvements in
classroom and student outcomes (p. 788). Specifically, the development of mindfulness and self-
compassion helps to decrease stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, stress physiology, and
absenteeism, which helps teachers provide an emotionally supportive climate with positive
teacher-student relationships and effective classroom management, ultimately motivating the
student to learn and engage in their learning, demonstrate prosocial classroom conduct, and
promote a sense of belonging in the classroom (Roeser et al., 2013, p. 788).

Practicing mindfulness helps develop skills for emotional regulation and tools for
responding appropriately to stressful situations. Meiklejohn et al. (2012) suggest that
mindfulness training strengthens self-regulation and impulse control, which helps to nurture pro-
social behaviours. “The ability to regulate emotions may help teachers to focus on student needs
and to maintain constructive engagement during emotionally charged situations, rather than
focus on their own frustrations and either disengage from the interaction or respond negatively”
(Schussler et al., 2016, p. 132). Some researchers stress the importance of teachers developing
their own mindfulness practices to help model and scaffold the development of mindfulness in
their students (Eva & Thayer, 2017; Weare, 2014). “When teachers model and embody
emotional well-being in moments of stress, students vicariously experience this behavior—and
potentially learn from it” (Eva & Thayer, 2017, p. 24). Weare (2014) adds, “To be experienced
WHY MINDFULNESS MATTERS

as authentic, teachers need to be able to model and embody the particular qualities that mindfulness develops, such as open-ness, flexibility and non-judgment” (p. 8). Simply providing students with tools for self-regulation and non-judgemental awareness of thoughts, feelings, and emotions is not adequate.

**Mindfulness practices.** Practicing mindfulness comes in many shapes and forms depending on the individual and their needs. Training can be formal or informal and include various forms of meditation, body scans, and yoga. Although learning to practice mindfulness can involve signing up for a mindfulness course, such as ‘Mindfulness Fundamentals’ or ‘Mindful Educator Essentials’ from Mindful Schools, it does not require formal training (Mindful Schools; Eva & Thayer, 2017, p. 22). Based on the research of formal mindfulness training programs, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, participants new to mindfulness are encouraged to incorporate sitting meditations and body scans into their weekly practice (Eva & Thayer, 2017, p. 22-23). For a description and suggested tips for many common mindfulness practices used in training programs, please see Appendix 1.

**Current Studies about Mindfulness in School Settings**

**Mindfulness training programs.** Attending to the present and accepting thoughts, feelings, and emotions non-judgementally is the foundation of mindfulness (Corliss, 2013, p. 24). As mindfulness becomes more popular, both in the media and in academia, more mindfulness training programs are being created. Mindfulness training programs help participants understand their emotions and moods through the use of various exercises. Taylor et al. (2016) state:

Mindfulness training programs teach mindfulness skills and coping strategies through structured practices (e.g., body scans, breath meditation, loving-kindness
meditation) in which attention is focused intentionally and nonjudgmentally on present-moment somatic, mental, and social experience in the form of bodily sensations, feelings, mental images, and thoughts. (p. 116)

Given that there are a variety of different program designs and implementation protocols in regards to mindfulness training, it can be challenging to know which program provides the most benefit to the target population. Although there are many programs developed for teaching children mindfulness, such as MindUP, Inner Kids, Modern Mindfulness for Schools, Mindful Schools, A Still Quiet Place (Discover Mindfulness, 2017), the purpose of this synthesis of current research studies is to examine the effects of programs for educators, based on the mindfulness training programs of mMBSR, MT, SMART, CARE, CALM and MBWE, which are expanded upon below.

**Modified mindfulness-based stress reduction.** As a pilot study, the goal of the modified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (mMBSR) training program was to design the training to be engaging and relevant for teachers, relying on self-report of surveys and questionnaires, observation of classroom practices, computerized tasks focusing on attention and emotional regulation, and saliva samples of cortisol levels to determine results (Flook et al., 2013). The modified MBSR training program was eight weeks in length, totally 26 hours, and led by two MBSR-trained instructors in the fall of 2011. Increasing the number of sessions, encouraging daily use of guided recordings, and utilizing specific school-related activities and practices were adaptations to the original MBSR. Eighteen elementary school teachers from four schools, serving low income and minority populations, participated in the study and were placed in either the intervention group or waitlist-control group. Participants maintained weekly mindfulness logs, recording both formal and informal moments of mindfulness. The results indicated “the
intervention group showed significant improvement on several self-report measures including decreases in psychological symptoms, an increase on the mindfulness FFMQ [Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire] describe subscale, self-compassion humanity subscale, and decreases in burnout,” as well as an improvement in “observer-rated classroom behavior organization and affective attentional bias” (p. 187). The positive effects of the mindfulness training were observed on both the self-report measures and objective measures (behavioral tasks, cortisol, observer-rated behavior), which is a strength of this study. Flook et al. (2013) argue,

Results suggest that tending to stress reduction translates into tangible benefits for teachers’ sense of well-being and effectiveness in the classroom, which in turn are likely to have a positive impact on students’ own well-being and learning, for example, via the teacher-student relationship and classroom climate. (p. 190)

**Mindfulness training.** Roeser et al. (2013) examined the effects of a mindfulness training (MT) program on 113 elementary and secondary teachers from two sites in Canada and United States between 2009 and 2010. The Canadian sample included 58 teachers (52 women, 6 men; 50% elementary teachers) and the United States sample included 55 teachers (48 women, 7 men; 51% elementary teachers). Participants were randomly selected for either the mindfulness training program (April to June) or waitlist-control condition (October to December). Participants of mindfulness training were taught how to “monitor their internal reactions to emotionally evocative situations and thereby know when they are in the grips of an emotion and need to take time to calm down before responding” as well as “cultivate an attitude of kindness and compassion toward themselves, especially during moments of difficulty that inevitably arise on the job and in life more generally” (p. 787). The MT utilized in this study is largely based on
the MBSR training program by Jon Kabat-Zinn and comprised 36 contact hours with eleven after school sessions over eight weeks. The program covered “guided mindfulness and yoga practices, group discussions of mindfulness practice, small group activities to practice skills in real life scenarios, lecture and guided home practices, and homework and assignments,” which are considered five main components to teaching mindfulness and self-compassion to teachers (p. 790). Results indicate 87% of the participants in the study found the mindfulness training program to be beneficial and 98% would recommend the training to other professionals and administration. Specifically, results showed a large effect size for teachers’ mindfulness and self-compassion, reduction in teachers’ stress and burnout, and reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression (p. 799). Roeser et al. (2013) report that teachers receiving the mindfulness training “reported greater mindfulness at post-program and follow-up than did those in the control condition, including greater awareness of sensations, feelings and thoughts; less judgment and reactivity; and greater awareness of one’s actions and reasons for action” (p. 799).

**Stress management and relaxation training.** The MBI [Mindfulness Based Interventions] utilized in this study is known as SMART, which refers to “Stress Management and Relaxation Training” (Taylor et al., 2016). SMART is a program for teachers, which uses “50% of same mindfulness meditation and movement practices” as Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program (p. 117). The remaining 50% of the program is split up into 30% focusing on “emotion theory and mindful emotional regulation” and 20% focusing on “theory and practice of compassion and forgiveness” (p. 117). The duration of the program is nine weeks, which includes 36 hours of contact over eleven sessions (p. 118). Participants in the study were a mixture of 59 elementary and secondary teachers from urban schools in western Canada, of which 53 were women. The researchers used a mixed-methods
approach, which included program surveys for those in the treatment group, as well as individual interviews for all participants. Data was collected for a variety of topics including occupational stress, emotional regulation in the workplace, and compassion and forgiveness for others. The results indicated that teachers were able to increase emotional regulation in the workplace, develop pro-social behaviours of compassion and forgiveness, and reduce workplace stress. The results provide support for the notion that teachers who received mindfulness training developed greater efficacy in relation to meeting emotional demands in the classroom and showed less negative emotional reactions to stressors at work” (p. 125). The results helped to support the idea that “mindfulness training helps teachers to learn to relate to the perceived stressors in their lives in new ways,” which can help to lessen the negative responses of stressful situations (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 126).

In another study, Benn et al. (2012) utilized the SMART-in-Education mindfulness training program for caregivers and teachers of students with special needs. This specific 36 hour mindfulness training used 70% of the components found in MBSR with additional focus on “emotion theory and regulation, forgiveness, kindness and compassion, and the application of mindfulness to parenting and teaching” (p. 1479). Participants met twice a week for 2.5 hour sessions over a five week period, with two additional full-days devoted to a silent retreat. Training included group discussion, mindfulness practices, and homework assignments. Parents and educators met in their own groups for the sessions and were trained by two different pairs of instructors. Participants included 32 parents and 38 educators, although after randomized grouping to summer intervention or fall waitlist-control condition, only 60 participants remained. This study relied heavily on surveys. Participants completed surveys prior to intervention, at program completion, and during a two month follow up. The findings of the study indicate
medium effect sizes for improvements in stress, anxiety, depression, personal growth, and self-compassion. In addition, at follow-up, statistically significant effects were found in perceived stress, negative affect, and disposition to forgive, which were not significant immediately following the training (p. 1480). Benn et al. (2012) stated, the five-week Mindful Training “significantly increased participants’ self-reported mindfulness in terms of their being (a) more aware and present to their surroundings, physical sensations, and internal mental processes; (b) less judgmental; and (c) more descriptive of their moment-to-moment experiences” (p. 1482).

*Cultivating awareness and resilience in education.* “CARE [Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education] is a mindfulness-based professional development program developed to improve teachers’ awareness and well-being and to enhance classroom learning environments” (Schussler et al., 2016, p. 130). The participants in this study were comprised of teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals, totaling 50 educators in both elementary and secondary schools from northeastern USA. The CARE program is comprised of 40% instruction on emotion skills, 40% mindfulness and stress reduction, and 20% practice in compassion, and combines a combination of instruction, individual practice and reflection, small and large group discussion, and in-class and at-home activities (p. 133). Personal practice is a large component of the CARE curriculum, therefore participants are provided with a workbook and CD to practice at school and at home. The program format was four full-day sessions during six weeks, totalling 30 contact hours with additional coaching phone calls and a booster session (p. 133). This study utilized semi-structured focus groups to determine the most and least helpful aspects of the training. Based on both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, the study found, “teachers experienced statistically significant changes in half the mindfulness subscales, which included observing, non-reactivity (i.e., avoiding an emotional reaction to an emotionally
charged situation) and their total mindfulness” (p. 134). Information gleaned from the focus groups supported the purpose of the study to bring more awareness to physical and emotional health. “They [participants] developed somatic awareness, identifying when their bodies were displaying signs of stress, and they felt equipped with strategies—like simple breathing or a body scan—to help ameliorate that stress” (p. 138). In addition, “participating in the CARE program not only validated the need for self-care but also gave teachers the permission to attain it” (p. 138). Although the CARE program was targeted at individuals, the study found that “mindfulness-based professional development intervention like CARE may be most effective when implemented by a whole school rather than with individuals” (Schussler et al., 2016, p. 140).

In a study by Sharp and Jennings (2016), eight K-12 educators (seven females, one male) who received CARE training in 2010-2011 were recruited to provide feedback. All participants were Caucasian and had six to thirteen years of teaching experience (p. 211). Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interview questions, ranging in length from 40 to 85 minutes, twelve to fourteen months following completion of CARE training. They found, “Three themes identified in participants’ application of mindfulness were (1) integration of CARE metaphors, (2) present-centered awareness of emotions, and (3) ability to reappraise situations and shift perspective” (p. 212-213). Sharp and Jennings (2016) provide examples of two CARE metaphors, which are “elevator going up” and “flipping my lid,” which describe “increasing emotional activation and emotional outburst, respectively” (p. 215). The ability to “shift from a reactive appraisal process to one that is marked by enhanced objectively and decreased emotional activation” is known as ‘reperceiving,’ which was experienced by many of the
participants. Participants reported having strong rapport and more compassion for their students as a result of the CARE program.

**Community approach to learning mindfully.** Sixty-four educators took part in the CALM program, which stands for Community Approach to Learning Mindfully. CALM is a daily mindfulness intervention for staff school-wide, which was based on the final recommendations from the CARE participants (Harris et al., 2016, p. 143). Within this 16 week program, yoga and mindfulness practices were provided four days a week. The purpose of the study was to determine the feasibility of a 20 minute daily yoga-based mindfulness program for educators. It was hypothesized that the CALM program would “improve emotional functioning and stress management as well as teaching, health, and wellbeing” (p. 144). Data was collected through self-report questionnaires online, physiological assessment (blood pressure), and saliva samples. This study relied heavily on a variety of questionnaires and scales (p. 146-147). The results indicated that “small to moderate effect sizes were observed for most outcomes” (Harris et al., 2016, p. 149). A factor that may have influenced this study was that participants were not required to attend all sessions. Although participants believed that it was feasible to attend the sessions, the intervention sessions were not utilized to their fullest capacity, which may have impacted the overall results of only small to medium affect scores.

**Mindfulness-based wellness education.** Another mindfulness training program called, Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education (MBWE) is a program developed in 2005 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) for human service professionals, specifically teachers-in-training. Utilizing mindfulness-based interventions based on the MBSR (1990) program, this 36 contact hour course spread over nine weeks is an elective course, “Stress & Burnout; Teacher and Student Applications” within the OESE/UT. Using a
wellness wheel, the MBWE program teaches participants social wellness and mindful listening strategies. Specifically, this experiential program focuses on developing mindfulness skills that “serve as a foundation to exploring seven dimensions of well-being: physical, social, emotional, ecological, mental, vocational, and spiritual” (Poulin et al., 2008, p. 38). In the study by Poulin et al. (2008) 28 participants (70% female) volunteered for the intervention and 16 participants (78% female) were placed in control conditions. Participants were encouraged to practice mindfulness for 15 to 20 minutes a day, five days a week, with the aid of a CD and workbook.

The data collection of this study included a variety of questionnaires as well as interviews. A study on the effectiveness of MBWE by Poulin et al. (2008) indicate “increased mindfulness and teaching self-efficacy among MBWE participants compared with a control group” as well as the development of five themes developed by teacher candidates’ experiences: “(1) personal and professional identity, (2) reflective practice, (3) holistic vision of teaching, (4) social and emotional competence on practicum, and (5) engagement in teacher education (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 295). Teacher candidates described the MBWE to be practical and relevant, suggesting the program taught them to stay in the moment and let go of the past, and positively impacted their personal and professional lives by improving self-care and relationships (Poulin et al., 2008, p. 41).

**Connecting current studies to my research question.** After reading and critically synthesizing articles on mindfulness training programs, it was evident that mindfulness training has positive impacts on the well-being of educators, relationships between staff, students, and colleagues, and the ability to reduce stress and burnout. The mindfulness training programs all offered different training in mindfulness practices and time commitments. However, regardless of which program was utilized, all of the studies showed improvements in the well-being of
educators. These current research articles synthesized related to my research project because they served as good sources of current research of the effects of mindfulness on educators. In my particular action research project, I used some aspects of the studies highlighted, including a MBSR training program, fall start time for training, approximately eight-week long training program, and semi-structured interviews with participants.

**Importance of this Study**

Based on current research, it appears mindfulness training is extremely beneficial for educators and their students and should be a priority of the education system (Harris et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Schussler et al., 2016). Unfortunately, as Roeser et al. (2013) point out, “Teacher education and teacher professional development programs do not assist teachers in developing skills such as mindful emotion regulation or attitudes such as self-compassion that they then might use to address the inherently stressful aspects of their work environments” (p. 789). Trying to balance the demands of work and life, many educators may struggle to find the time to arrange mindfulness training from an outside health care provider. Flook et al. (2013) argue that “making training readily accessible and specifically relevant to educators outside of strictly mental health care frameworks are important considerations” (p. 183). The benefits of mindfulness training on school staff and students are continuing to be studied. “Policy decisions that take into consideration and support programs designed to enhance teacher personal and professional wellbeing have the potential to significantly improve educational practices” (Flook et al., 2013, p. 190). Unfortunately, as Flook et al. (2013) points out there needs to be more agreement in the type of training provided. They call for more rigorous research for developing mindfulness as professional development for teachers by stating:
There is no consensus yet on the recommended format for such training.

Investigators have used different approaches to mindfulness training, varying in terms of the breadth and types of practices taught (content of lessons), length of sessions, and overall duration of training. (p. 184)

The lack of consensus may be a reason that mindfulness training is not available more readily to educators.

In addition to this lack of training for teachers, there are populations of school personnel that have not been accounted for. Few studies have focused specifically on educators of children with special needs (Benn et al. 2012). Paraprofessionals, who work closely with teachers and students with special needs, appear to be the missing population. These paraprofessionals also suffer from stress and burnout and would likely benefit from mindfulness training (Giangreco et al., 2010). Although paraprofessionals have been included in some studies (Harris et al., 2016; Schussler et al., 2016) as part of the participant groups, the findings have not differentiated between teachers and paraprofessionals. There do not seem to be many programs and initiatives specifically designed for paraprofessionals, but it is likely that as more intervention programs are proven effective for teachers, they will also be appropriate and effective for support staff.

Summary

This literature review defined mindfulness as the ability to pay attention to the present moment without judgement (Corliss, 2013), and demonstrated links between mindfulness and virtues of positive psychology, such as wisdom, humanity, moderation, and transcendence, as well as character strengths of curiosity, judgement, perspective, love, kindness, forgiveness, self-control, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty.
The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn has been modified by many researchers to determine effective mindfulness training programs for educators, including the mMBSR, MT, SMART, CARE, CALM, and MBWE programs. Mindfulness training has shown to have many positive impacts on participants, including significant effects on the brain, self-awareness and life skills, happiness and fulfillment, health, and well-being. Given the plethora of research pertaining to mindfulness throughout the past few decades, it is clear that people benefit from mindfulness training (Harris et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Weare, 2014). Although the effects of mindfulness training programs have been supported empirically in clinical settings, research studies for educators and support staff are still limited (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In writing the review of literature, I read a variety of current studies and books on mindfulness for various populations. I defined mindfulness, grounded mindfulness in Positive Psychology, and provided a synthesis of current studies. This study targeted a population that has been largely overlooked by research studies, but has a significant impact on the students they work with: paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals working closely with students with special needs have basically been omitted from research on mindfulness training programs. Although it is likely that the effects of mindfulness training on paraprofessionals will be similar to educators and adults in general, there is little evidence to confirm this hypothesis. Through an action research project, I devoted time to increase my own mindful practice. From knowledge gained, I created professional development workshops for other paraprofessionals in my school. This action research project answers the question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?”
Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how the logistics of the action research study were implemented, focusing on the research question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?” It begins by presenting the importance of mindfulness through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, in which all things are connected. Within this theory, children and educators have a significant effect on the well-being and success of one another. The next section explains the methods of action research and the four cycles within the process, followed by a description of paraprofessionals as participants of the study. A description of the types of data collected and the quantitative and qualitative instruments employed, as well as an overview of how the data was analyzed through content analysis and interpreted concludes this chapter.

Methodology & Methods

Ecological systems theory. Ecological Systems Theory (EST), introduced by Bronfenbrenner in 1979, consists of five scientific paradigms, known as the micro system, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Sincero, 2012). Within the micro system, anyone who has direct contact with an individual will affect that individual. These people include one’s family, friends, classmates, teachers, and neighbours. In essence, Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that the environment that a person lives in affects how they act in different environments, such as at home and at school, because “we are not mere recipients of the experiences we have when socializing with these people in the micro system environment, but we are contributing to the construction of such environment” (Sincero, 2012). Within the
EST model, everything is connected; the social interactions between school personnel and the student can impact the student’s holistic development and the educator-student relationship.

According to Psychology Notes Headquarters (2013), “how the child reacts to people in his microsystem will also influence how they treat the child in return. More nurturing and more supportive interactions and relationships will understandably foster the child’s improved development.” The relationships formed between educators and their students are crucial for growth and development of students. Based off this notion of connectedness, there is a strong link between the effects of the well-being of teachers and support staff on the students in their care. Causton-Theoharis (2014) argue that “you need to take care of yourself while taking care of others” and further stress that “educators who are not rested, healthy, and reasonably content will have difficulty helping their students” (p. 112). The classroom environment is significantly affected by the emotional well-being of teachers and support staff. “Supporting teachers’ ability to cope with the demands of the classroom and bolstering their own well-being is a necessity, with implications for students’ learning and school success” (Flook et al., 2013, p. 182).

**Action research.** This study explored the following research question: *How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?* After considering many different methods, I was certain that action research was the best method to explore my question. “Action research is about evaluating your practice to check whether it is as good as you would like it to be, identifying any areas that you feel need improving, and finding ways to improve them” (McNiff, 2014, p. 14). Within my action research project, I focused on the improvement of my own mindfulness, with the goal of helping other paraprofessionals in their practice. “The action of action research is informed, committed and intentional, with a view to generating knowledge of practice for personal and
social wellbeing” (McNiff, 2014, p. 29). I liked that within this type of methodology, I was responsible for my practice and had the potential to make a difference for others. “Action research puts practitioners in control of their own practices, and they accept responsibility for those practices” (McNiff, 2014, p. 26). Action research is about creating knowledge to benefit not only the self, but also others, and is relational in nature. The epistemology of action research is different from “the dominant social science epistemology that sees things as separate” because it is “a way of knowing that sees everything related to everything else” (McNiff, 2014, p. 46).

Based on Ecological Systems Theory, where everything is connected, I endeavoured to create positive personal and social change. Targeting the areas of weakness in my own practice, such as stress and burnout leading to deficits in patience and negative relationships with students, I focused my attention on improving my own mindfulness. The cyclical nature of action research allowed me to take control of my own practice. I shared the knowledge that I gained with other staff members in my school, which lead to social change. Therefore, action research was the most suitable methodology for my research question.

Cycles of action research. Action research is cyclical in nature, whereby I, as the researcher was in a “continuous process of acting, reflecting on the action, and acting again in new ways” based on my findings (McNiff, 2014, p. 112). An overview of the cycles follows:

Cycle 1. “How do I increase my own mindfulness?” Prior to beginning cycle one, I completed an Awareness Questionnaire to be used as a baseline record (Mikulas, 2014, p. 219). Throughout the research process, I completed the questionnaire two more times and took notice of how my awareness changed over time. The second questionnaire was completed on July 1st, 2017 and the third questionnaire was completed on July 30th, 2017. Following the initial questionnaire, I took steps to learn about mindfulness strategies and I practiced different
techniques. I followed an eight-week self-directed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) online course (Potter, 2017). This MBSR program was developed by a MBSR instructor, Dave Potter (2017), modelled on the MBSR program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. The program is organized into eight weeks with readings and videos to help guide learning and self-discovery on the first day of each week, followed by six days of formal and informal practice components. Mindfulness techniques of body scans, sitting meditation, and yoga form the cornerstone of the program, with additional practices of loving kindness, lake and mountain, soften-soothe-allow, RAIN, and silent meditations as supplemental practices. The program also stresses the importance of informal practices of simple awareness, pleasant and unpleasant events calendar, STOP: The one minute breathing space, and the soften-sooth-allow process. I kept a mindfulness research log and recorded notes about the type of strategy used, origin/source of the strategy, duration of practice, personal impressions of the strategy/what I noticed.

Towards the end of this cycle, I started creating PowerPoint presentations with information about each of the mindfulness strategies that I practiced and which ones I found to be effective. I also created a potential outline for professional development workshop topics. Although I was not able to finalize the workshops prior to recruiting participants, I started collecting resources that I believed would benefit other paraprofessionals. I started cycle one in June, 2017, and moved onto cycle two at the beginning of the new school year (September 2017) after I had practiced a variety of techniques and recorded my findings.

*Cycle 2.* “What do other paraprofessionals want to find out?” In order to determine if there was a need for mindfulness professional development within my school, I created a survey on mindfulness and professional development. During the first week of school, a completed and approved survey was provided to all paraprofessionals in my school to voluntarily complete and
WHY MINDFULNESS MATTERS

submit. Based on the needs outlined by the paraprofessionals, professional development workshops were finalized, an outline of the sessions was created, and cycle 3 commenced.

**Cycle 3.** “*How do the professional development workshops affect our practice?*” During this cycle, the paraprofessionals learned about a variety of mindfulness strategies, as well as the importance of practicing mindfulness for self-care. Workshop themes included: ‘defining mindfulness,’ ‘mindful meditation,’ ‘relaxation yoga,’ ‘movement yoga,’ ‘mindfulness breathing strategies,’ ‘mindfulness in the classroom,’ and a ‘wrap-up session.’ Workshops were provided during work-hours for all interested paraprofessionals at my school. The format of the workshops included a multi-media PowerPoint presentation, specific practice of mindfulness strategies, and group discussion. Exit cards were used to find out what participants learned, their impressions, what they still wanted to learn, and how they would utilize the strategies for self-care or with their students. Any questions or concerns from participants were immediately addressed through an email to all participants or during the following workshop after some additional research was completed. Participants were provided with all the PowerPoint presentations, activities and handouts in a binder format, which included an accompanying CD with all presentations, notes, and guided mindfulness tracks. Participants were encouraged to record their own notes throughout the presentations. The first workshop was held during a Professional Development day on October 6th, 2017. This session was 3 hours in length and was split up between defining mindfulness and the effects of mindfulness training, and over one hour of guided practice, consisting of an outside awareness exercise, mindful eating exercise, and a 20-minute body scan. After the initial session, six workshops occurred once a week for seven weeks. The final session was held on November 23rd, 2017. One week between the fourth and fifth session was taken as a break week. Due to supervision schedules and availability of
participants, the group was split up into two smaller groups. One group with three participants practiced on Wednesdays after school from 3:00-3:30 pm. The second group with six participants practiced from 12:00-12:30 pm on part of their lunch break.

**Cycle 4.** “How do we affect change using our understanding of mindfulness?” The final cycle focused on brainstorming ways that paraprofessionals could help increase the benefits of using mindfulness as a school-wide approach. This cycle included brainstorm sessions with all participants as well as the interviews of two participants. A final review of all the data collected during the study aided in answering this final question.

**Participants**

Based on the methodology of action research, I was in the center of this research project. The purpose of this research was to increase my own mindfulness and share the knowledge that I gained with other paraprofessionals. I worked with other paraprofessionals in my school throughout my research journey.

**Characteristics.** A total of nine paraprofessionals from an urban elementary school in the Yukon during the 2017-2018 school year were recruited to participate in the study. Paraprofessionals included both Educational Assistants, assigned to specific students or to classes, and Remedial Tutors. All participants in this study were female and consisted of 25-34 year olds (n=2), 35-44 year olds (n=3), 45-54 year olds (n=3), and undisclosed (n=1). There were no prerequisite of number of years worked as a paraprofessional or grade level of assignment. Paraprofessionals ranged in grade level of assignment between kindergarten and grade six and ranged in years of experience as a paraprofessional between 1-5 years (n=1), 6-10 years (n=3), 16-20 years (n=2), 21-25 years (n=2), and unidentified (n=1). Participants also ranged in highest level of education completed: some college credit, no degree (n=4),
trade/technical/vocational training (n=2), Associate’s degree (n=1), and Bachelor’s degree (n=1). Two of the participants also completed a semi-structured interview at the conclusion of the mindfulness training sessions. One participant, a mother of three children, working two jobs, was given the pseudonym Samantha Meadow. The other participant, a hardworking, creative woman with many school-related pressures, was given the pseudonym Elizabeth Garden.

**Recruitment.** Paraprofessionals received notification of the opportunity to be involved in mindfulness professional development training for self-care and for use with students, in the form of a recruitment letter and paper flyer in their school mailboxes in the staff lunchroom. The recruitment letter included the purpose of the study, possible times of professional development opportunities, consent forms (for participation in the group session and a separate one for the surveys), as well as my contact information and the contact information of my research supervisor. In addition, a brief meeting with paraprofessionals was used to provide an overview of the study and answer any questions prior to the due date of consent forms.

**Ethical issues.** Prior to commencing my research with adults in my school, I applied to the Research Ethics Board at Vancouver Island University and received approval for my study before gaining approval from the Department of Education with Yukon Education. I started my research and professional development workshops at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year in order to have adequate time to try various strategies and build knowledge with the paraprofessionals in my school. Participants were fully informed of the nature of their involvement in the research project and were provided with consent forms for each aspect of the research with research particulars as well as my contact information. Participants were informed that they could discontinue their involvement at any time for any reason and could skip questions on the survey if they felt uncomfortable for any reason. Any data collected was kept confidential.
and protected by identifying codes and passwords. Due to the nature of the mindfulness workshops and brainstorming sessions, anonymity between participants could not be assured. A possible risk of participating in the sessions was that other participants would know what was shared. To minimize these risks, participants were reminded that information provided was done so voluntarily. Participants were encouraged to refrain from sharing information with the group that would make them uncomfortable in any way. There was no form of coercion and I was not in a position of power with the participants. “The choice on whether or not to participate must be genuinely free, with no negative repercussions for not taking part, and no feelings of researchers having taken advantage of powerless participants” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 80).

Participants invited to complete an interview were allowed to confirm their responses from a transcription of the interview, known as “respondent validation,” and had access to the final document (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 83). Data obtained during the research project was stored in a secure manner, and was only viewed by the researcher and researcher’s supervisor. Data will be kept for three years and will be disposed of in April, 2021.

**Data Collection**

Action research contains some of the elements from other types of methodologies, such as creating a research question, gathering data, and interpreting the results. Action research strives to create “personal and social change” by communicating the importance of the knowledge claims (McNiff, 2014, p. 14). “The term ‘action research’ comprises two words, each with a different focus. Action refers to what you do. Research refers to how you find out about what you do” (McNiff, 2014, p. 14). For my research project, I started collecting research about what knowledge was already known. When I felt I had a solidified understanding of the literature base, I tested various mindfulness strategies to determine if they worked for me. I passed this
information to other paraprofessionals and gathered feedback from them about what they found useful. Throughout this process I collected data from a variety of perspectives to ensure validity of knowledge claims. Action research has the following steps, as outlined in McNiff (2014):

- Identify issues and raise research questions, monitor practice systematically to generate data, describe the action and gather data, generate evidence to explain the data and make knowledge claims, test the validity of knowledge claims, make your action research public and disseminate findings, and communicate the significance of knowledge claims. (p. 51)

**Types of data.** This action research project utilized a mixed methods design, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. “Mixed methods research recognizes, and works with, the fact that the word is not exclusively quantitative or qualitative, it is not an either/or world, but a mixed world” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 22). “Mixed methods approaches are premised on pragmatism ontologies and epistemologies,” which try to find “real answers to real questions” in real world contexts (p. 23; p. 25). Mixed methods are valuable because they “uncover information and perspective, increase corroboration of the data, and render less biased and more accurate conclusions” (p. 22). The use of a mixed methods research design must integrate both types of data sources and be “mutually illuminating,” meaning that both quantitative and qualitative data are required to fully answer the research question (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 23).

Although there are many types of mixed methods research designs, depending on what is being mixed and when it is being mixed, I chose to use a “parallel mixed design,” also known as “concurrent design” or “convergent parallel design” utilizing both quantitative and qualitative tools for independent purposes during the same phase of the research process (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 25). “Regardless of the name, the convergent design occurs when the researcher collects and
analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data during the same phase of the research process and then merges the two sets of results into an overall interpretation” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 77). There are four main steps of using a convergent design. The researcher collects the two types of data separately, uses appropriate analysis tools for each data collection method, merges the data, and finally makes interpretations based on the “ways the two sets of results converge, diverge from each other, relate to each other, and/or combine to create a better understanding in response to the study’s overall purpose” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 78). For my action research study, I analyzed the quantitative data from participant surveys and qualitative data from my research journal, brainstorming sessions, and participant interviews separately. By analyzing all of this data separately and then merging the data, I was able to determine overall themes and make final interpretations of mindfulness training programs for paraprofessionals.

*Applicability of data to question.* Quantitative and qualitative data collection methods each have specific purposes and have both been used to study the effects of mindfulness training. There is support in the literature for using qualitative research regarding the study of mindfulness. Christopher and Maris (2010) recommend “the use of qualitative research when studying mindfulness because it offers us the potential to explore participants’ experiences in an open-ended manner that quantitative research has not yet captured” (Frias, 2015, p. 34). In a qualitative review of literature on mindfulness training, Morgan, Simpson, and Smith (2015) added, “while mediation studies are useful in testing specific hypothesised relationships, other sources of evidence such as qualitative research are needed to provide a more holistic assessment” (p. 745). For the purpose of my research, I used a mixed-methods approach to ensure a deeper understanding of the effects of my action research project.
**Data collection instruments.** Quantitative data collection instruments were questionnaires and surveys. Qualitative measures consisted of a mindfulness research journal, brainstorming sessions, and interviews. The following section explores each of these tools in greater detail.

**Awareness questionnaire.** Quantitative data will include the Awareness Questionnaire (Mikulas, 2014, p. 219). This questionnaire has 45 statements and utilizes a five-point Likert scale (5=always true or very often true of me; 1=never or almost never true of me). The questionnaire allows for answering the question as not applicable or by writing an ‘X’ to indicate that the statement is unclear. Questions are to be answered individually and are not totalled in any way. I explored how mindfulness training impacted my awareness at three times throughout my research journey. I completed the questionnaire on June 1st, prior to starting the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), on July 1st, after four weeks of the MBSR (half-way point), and on July 30th, at the completion of the MBSR. The flexibility of dating each completion of the Awareness Questionnaire and utilizing the questionnaire regularly helped me track my changes over the course of my research. By comparing my final answers to previous answers, I noticed in what areas my awareness improved, decreased, or stayed the same. I determined areas that needed more emphasis.

**Survey questions.** Questions on the survey for mindfulness and professional development included both quantitative and qualitative question formats, such as rating scales, closed response, and open-ended response. The initial survey determined a baseline of current knowledge of mindfulness practices and uses personally and professionally, as well as most appropriate times for professional development sessions. This survey was distributed prior to the start of the professional development opportunities. Based on feedback of availability, preferred
day, and reference to supervision schedules, mindfulness training sessions were arranged. The first session took place on October 6th, approximately two weeks after the initial survey was completed by participants. In addition, ongoing feedback, through the use of anonymous exit-tickets helped to ensure that the sessions were relevant and that they covered areas of interest for the participants. A final survey, developed throughout the research process, was used to collect feedback on professional development workshops and resources obtained throughout the sessions. This survey included some of the same questions from the first survey, such as self-regulation strategies used with students to determine if personal changes or increased use of mindfulness strategies for self-care were made through the training. In addition, this survey had specific questions based on the material covered in the workshops and how the mindfulness training impacted personal or professional areas of participants’ lives. In order to protect participants’ confidentiality, participants were asked to assign a code on their surveys for comparison purposes. Participants were instructed to use the same code on both of their surveys for pre-post comparison. Eight of the nine participants completed the initial survey in September. The same eight participants completed the follow-up survey in December. One participant chose not to complete either survey.

**Mindfulness research journal.** A research journal was kept to record research cycles, including the goals, strategies I tried, challenges/difficulties I faced, and developing themes. In addition, notes about the type of mindfulness strategy used, origin/source of the strategy, duration of practice, personal impressions of the strategy/what I noticed were recorded. This research journal was a personal data collection tool. Participants were encouraged to record their own thoughts in a mindfulness log. Insights from participant logs were voluntarily shared during brainstorming sessions, but their logs were not collected for analysis.
**Brainstorming sessions.** During the professional development sessions, participants were exposed to a variety of different mindfulness strategies for self-care and for use with students through direct instruction and guided practice. Participants practiced the various techniques within the small group settings. During many of the sessions, I posed specific questions to the group to brainstorm responses. The themes of these questions included stressors of working as a paraprofessional, sensations noticed during outside awareness activity, what makes a mindful person, resources to help teach children about mindfulness, mindfulness strategies that are most effective with students, and plans for building a more mindful school environment. I used chart paper to record group ideas.

**Interviews.** Two paraprofessionals were recruited for up to an hour-long semi-structured interview. The interview of one participant lasted fifty minutes and the other interview was completed in just over thirty minutes. Interviews were conducted at the end of the research period, in December, to discuss overall impressions of the mindfulness training, effects of mindfulness training on personal and professional life, how they were able to utilize mindfulness strategies with their students, barriers to mindfulness, and any feedback for future training. The interviews were conducted outside of school hours during mutually accepted times and locations between researcher and participants. The interviews were recorded for transcription purposes. “The interview is a flexible tool for data collection, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used; verbal, non-verbal, spoken, and heard” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409). Cohen et al. (2011) further explains that an advantage of interviews is “that it allows for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection” (p. 411).
Data Analysis and Interpretation

Theoretical framework of analysis and interpretation. Mixed methods allows for “methodological pluralism,” which can help to recognise and correct errors from using only one type of data collection. “It also enables meanings in data to be probed, corroboration and triangulation to be practised, rich(er) data to be gathered, and new modes of thinking to emerge where paradoxes between two individual data sources are found” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 23).

During the analysis stage of the research process, McNiff (2014) encourages researchers to become familiar with their database by reading over the data multiple times with their research question in mind (McNiff, 2014, p. 177). While reading and re-reading, “ideas and patterns begin to emerge from the data, and core themes become visible” (McNiff, 2014, p. 178).

Content analysis. Content analysis can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The keywords that are chosen for coding purposes can also be referred to as a ‘unit of analysis’ or ‘category of analysis.’ The researcher assigns codes to different categories of data, which comes from a variety of different sources (McNiff, 2016, p. 198). Each time the word or code is observed, it is marked with the code symbol and added to a table or recording device (McNiff, 2016, p. 199). These qualitative codes can later be analysed quantitatively (McNiff, 2014, p. 178). The guiding questions for the group brainstorm and exit cards helped organize the data for analysis.

I chose to code my data in two separate ways: key word coding and chronological coding. I started by coding statements based on character strengths and virtues, according to positive psychology. I used six different coloured markers, one for each virtue, and a pencil to write the initial of the character strength identified. For example, I used the colour pink for humanity and wrote an ‘L’ for love, ‘K’ for kindness, and ‘S.I.’ for social intelligence. Given the same data,
another researcher may have determined emphasis on slightly different character strengths and virtues. However, keeping true to my own values and understanding of each of the character strengths and virtues, I consistently categorized and organized the data. When unsure, I referred to a handout on simple phrases for each character strength (Niemiec, 2015), which can be found in Appendix 2. For the purposes of categorizing statements, feelings, and thoughts based on key words of positive psychology virtues and character strengths, I came up with overall labels for specific types of ideas. For example, any time I or a participant mentioned “self-care,” I categorized that statement as kindness, under the virtue of humanity, because I thought self-care was demonstrating kindness to oneself. Another example was whenever a participant mentioned calmness or relaxation, I categorized the statement as self-control, under the virtue of moderation, because they were managing feelings and relaxing their bodies, rather than losing control of emotions. I categorized statements relating to “staying in the moment” under the virtue transcendence, relating to the character strength spirituality, because spirituality is to “look for what is sacred in this moment” (Niemiec, 2015).

After coding based on virtues and character strengths, I went back through the data and coded chronologically, based on transformative experiences over time. I looked at how I was impacted by my mindfulness journey and how participants were affected by the mindfulness training period. I specifically examined how their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives differed at the beginning, middle, and end of the training.

After coding the data in two separate ways, I began to interpret the results. “When you interpret your data, you identify those pieces that show the transformation of what you are looking for and what you value into action. This is the basis of making judgments about the quality of your action research” (McNiff, 2014, p. 181). Based on the group brainstorming
responses, exit tickets, surveys, and interviews from participants, common themes developed. I identified the themes based on the information gained during the sessions, rather than having participants determine key themes. These findings and themes are discussed in detail in chapter four.

**Triangulation.** Data interpretation in action research is often based on personal values (McNiff, 2014, p. 180). However, these “values must be negotiated and justified with others before being claimed as viable criteria and standards” (McNiff, 2014, p. 182). Triangulation of data becomes an important part of the interpretation process, providing additional support for ideas that had previously arisen in one form of data or another. According to McNiff (2014), triangulation “is a process where the data are looked at from at least three different perspectives, if not more” (p. 183). Similarly, Cohen et al. (2011) define triangulation “as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour” (p. 195). There are different types of triangulation, however, the most popular type and the one that I used for my research is “methodological triangulation” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 197). “As a check on validity, the between methods approach embraces the notion of convergence between independent measures of the same objective” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 197). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest that “the convergent parallel design “is used when the researcher wants to triangulate the methods by directly comparing and contrasting quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings for corroboration and validation purposes” (p.77). For the purpose of my research, when referring to ‘methodological triangulation,’ I used the second part of the definition by Cohen et al. (2011), which uses “different methods on the same object of study” (p. 196). By utilizing a research journal, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews, I used a variety of methods to research mindfulness and interpret the findings.
Summary

This chapter began by grounding the action research study in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting the importance of self-control of children and educators, based on the belief that all people and behaviours are connected within an environment. The chapter provided a description and implementation of the action research study and cycles of research. After presenting a description of the paraprofessionals as participants, the chapter focused on methods and instruments of data collection, concluding with methods of data analysis and interpretation. All aspects of the chapter were guided by the research question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?”
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss key findings of the study relating to my research question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?”, analyse the findings, and make connections to literature on mindfulness training programs. The chapter is arranged in chronological order of my cycles of action research. In addition, beginning, mid-point, and final transformations for both paraprofessionals and myself are presented. I used the term transformations to serve as the overall picture of personal growth, based on the smaller changes, resulting from mindfulness training. I believe the small changes in awareness or perspectives lead to greater transformations of self and believe the transformations are present in different developmental stages of the learning process. I also present an overview of the mindfulness training program and share feedback of participants to showcase the significant impact that the training made on personal and professional lives. The analysis focuses on connecting the transformations to virtues and character strengths common to positive psychology. Throughout this chapter, the terms self-regulation and self-control are used synonymously, based on their reciprocal use within the literature on positive psychology. After analyzing findings from my personal transformation and transformations of paraprofessionals, I compare similarities to these transformations and examine connections to current studies.

Findings

Cycle 1

In cycle one, I asked the question, “How do I increase my own mindfulness?” I decided to begin this part of my research in June and at the time I was extremely overwhelmed with both
work and personal life responsibilities, such as academic time pressures, wedding planning, and financial insecurities, leading to difficulties in coping with all the demands, issues sleeping, and strain on my relationships. In my research journal, I wrote about the negative impacts of my diminished well-being on my students:

*Work is stressful because it’s the end of the year and the behaviour students that I work with are struggling with self-control. I become increasingly frustrated with the boys and yelled at a student who was not listening and being disrespectful. I let my emotions get the better of me and reacted negatively towards my students.* (June 1, 2017)

Given my mental and emotional state at that time, I looked for a program that offered flexibility in terms of time and accessibility because I would be travelling during this time period. I began my self-directed mindfulness journey with the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) online course (Potter, 2017). I came across this program through an Internet search of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course offerings. I chose this program because it was developed by an instructor of MBSR, provided research-based mindfulness techniques and strategies, offered weekly readings and videos to support knowledge development, and was highly structured to help ensure routine and personal commitment. This specific MBSR program was also free, accessible, and resources could be downloaded.

Before beginning my mindfulness journey, I was encouraged to set up an intention for why I wanted to do the training and what I hoped to gain in the end. I focused my attention on three main areas, which all related to self-control aspects: learn strategies to help ease my overactive brain and stop worrying about all the financial and academic stress, learn to regulate my emotions and decrease my anxiety, and find ways to help get a better night’s sleep and be
more relaxed in life. I was also encouraged to choose a time and location that I would reserve for mindfulness training as part of the MBSR program. Although the time and location changed due to travelling, I made mindfulness training a priority for two main reasons: it was my research for my thesis, and I began to notice personal transformations.

My Personal Transformation: Beginning Transformations

**Feelings of failure.** In the beginning of my journey, many of my journal entries depicted negative feelings, full of judgement and self-criticism. However, I noticed that at the end of each entry, I wrote a comment that was hopeful in nature. After four days of practice, an early journal entry conveyed my frustration:

> Three out of four times [doing a body scan] I have fallen asleep and the time in the bath I was so unfocused and couldn’t bring my awareness to any body part. I know that meditation is different for everyone and that sometimes it takes time to see any results, but it is hard not to feel like a failure. I haven’t successfully completed one body scan yet! I will keep trying and I’m hopeful that I will be able to stay awake for one soon! (June 8, 2017)

As a follow up to this journal entry and determined to understand why I was falling asleep, I began researching more. I came across articles on the MBSR course website that explained that all meditators fall asleep at some point or another. The article clarified that the body may actually be sleep deprived and falling asleep during meditation is giving the body exactly what it needs. Having a better understanding of why I might have been falling asleep helped to start changing my negative feelings about failing at body scans. I started to feel much less judgement and criticism on myself and believed I was doing exactly what I needed to be doing.
Different perspectives. Within my logs and journal entries, there remained many judgemental comments about distraction, mind wandering, living in auto-pilot mode, disappointment, and frustration. When sifting through my meditation logs, I noticed the entries about formal meditations (body scan, sitting meditation) were much more judgemental in a negative way than the informal practices. The informal practices, of simple awareness and pleasant events, used guiding questions to help me focus on the positives. I found that these entries were filled with thoughts and ideas showing gratitude, appreciation of beauty, zest, and self-control. The following is one example of a passage about a pleasant event:

Walking my dog. Hearing birds sing, wind rustling trees, sun on grass/tree leaves, butterflies flying. Yes, aware. Warm, huge smile on my face, lightness in my step.

Grateful, happy, appreciative, carefree. Feeling grateful for sunshine after all the rain. Happy I got out of the house to experience a nice day. (June 17, 2017)

Intermittent calmness. Early in my practice of meditation, I noticed occasional mention of feelings of calm. One early recording of such instance follows:

This morning I did a sitting meditation (30 min Potter, 2017). Today was the first time in this posture that I actually felt relaxed after. In all previous times, I was so uncomfortable and thinking about all the pain and discomfort I was in and I never felt relaxed in the end. I was always waiting for the recording to end and remembering what cue would be next. Today I still thought about upcoming cues, but then part way through I stopped thinking about them. I was surprised that the recording was over because I was drifting in a space without thought at that point. My mind was finally calm in those last moments before the recording ended. With all the visiting and wedding planning that I am doing, my mind is constantly racing and
I feel tired. However, I appreciate the 30-40 minutes that I set aside daily to practice my meditation. I think these sessions are helping me stay more grounded. (June 29, 2017)

This meditation entry showcased less judgement on the present meditation and focused more on self-control, spirituality, and gratitude. The busyness of life continued, but the ability to set aside time for self-care became an important part in overcoming these stressors. Setting aside time to practice helped me feel more focused and grounded, which actually helped me have more time to complete other tasks throughout the day. This was also the first time that I referred to myself as feeling more grounded, which was a significant turning point in my journey.

**My Personal Transformation: Mid-Point Transformations**

**Heightened self-control.** Formal mindfulness training and practice is done to help one utilize skills in their regular day-to-day interaction. Through the development of mindfulness self-control skills, I was able to apply these skills to help me calm down after an error in driving and forgive myself for the mistake. In my log, I disclosed:

\[
\text{I made a mistake driving today. I got very upset with myself and felt terrible for what I did. I felt that I was stupid for not following the “rules.” Inner feelings of anger and self-hate, even though nothing bad happened. My stomach was in a knot. My heart was racing. I started sweating. I tried to just calm my body by taking some breaths, forgiving myself for the mistake, and understanding why it happened (compassion for myself). [After the breathing.,] my body didn’t have the physical sensations. My mind was still thinking about it, but I wasn’t upset with myself anymore. (July 5, 2017)}
\]
I think this passage demonstrated the power of developing mindfulness techniques. I was able to quickly change my response to the driving error. I started out being very judgemental in a mistake and through curiosity, I was able to identify what my body was feeling and recognize that I needed to apply a self-control skill. I forgave and offered kindness to myself. Although I still thought about the incident, I was no longer upset. I arrived at my destination safely and was able to go about my day without carrying the negative thoughts along. This example touched on many character strengths, including judgement, curiosity, forgiveness, kindness, and self-control, demonstrating an impact of the virtues of wisdom, moderation, and humanity.

More present. Staying present has always been something I struggled with, but half-way through the MBSR course, I began noticing changes in my ability to stay present. An example of staying present is highlighted in the following entry:

I feel that I am calmer and able to take a breath when I am starting to feel myself get upset. I am noticing more of my body sensations. I am also finding that I am more able to recognize when I am not fully present in the moment, such as when I am talking to someone or working on a task. I am very task/goal driven, and I notice that I often have trouble staying in the moment. I am often thinking about lots of other things rather than staying present. Although I have not perfected ‘being in the moment,’ I have started to understand/notice when I am not. I think that is a great start on my journey to becoming more mindful. (July 3, 2017)

The ability to stay in the moment demonstrates a strength in spirituality and the virtue of transcendence.

Deeper gratitude and kindness. Throughout my journey, my journal reflections became more positive and my reflections included more emphasis on the need for self-care
through showing kindness to myself. During a reflection in the middle of the MBSR course, I expressed the value of meditation:

*I think I have come to really value the time that I set aside to meditate and need it in my life. This is drastically different to my feelings before I started MBSR. I would never have specifically set aside 30-40 minutes daily for self-care/reflection. Now, I build this time into my day, regardless of how busy I am. It is the summer, but I am hopeful that I will continue to make time for me when the 8 weeks are up and summer ends and I am back to school. I am grateful that I have focused on the program this much so far.* (July 3, 2017)

My journal entries were filled with hope, gratitude, and kindness. I felt more positive and less judgemental. I continued to show increases in gratitude in all aspects of life. I started recording at least three things I was grateful for each night before bed in a gratitude calendar. I found this practice really helped me to appreciate what I had or who was in my life, especially on challenging days where it could be easy to see everything through a negative lens. Based on the impact the gratitude calendar had on my personal life, I ensured that this would be part of the training for paraprofessionals.

**Increased mental clarity.** After confirming that some of my colleagues were interested in participating in the mindfulness training sessions, it was time to start preparing the presentations. Over the Labour Day weekend, I planned on spending my time working on the presentations, but ended up wasting two of the three days by becoming distracted, procrastinating, and not being able to start working on the presentations. Unfortunately, with such a large undertaking, I didn’t know where to start. I share my response to how I handled the situation here:
I realized that the reason I wasn’t able to get started was because my mind was wandering all over the place! I felt stressed and overwhelmed because I didn’t know where to start or if I would finish everything before the first sessions! I recognized these feelings and decided to grab a blanket and my IPod and I headed for the forest. I knew that I would never accomplish anything at home if I was in that state. So instead, I did a 30 minute sitting meditation in the forest, focusing on my breath and just allowing the feeling of worry to disappear. I was present in the moment and enjoyed the warmth from the sun on my face, the gentle breeze rustling the trees, and an insect making noise beside me. Of course ideas about my workshops popped into my head, but they felt like solutions and possibilities, rather than problems or worry. I ended the meditation feeling calm, settled, and free. I was excited to work on the presentations because I felt revitalized. I was grateful to have spent this time being, rather than stressing at home. It seems so counter-productive to meditate in times of stress or when under time pressure, but it works in quite the opposite way. After 30 minutes meditating, I was able to actually focus on the task I had planned to start at 9am. If I had not meditated, I would likely still be in a state of unease and would not have accomplished anything. Recognizing when to take a break is something I am learning through my mindfulness journey. (September 3, 2017)

The insights gained during this meditation were pivotal in the new significance I placed on meditation to aid in mental clarity, especially in times of stress. This entry showed emphasis on character strengths of judgement, curiosity, self-control, zest, appreciation of beauty, spirituality, and gratitude, leading to further development of the pathways of wisdom, moderation, courage, and transcendence. During this time I was starting to show a greater desire
to be in the present moment, focusing more attention on myself and those around me and strengthening my relationships in the process. The development of these character strengths changed the way I saw others and how I could take the time I needed to relax my body and mind.

**My Personal Transformation: Transformed**

**Enhanced awareness and health.** Throughout my journey, many log accounts about body scans and sitting meditations expressed a greater attention to body sensations, including tingling, burning, throbbing, and pain. My awareness to bodily sensations, my senses, and the natural beauty surrounding me increased as I became more curious about what I was experiencing and why I was feeling a certain way. I developed a better understanding of my body and mind. This greater awareness helped ensure that I was taking care of my body. I reflected on this when I recorded:

*I think through the body scans and sitting meditations, I have become more aware of pain in my body. I can pinpoint exactly where the pain is and describe it to my physiotherapist. This greater awareness has got me to seek help now, rather than later.* (August 26, 2017)

**Highlights of awareness questionnaire.** I also thought it was important to note how specific aspects of my awareness changed over time, based on my ratings to statements on the Awareness Questionnaire (Mikulas, 2014, p. 219). I found overall positive effects on wisdom, moderation, humanity, and transcendence. Over time, I reported increases in body awareness, greater awareness of my own thinking, and sensitivity to other perspectives, which fall under the wisdom virtue, representing character strengths of curiosity, judgement, and perspectives, respectively. I showcased improvements in my character strength of forgiveness, under the virtue of moderation by describing feeling better able to let things go. As part of the virtue of
humanity, I observed improvements in social intelligence as my ability to listen actively to others improved. I also reported significant improvements with feeling in the present moment, being more attuned to my senses and surroundings, and eating with more attention, which relate to character strengths in spirituality and appreciation of beauty, both under the virtue of transcendence. Although this questionnaire was only one small part of data collection, it was clear that the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (Potter, 2017) had impacts on many areas of virtues and character strengths that correspond to the literature on the connection between positive psychology and mindfulness.

**Improved sleep.** Regardless of the time of day (morning, afternoon, bedtime) or the location (floor, chair, bed), I continuously fell asleep during portions or for the majority of body scans throughout my journey. I attempted body scans with fewer pillows and covers, with my eyes open, or with the light on, but to no avail. During the beginning of my journey, I was very judgemental about falling asleep, but now I am extremely grateful to have found something to help me sleep. One of my reflections highlighted this change in perspective:

> *When I first started reading about body scans, I felt like I was failing when I fell asleep. Now, although I still fall asleep sometimes, I feel like I am doing exactly what I need to be doing. I have always had trouble getting to sleep because of an overactive mind that never seems to turn off. Now I slip into sleep feeling relaxed and settled.* (July 23, 2017)

I easily fall asleep with other types of recordings too, such as sleep stories from the CALM meditation application. I have found that falling asleep and staying asleep throughout the night has improved my overall energy level and ability to function on a daily basis. I still have many
stressors in my life, but knowing that I won’t be up all night thinking and worrying about them is a true gift that meditation has brought me.

**Finally grounded.** The mindfulness training not only helped me feel more relaxed to help me sleep, it also appeared to change my demeanour. I reflected on this increased sense of calmness and acceptance when I shared:

*I have noticed that I am much more calm and relaxed during the day too. I have been under a lot of stress and pressure lately, but I have been able to get tasks done without the anxiety and worry that use to come hand in hand with the pressure and deadlines. Not every day is easy, but I am learning to appreciate each day and bring in more of my senses to awareness. I have laughed so much the last week because I have been fully present in the moment with the people I am with. I have had great conversations with strangers and feel more comfortable in my own skin.* (July 23, 2017)

Believing that I changed throughout my journey has been validated by strangers, professionals in health-care, and colleagues. A stranger that I met this summer told me that I seemed calm and relaxed (July 23, 2017). In a follow-up session, my naturopath told me that I appeared “grounded” and very aware of my body (October 16, 2017). Finally, “a colleague that I have been working closely with for just over a month and a half mentioned that I look much healthier these days. She even said that I looked like I was glowing” (November 5, 2017).

In addition to overall feelings of calmness, I think the mindfulness training also strengthened my patience. One time I really noticed this was when I was waiting in the line-up during the opening day of a grocery store in Whitehorse. The employees kept apologizing for the long waits, and I responded with, “I’m not in a hurry, no problem.” I used to get annoyed
standing in long line ups before, but I think the mindful practice helped with my impatience (August 26, 2017).

**Recognition for ongoing practice.** This year has been a challenging year, with many personal and professional demands monopolizing my time and energy. I was devoted to daily meditation from June to October, but started reducing the number of sessions in November as the demands seemed to become unmanageable. In a very candid reflection, I explained the impacts on my health and well-being:

*It has been a struggle these last two to three weeks to find the time for myself. I have become very overwhelmed with everything going on at school, home, and with my Masters. I haven’t been giving myself enough time to do the things I need to do to take care of myself. I have been using the sleep stories from the Calm App (all free now), but otherwise have not done formal meditations. I have let the stress overtake my whole body and do not feel happy or have the energy or desire to do anything. I know I need to get back to devoting time to myself. (December 10, 2017)*

As a final research journal entry, I wrote about my plans for making self-care a priority once again:

*During this Christmas break, I am trying to give myself more time to practice and get back into a routine of putting myself first. I know this is what is missing in my life to be fully happy. This became very apparent when I was talking to my participants in the interviews. I alluded to falling away from meditation and explained the effects it was having on my life. I felt scattered, unbalanced, and unhappy. I knew that I needed to get back to practicing to feel better and feel more in control of things. (December 23, 2017)*
Both of these journal entries mentioned self-care, or kindness to oneself, as vital for my overall happiness and ability to control emotions, think clearly, and feel settled. During the MBSR program, I showed more kindness and acceptance to myself than ever before, strengthening my pathways of humanity. Making time for myself is the most important part of my day and I will once again make this a priority.

Cycle 2

In cycle two, I asked the question, “What do other paraprofessionals want to find out?” Cycle two was designed to determine if there was a need for professional development on mindfulness and what the participants were interested in learning about. Over one third of the total number of educational assistants at the school voluntarily enrolled in the research, clearly demonstrating that mindfulness was a topic of interest. As part of the first session, participants were asked to leave a comment about what they were most interested in learning about during the sessions, to help ensure that information was covered. The responses fell under three main categories: better understanding of mindfulness techniques and benefits in general, practices for self-care, and strategies to use in the classroom. Based on initial survey responses and dedication to participation in the research, participants showed strengths in curiosity, kindness, and a love of learning, based on virtues of wisdom and humanity.

Paraprofessional Transformations: Beginning Transformations

Initial thoughts. Although participants all willingly volunteered to be part of the research, not all were entirely sure of what to expect based on personal experiences and perceptions. In her interview, Elizabeth admitted to being skeptical and judgemental about what the mindfulness training sessions would entail. She explained the reasons for her thoughts:
I had some different stereotypes in mind of what it was going to be like. Just my aunt always used to say, “Well, that’s selfish. Spend that much time on yourself is a very selfish venture.” That’s the one that stood out in my mind the most. And I thought, yeah but I know people that do it. And how is it selfish if it’s helping you to be a more well-rounded person, to present better to others, and to be able to do your job, especially in our case in education. To do it more mindfully. So that’s why I thought I would try it. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)

**Establishing a need for self-care.** All paraprofessionals believed that the self-care and emotional well-being of adults in the classroom affects the learning of students. Unfortunately, most of these adults reported feeling emotionally fatigued daily or weekly during the initial survey. Much of this daily or weekly emotional fatigue resulted from identified stressors of working as a paraprofessional. During the first session, the group brainstormed what causes stress for them in their role within the school. Of the thoughts, 33% of the ideas related to exhaustion, lack of breaks, and being “on” all day. This was a common theme brought up in the sessions and interviews. In Samantha’s interview, she explained how the lack of breaks at school and home affected her health:

*There’s* just no downtime. *There’s not enough breaks throughout my day. There’s only just one, the quick lunch one, and it’s always rushed, so I always feel like I’m rushing to eat, rushing to eat breakfast. I just feel like you go, go, go. Always with the students, which is fine, but, you know, it does add to that whole burnout feeling. And no time, always rushing to eat. Never taking time to really make sure I’m eating healthy, and with that I’ve put on lots of weight over the last little while, and no exercising. I’m too tired.* (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)
When looking back on the brainstormed list of stressors, 21% of ideas related to lack of training and support, conflicting styles between paraprofessional and teachers, and feeling judged or not appreciated. Finally, 46% of the stressors related to negative student behaviour, fear of becoming physically hurt, high needs of students, and student trauma. Samantha explained:

*The kids can be stressful. The behaviour issues I find really exhausting. I struggle with being yelled at, being called names. I struggle with just letting that go. The behaviour is a really big one for me because it sucks the life out of me.* (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)

Although trauma cannot be eliminated, the improvement of self-regulation strategies and skills could help students reduce their negative behaviours, leading to improvements to working conditions for paraprofessionals. One paraprofessional noticed how the use of a mindful jar helped a student in her class develop self-regulation skills and improve their relationship. This student was described as extremely negative, unkind, easily frustrated, and known to growl at her every time she asked him to complete a task. Samantha explained:

*He was just having a really bad moment. I asked him to go and have a break and there’s a beanbag chair in the back of the class. “I noticed you need a break.” But he was not interested. So I saw the mindful jar and I said, “Hey, why don’t you come sit over here. You can give this a shake. You can watch the sparkles, you can calm yourself down.” And that’s what got him to come over, actually seeing the mindful jar. Just asking him for a break didn’t work. But seeing that, he was intrigued and now it’s been something we have been using more often. He shakes it really*
vigorously and just sits, watches it. Sometimes it take a few minutes; sometimes he’s there for quite some time doing it. But I notice when he comes back in, he’s able to come back in and rejoin the group after that. (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)

Many of these comments focused on the need for self-care or kindness to self, and development of self-control strategies to use for self and with students. Many of the negative aspects of working as a paraprofessional can be eliminated if more attention and care is placed on paraprofessionals. When paraprofessionals develop self-regulation skills, they can in turn share these skills with their students, as Samantha did, to help improve student self-regulation as well as paraprofessional-student relationships.

**Importance of routine.** Knowing that creating a routine and scheduled time for daily practice was important for me and helped to ensure that I practiced various mindfulness techniques at home, I incorporated this into the first session with paraprofessionals. I asked paraprofessionals to set up an intention for why they wanted to practice mindfulness techniques, but to also think about when they may practice. After the first session, I encouraged participants to take home the materials and practice some of the techniques discussed, using the audio CD. For accessibility, I also emailed the presentations and tracks to participants. A week later, we met for our second session, during which I asked participants what were some of the barriers to practicing at home. Almost all participants’ comments related to either time/family pressures, lack of privacy/space, or both. I thought about how this related to the character strengths and I thought that participants demonstrated a lack of kindness to oneself by always putting others first. In her interview, Samantha summed up her thoughts about the first session in relation to her role as a mother:
[The first session was] a little emotional because I think it was just a chance to realize how far we sometimes let things go. And to see you’re not alone in that mayhem world because sometimes you do [feel that way]. Yeah, but it felt really nice and it’s a good reminder, as moms, we always put ourselves last and it’s tiring sometimes. (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)

In addition to labelling the barriers, I wanted participants to think of ways to overcome the barriers. The most common ideas were setting up a routine and meditating either first thing in the morning or right before bed. Although participants wrote these ideas, it was hard for some of them to commit to practicing at home. One participant wrote, “I have good intentions, getting into the habit has been the most difficult part” (personal communication, December 22, 2017). Another participant, Samantha, shared her experience of struggling to find the time or energy to practice:

> It’s always the first to go and it’s really hard to come back. I can’t even find the time, just ten minutes in a day. And it can be just an excuse. Everyone has ten minutes, but it still doesn’t happen. And at 10:00 at night when you finally sit down, “I just want to sit down.” I lose myself into a dumb t.v. show; it’s mindless. (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)

Although time constraints and lack of privacy remained barriers to mindfulness practice at home, meditation practice of paraprofessionals increased between the initial and follow-up surveys. Prior to training, very few participants completed any form of meditation. During the follow-up survey, at least two people reported doing sitting meditation, walking meditation, object meditation, loving-kindness meditation, body scans, and yoga 1-2 times a week. Some paraprofessionals even recounted doing sitting meditation, walking meditation, and body scans
3-4 times a week. A potential explanation for this increased practice at home is the knowledge gained during the professional development workshops, a better understanding of the effects of meditation, the increased need and devotion to self-care, and the desire to boost self-control. Looking at the character strengths, it is clear that curiosity, willingness to learn, kindness, and self-control were motivating factors of attending the training and practicing. The importance of developing these character strengths meant that even though there were barriers to attending sessions or practicing at home, participants still believed in the importance of mindfulness training and tried to make it more of a routine and priority. The busyness of life continued, but their new perspectives and desire to take care of themselves (for once) was starting to change the way they handled the busyness. These changes highlight the apparent need and commitment to self-improvement and also the desire to be better able to handle stressful situations at work.

Cycle 3

Cycle three focused on the question, “How do the professional development workshops affect our practice?” Cycle three continued until the end of the training with paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessional Transformations: Mid-Point Transformations

As a mid-way check-in with participants, I asked if they had noticed any changes in how they related to other people as a result of the mindfulness training. Comments indicated important changes in two main areas: self-regulation, and social intelligence. In their response, most participants reported being able to stop and breathe and an overall sense of calmness. Most responses also suggested better relationships due to increased tolerance and understanding of others and less anxiety around people. One participant wrote, “Yes, I take time, I calmly stop, breathe, get down to my children’s level and ask their feelings rather than just controlling them. I honestly feel calmer in my day to day life” (personal communication, October 26, 2017).
Another participant shared her experience by writing, “Becoming more aware of how others are feeling (as my own awareness grows). Also catching myself when I am being judgemental & stopping before engaging my mouth – keeps relationships much more positive. Closeness within our Thursday group” (personal communication, October 26, 2017).

**Greater body awareness.** During each yoga session, I asked participants to describe one feeling or sensation they noticed during the practice. During the relaxation yoga session, participants expressed comments relating to physical sensations of pain, warming/burning, tingling, and changes to breath. They also emphasized tightness followed by release of tension, and a feeling of calm or relaxation. One participant left a comment about the sensations she experienced:

> After each movement/stretch I felt that limb/area felt lighter (more relaxed). Seated spine stretch a bit of tingling in my hand/arm. In the beginning my lower back was stiff and sore in corpse but by the end it felt relaxed and lower to the floor. (personal communication, October 19, 2017)

The second yoga session was more focused on movement poses. More comments related to soreness, tightness, and tension release. Noticing and labelling their body sensations was highlighted by an increase in wisdom, through curiosity and judgement, leading to acceptance. Self-control was strengthened during the yoga sessions, underlining an increase in moderation. Based on verbal communication between participants and researcher, it was evident that participants walked away from the yoga sessions feeling much calmer and ready to continue their day.

**Spreading kindness to self and others.** Many participants noticed that they were gentler with themselves through tools they learned in the mindfulness training. Some even shared how
the training encouraged them to give themselves time. Elizabeth shared, “I like my soft start. And after taking the mindfulness workshop, I ensure that I get my soft start. Whereas before it was hit or miss. And I find it makes a huge difference.” Later in her interview, Elizabeth shared:

And that judgement piece. That was a very important piece and that really put a big, big change in me, I feel. When the woman [Dr. Shauna Shapiro in a mindfulness video] was speaking, it was a blond haired woman, the one that made us cry. When she spoke about being so hard on ourselves and hard on others. But you can’t, they go hand-in-hand. As soon as you try to judge others less, I found, I judged myself less and I was much kinder to myself. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)

Elizabeth explained how her relationship with her husband has improved because she is more peaceful, patient, forgiving, and less judgemental. Her husband also indicated that she sings more and plays more music as a result of the training. Later in the interview, Elizabeth suggested how the mindfulness training affected her perspective, especially when dealing with personal challenges:

I’m proud of myself. I’m not as stuck in my ways as I thought I was. And I am more open and flexible. I think this helped too [tapping the mindful binder]. Because I know I’m not that flexible, but I am becoming more flexible. Just looking at things differently too, period. Because it just makes everything more positive; your viewpoint becomes much more positive. Not that the negative doesn’t creep in; but you’re more aware of it, so often you’ll catch it and try to shut it down. So, it’s helped me de-stress. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)
**Increased self-control for students.** All paraprofessionals agreed that self-regulation skills and strategies are as important for adults to have and utilize as they are for students, sharing that the ability to regulate emotions and be a good role model for their students is essential. Many of the paraprofessionals reported higher rates of using the mindfulness techniques with their students between the initial survey and follow-up survey. All paraprofessionals reported teaching the child self-calming and problem solving strategies, using a calming space, helping the child label his/her feelings and emotions, and utilizing mindful breathing strategies as self-regulation strategies. Many paraprofessionals also reported providing opportunities for students to practice meditation. Paraprofessionals agreed that mindful breathing techniques, with and without tools, were the most used form of self-regulation strategy they use with their students. Some of the mindfulness techniques that were believed to have the most profound effect on children within the school were breathing tools (chime, breathing ball, stuffy on stomach), meditation or yoga techniques, and the mindful jar. Some other strategies mentioned included going out in nature, sensory tools, and a mindful student/mindful adult. A reason why breathing techniques are the most preferred choice is because they are readily available and do not require additional resources. Elizabeth explained how she prevented the need for a restraint with a child that was very escalated by saying:

"Look, come on let’s breathe. I hope you can hear me right now, let’s breathe." We grabbed a stuffy and that was the fastest, most immediate breathing technique that I could use with that stuffy and try to get a little humour in there and put it [showing on stomach, lying back] and watch it. I did it with them and it made them laugh and it took something that was going to go to a very bad space into an actual little bit of a connecting space. And now, I have the stuffy that’s there, so that no matter who
they’re with, they know that they’re welcome to open the door, grab their stuffy when they need it. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)

Many of the paraprofessionals showed increased ability to readily use self-regulation skills for themselves and with students, which lead to more positive connections and better relationships between one another.

Paraprofessional Transformations: Transformed

Mindful characteristics. During one of the brainstorming sessions, participants were asked to describe what makes a mindful person. Some adjectives and phrases used to describe a mindful person included, empathetic, supportive, keeps their word, kind tone, thinks of others, happy with self, reads others emotional state and takes action, reflective, non-judgemental, aware of surroundings, body awareness, calm, rational, peaceful, ability to handle tough situations, and living in the moment. These adjectives could be categorized as a person with strengths in kindness, self-control, curiosity, social intelligence, love, spirituality, prudence, and judgement. In order of most importance, based on the number of character strengths within each category, the virtues paraprofessionals identified as defining a mindful person are humanity, wisdom, moderation, and transcendence.

The ability to identify what makes a mindful person and reflect on these adjectives and how they connect with the self is an important aspect in the transformation process. When paraprofessionals suggested descriptions of a mindful person, many were thinking about themselves and others, rather than the ‘ideal mindful figure.’ They suggested words that they personally connected with and those that helped shape their transformation. All paraprofessionals are different, based on their values and backgrounds, but common characteristics of kindness, self-control, curiosity, and ability to live with less judgement
remained essential to their definition. For visual learners, it is easier to have a picture of how a mindful person looks and behaves. I can picture the type of person that my colleagues described and believe that many of them have many of these qualities already or are in the process of developing them further.

**Importance of breath.** When asked what mindfulness techniques paraprofessionals were using for self-care, almost all participants mentioned a form of breathing exercise, either one involving tools, such as a mindful jar or finger labyrinth, or as belly breathing or deep breathing exercises. A couple participants also mentioned meditation, body scan, and yoga as their preferred method. Regardless of the mindfulness technique utilized, each participant found a self-regulation strategy that helped calm their body and mind. One participant shared, “*Mainly breathing to center myself and get my mind away from over thinking, it helped to relax my mind and body*” (personal communication, November 22, 2017). Elizabeth shared the importance of breath as her most useful self-regulation strategy:

> Breathe, because that’s that immediate to get myself down before I escalate and it’s also important because that’s a strategy that I use to help other people, if a child is screaming or yelling or an adult or whoever is to make sure that I take myself down and my volume goes down. So that’s definitely the one I use the most. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)

**Improved health and well-being.** Each participant noticed different effects of the mindfulness training. After the completion of the training, fewer participants reported feeling emotionally fatigued weekly and one participant reported never feeling emotionally fatigued. Some of the specific effects that were reported by one participant each included increased memory, clearer thinking, increased energy, improved sleep, less anxiety, and a greater capacity
for staying calm at work. Nearly half of the participant group described having better health, a
greater sense of happiness, better mastery of emotions, increased empathy, and enhanced
relationships. All participants described being calmer and more present in their personal and
professional life. The main virtues highlighted were wisdom, humanity, moderation, and
transcendence, emphasizing character strengths of spirituality, self-control, zest, kindness, social
intelligence, and judgement. Why are these specific character strengths important in an
education setting? They are important because education settings are stressful and dynamic. An
adult’s ability to handle the stress through greater emotional regulation, being able to forgive
students after a tough situation, having compassion for others, and treating others with kindness
and respect ultimately impacts the students under their care. These qualities also greatly affect
the working environment as a whole. Colleagues that feel supported by others and have a team
to help them deal with tough situations are more capable of handling situations successfully.
Being able to seek assistance or ask for a break after a tough moment can also impact the school
environment. When support staff feel supported and valued, their students and school as a whole
benefits.

**Thinking of the future.** Although committing to practicing daily was a struggle for many
participants, all are keen to continue trying to find moments to practice. The mindfulness
professional development workshops introduced many different types of meditation practices
and techniques, providing many options to choose from. Each participant differed in her needs,
values, and interests, and gravitated to certain mindfulness practices over others. A few
participants are interested in continuing to practice or increase their use of mindful breathing,
mindful eating, and body scans, while the majority of participants are hoping to dedicate more
time to yoga and specific meditations, such as sitting meditation, walking meditation, or loving kindness meditations.

**Cycle 4**

Cycle four focused on, *“How do we affect change using our understanding of mindfulness?”* When thinking about how to increase the mindfulness of the school as a whole, paraprofessionals were divided regarding where to focus attention. Of the areas of need identified, 25% related to self-care practice opportunities, 25% connected to school wide practice of mindfulness techniques, and 50% stressed the need for teaching opportunities and information sharing for all teachers and paraprofessionals in the school. Paraprofessionals believed that if all professionals and paraprofessionals spent time cultivating mindfulness for self, the ripple effect would be felt throughout the school. This is connected to the idea of loving kindness meditation and spreading kindness to others. This concept also connects to Ecological Systems Theory, regarding the interconnectedness of the school environment and people within the environment (Sincero, 2012). Suggestions for school-wide cultivation included playing meditation tracks during whole-school assemblies, providing opportunities for staff and students to practice meditation at lunch, and scheduling more social thinking groups to work on mindfulness self-regulation skills, targeting high-needs students more often than once a week. Samantha highlights the importance of explicitly teaching students the techniques:

*I think that also comes with the pre-training. Like you can’t just expect someone to just know how to do that [mindful breathing techniques], like really pre-training them how to stay calm, become calm when they get agitated, and just teach them strategies on how to deal with those situations.* (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)
In relation to sharing information with staff, some suggestions included: schedule professional development days on mindfulness and social thinking, train teachers to ensure staff are on the same page, share simple tips (staff room bulletin board or table), and share resources at staff meetings, such as how to sign up at CALM.com as an educator for free. Paraprofessionals stressed the importance of students, teachers, and paraprofessionals all receiving the mindfulness training. In her interview, Samantha highlighted the pitfalls when one or more of these groups does not receive training:

*It would be nice to have a little more support how to help them [small group of students] practice situations and how to deal with some of their emotions and their outbursts. I think I would need more training in that for sure. I mean it’s no point in me sending them away and letting them do it when I’m the one helping them do it and not know the key words, the process. You have to be involved; there’s no choice. It’s not going to work if you weren’t not involved in it. Well, and the other issue is the teachers don’t get the training. And if they’re not on board, it’s not going to work. And then when you’ve done the training and you’re trying to get the student to follow-through and then they come along and they kybosh it and they don’t agree or they have something else on their own mind and then they set the student off all over again. But you’re the one always there to pick up the pieces and that’s not fun. When you get to a certain point sometimes with a student and you’re just doing it and it gets kyboshed. And you have no choice. You’re overruled and you have to go with it. But, it can be a challenge.* (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)
Based on the information provided on the surveys, group brainstorming sessions, and interviews, it is evident that increasing awareness and mindfulness training would benefit the school as a whole, leading to improved understanding, awareness, acceptance, and strengthened self-regulation skills.

Review of Mindfulness Training Sessions

Defining mindfulness. As part of the surveys and interviews, paraprofessionals were asked to define mindfulness. Many highlighted the importance of being present and aware of surroundings, regulating emotions, and taking time to care for yourself. When asked how to define the mindfulness training to colleagues that were not part of the research, Samantha said, “I would just let them know it’s all about trying to figure out how to take care of you more, through yoga and meditation” (S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017). In an interview, another participant, Elizabeth, stated,

Understanding your mind and how it works to enable you to make a more well-rounded decision and/or reactions, etcetera. And to have recognition and techniques to help you deal. First you have to recognize when you have to use them, otherwise they won’t do you much good. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)

Many of the definitions relate to virtues of humanity, moderation, and transcendence, and specifically to character strengths of kindness, self-control, and spirituality.

Feedback of training sessions. After the first session, one participant left a comment showing judgement and gratitude, “Already realizing how little I knew about the benefits of meditation. So happy to be part of your sessions” (personal communication, October 6, 2017).

Throughout the sessions, participants showed considerable gratitude. Any time I asked
participants if they needed clarification on anything or wanted to know more about a specific topic, they answered “no” and provided positive comments, such as, “Honestly – this was amazing!” or “Thank you for the great day” (personal communication, October 6, 2017). Final feedback from the paraprofessionals regarding mindfulness training workshops was extremely positive. Participants rated the clarity of information sessions, presentation skills of the researcher, organization, practice techniques, and take-home materials as strengths. Additional notes included comments such as, “The sessions were well done!”, “Great workshop,” or “I would not change anything about the presentation” (personal communication, December 20, 2017). In the interview, Samantha said, “You did a fantastic job. The binders were perfect because it’s an easy thing to keep everything in; it’s very organized. I really enjoyed the small group setting; the space provided was nice.” Later in her interview, she explained:

My favourite PD [professional development] by far. The highlights of the sessions were when we really focused on ourselves. I found that the most useful for sure. It’s just always focused on the kids. Always, and I think we again forget about the people that are taking care of those kids and how demanding those children can be and how hard that is on the people dealing with them. So it was really nice to see that change. I think we need to do that more often. More training in how to take care of ourselves.

(S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)

**Bonding experience.** Mindfulness training highlights included learning techniques for self-care and to use with students and the inherent bonding experience of the small group sessions. Both women commented on the bonding experience in their interviews. Samantha mentioned:
It was emotional right away and as soon as you just let that guard down of that ‘tough mom, I can do it all,’ persona that we all put forth and it took one person to get all teary-eyed, and it was a cascade of tears after that. It was a release of it and it was nice that you’re not alone. To be amongst others that are equally as kind, equally as nice, and equally ready to be here and learn as well. Yeah, so it was nice.

(S. Meadow, personal communication, December 20, 2017)

Elizabeth also felt the strong bonding experience, as she noted, “With the group I felt like it was a bonding experience. I found we bond, bounded quite, quite tightly after all that. And it’s carried on. There’s no doubt about it” (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017). She went on to explain that the group was supportive:

It felt like it had kind of a family atmosphere feeling to it. You could tell we all looked forward to it. And trying all the different poses and you know it just really had a blanket of nurture around it and I love that. And I find that’s so important in a workplace, but it doesn’t always exist, so yeah if you could always keep that nice little family aura that you give it. (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017)

When looking through the comments about the training sessions, it was evident that the participants felt a great amount of gratitude, but also kindness and social intelligence. The tight-knit, ongoing nature of the sessions ensured continued support to fellow colleagues. Elizabeth commented on how the training sessions influenced her school year by saying, “We really appreciate it. Made us feel special. And we made each other feel special too. I think it put a really nice change to the year. I really sincerely mean that” (E. Garden, personal communication, December 18, 2017).
Need for more time. However, the mindfulness workshops were not free from criticism. One suggestion for improvement was, “more time allowed for each session would have been beneficial” (personal communication, December 20, 2017). This need for time was a common concern, due primarily to the busyness of the school, especially for participants trying to attend the lunchtime session. Some participants shared that it was stressful because they were trying to get to the session on time and then have to rush out for their lunch time. A suggestion was to have more chances to do mindfulness training and practice during professional development days. In the interview with Samantha, she shared a couple options to overcome scheduling issues. One suggestion was if administration and teachers would approve, would be to allow the small group of paraprofessionals to continue meeting one a week for a half hour or hour at the end of the day. Her other suggestion was to continue using professional development time, at least a half day and once a year as a minimum.

Value of mindfulness training. Despite the concerns, all participants understood the value of the training. One hundred percent of participants replied that they would incorporate mindfulness techniques into their personal life and use mindfulness strategies with students. When asked if participants would continue practice sessions after the research period concluded, all participants said that they would. Some elaborated by sharing that the training was motivating, a great reminder for the importance of self-care, relaxing, and helped to be a calmer educational assistant, which benefits the students. Others enjoyed the practice and comradery and hope to have more training in yoga and meditation. On one of the surveys, a participant wrote:

Janet – thank-you so much. I found your sessions really enjoyable. I walked away realizing I do not take care of myself and I need to start. You gave some skills to start
and [I] am hoping there will be future classes.

(personal communication, December 20, 2017)

Clearly, the mindfulness training was beneficial for participants and myself.

Analysis

Similarities of Transformations and Connection to Literature

Through my mindfulness journey, I experienced improvements in body awareness and health, sleep, ability to regulate my emotions, mental clarity, and positive outlook on life. I felt calmer, more capable of being in the present moment, and better able to show myself kindness and forgiveness. Mainly, I saw an increase in character strengths relating to curiosity, self-control, kindness, forgiveness, hope, spirituality, and gratitude, emphasising a greater development in virtues of wisdom, humanity, moderation, and transcendence.

In general, paraprofessionals demonstrated improvements in self-control, body awareness, and overall health and well-being. They felt more relaxed, present, and understood the importance of self-care. Impacts were predominantly in character strengths of self-control, curiosity, kindness, social intelligence, spirituality, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty. The main virtues impacted by the mindfulness training were wisdom, humanity, moderation, and transcendence.

Each participant in the research reflected on the mindfulness training through a different perspective. However, despite differences in individual values and perspectives, the same virtues of wisdom, humanity, moderation, and transcendence were strengthened by the mindfulness training and individual practice, which is reflected in research in positive psychology (Corliss, 2013). Of the twenty-four character strengths in positive psychology, half showed the greatest impact by the training. The mindfulness training helped strengthen
participant’s character strengths of curiosity, judgement, zest, love of learning, kindness, social intelligence, forgiveness, self-control, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, and spirituality. The participants regularly attended sessions (average = 90%), were interested and invested in learning more mindfulness strategies for self-care and with their students, and brought a kindness and gratitude to each session. The high average of attendance signifies a strong commitment of paraprofessionals to the need for self-care and ongoing training. This is extremely important because the sessions were not always the easiest for people to get to, but they all tried their hardest. The knowledge that was shared during the sessions, the bonding experiences, and the work on self-improvement and emotional regulation all outweighed the barriers. Educators and support staff want more training and are eager to participate in the training when it is provided.

The results of this research are consistent with the literature on mindfulness training programs. Findings from Annesley (2015), Weare (2014), and Meiklejohn et al. (2012) support my participants’ claims of greater thinking skills, such as memory, clearer thinking, and mental capacity, following the mindfulness training sessions. The development of greater body awareness and reduction of judgement is consistent with results of other mindfulness training programs (Schussler et al., 2016; Roeser et al., 2013). Self-reported increases in physical well-being, health, and mastery of emotion following the training are consistent with research in the field (Annesley, 2015; Weare, 2014; Corliss, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016; Schussler et al., 2016). Suggestions of increased ability to stay in the present moment has been documented in research by Eva and Thayer (2017). Corliss (2013) and Annesley (2015) also found mindfulness training helped improve sleep. Improved relationships as a result of increased well-being has been documented in other studies of mindfulness training of educators (Flook et al., 2013; Weare, 2014; Corliss, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). Findings from studies by Weare (2014), Corliss
Taylor et al. (2016) and Sharp and Jennings (2016) support participants’ changed perspectives, positive outlook on life, happiness, gratitude, and kindness.

Clearly my participants and myself benefited from the mindfulness training practice sessions and found benefits in both personal and professional lives. Based on my study and strong links to other studies on mindfulness training programs of educators, it is clear that mindfulness training should be a priority of the education system. All students, educators, and support staff benefit when they have the tools to stay calm and present. When students, teachers, and support staff are emotionally regulated, feel supported, and have necessary mindful tools, everyone succeeds. The workplace is calmer and safer for all students and staff, relationships between staff and students, and colleagues are strengthened, and a happier, warmer, environment is created. When staff feel better emotionally, their students are positively affected, and vice versa. I propose that all individuals within the education setting in Yukon should be provided with quality mindfulness training. In chapter five, I make further recommendations on the specific aspects of mindfulness training that I believe are essential. A school system that provides the time and resources for staff and students to receive mindfulness education is essential for handling the challenges of the modern world and developing strong, curious, kind, compassionate, and emotionally-regulated leaders for the future.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the cycles of action research, illustrated my personal mindful journey of researcher, as well as beginning, middle, and final transformations of paraprofessionals, and connected key findings to literature on mindfulness training of educators. A main focus of the analysis was on the strengthening of character strengths and virtues of positive psychology. The entire piece was developed with the understanding of the
research question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?”
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the importance of self-care of educators, by restating the purpose of study, relating to my research question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?”

After providing a brief summary of personal discoveries, I offer final conclusions on the value of the study, offer specific recommendations for implementation, and justify why mindfulness training and further research should be implemented in other schools throughout Yukon.

Restating the Purpose

Working in school settings is challenging and many staff members, both educators and support staff, are leaving the profession as a result of negative impacts of stress and burnout (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Deficits in the social and emotional intelligence and well-being of teachers may have detrimental effects on classroom relationships, management, and climate (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The school climate is affected by the type of the interactions that occur between students, teachers, and colleagues, which can be both positive and negative (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Under stressful conditions, Schussler et al. (2016) state “teachers may resort to reactive and excessively punitive responses that contribute to a self-sustaining cycle of classroom disruption negatively affecting the student exhibiting off-task behavior and contributing to a contentious class climate” (p. 131). Educators are required to foster the growth and development of their students holistically, focusing on academic, social, and emotional skills, but to be effective teachers, they must also develop their own resilience and self-regulation skills (Eva & Thayer, 2017).
All of the psychological and physiological benefits of mindfulness support the need for more training for educators, who ultimately pass on these benefits to their students and colleagues. Taylor et al. (2016) summarize the benefits of mindfulness training include:

- Increased teacher mindfulness and self-compassion, improved teacher efficacy for regulating emotion and for forgiving students following conflict, less reactivity and increased use of adaptive coping strategies at work, and increased tendencies toward forgiveness and compassion in relationships with students at school. (p. 127)

Similar to Taylor et al. (2016), participants in my study found increases in overall mindfulness, improved emotional regulation, ability to forgive and work with students following conflict, increased use of coping strategies at work, and stronger relationships.

In addition, “Teachers learn to see their “most challenging” students as less challenging, and in a wider emotional light” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 127). Eva and Thayer (2017) support mindfulness training for educators, stating “a teacher’s own [mindfulness] practice and self-care is crucial as a starting point in shifting the classroom climate” (p. 24).

Many mindfulness training programs have been developed for students and teachers, but paraprofessionals continue to be missing from the training opportunities. This research study explored the gaps on mindfulness training for paraprofessionals and provided information to add to the body of literature on Mindfulness Training for those in educational settings. By completing an action research study on increasing my own mindfulness, I explored specific programs and strategies that help to reduce my stress, anxiety, and burnout of working with challenging students. My goal was that through my continued research, I would be able to determine effective mindfulness strategies to help improve my own practice and pass these along to other paraprofessionals within my school to aid in their improved mindfulness and ultimately
their well-being. I shared the knowledge that I gained through facilitation of professional development workshops for other paraprofessionals in my school. I hypothesized that these training workshops would help paraprofessionals in their own self-care, reduce the negative effects associated with working with students with special needs, and positively affect their relationships with these students. As a result of the mindfulness training workshops, participants demonstrated commitment to self-care, positive relationships with colleagues and students, and greater emotional regulation and coping skills to handle difficult situations.

**Personal Discoveries**

When I looked back on my intentions for starting the MBSR program, I was pleased to see that I had met my goals. I found strategies to help ease my overactive brain, I learned how to regulate my emotions and be more relaxed in life, and I discovered ways to decrease my anxiety and get a better night’s sleep. Not that my journey is now complete and the learning has ended. I continue to learn new skills and strategies as I expand my practice. I also continue to use meditation to help provide mental clarity. When beginning the data analysis and interpretation process, I was extremely overwhelmed and had difficulties knowing where to begin. Instead of stressing, I chose to meditate. After the meditation, I felt clear of mind and had a vision of where to begin. Taking the time for myself proved once again to positively impact my practice as a Master’s student and person. More often, I am choosing my own self-care over other demands. Taking care of myself first gives me more time for other responsibilities in the end, because I am calmer, clear of mind, and settled. When I am focused and grounded, I am more efficient and can accomplish more.

As I had hypothesized, the mindfulness training also helped paraprofessionals improve their practice of self-care, self-regulation skills, and ability to work with challenging students in a
more positive manner. Ten individuals in the same school felt calmer and better able to handle the inherent stress and busyness of a school setting. The training had overall positive effects for all participants involved.

**Conclusion: Value of the Study**

The thoughtful action research design of this work has the potential to impact myself, students, colleagues, and our school as a whole. The study began with my own exploration of mindfulness practices based off of empirically validated research. From this knowledge base, I shared my knowledge and experience with colleagues who were able to apply mindfulness practices to their personal and professional lives. The supportive nature of the professional development workshops provided ample opportunities to practice and refine our skills. Paraprofessionals were encouraged to try various skills with their students and work together to positively impact our school environment. The potential benefits of this study are vast, such as increases in emotional well-being, health, and improved relationships between paraprofessionals and students, providing an excellent model of a design for engaging in action research with colleagues.

**Recommendations**

The findings from this study demonstrated the positive impacts that mindfulness training had on paraprofessionals within a school environment. Investing time and energy into providing effective professional development opportunities focusing on self-care of integral staff members has positive effects on the school as a whole. When paraprofessionals feel better and are better-equipped with tools and strategies to manage tough situations, students benefit. The ability to stay calm and in control of emotions is a skill necessary in tough working conditions. This study was one of the first to specifically target paraprofessionals in schools. The success of the
mindfulness training sessions were marked by positive outcomes, including increased self-regulation skills, improved health and well-being, and enhanced kindness and social intelligence.

I am hopeful that policy makers within Yukon Education will read my study and come to the same conclusion that I have: paraprofessionals need and deserve training in self-care. The benefits of the mindfulness training sessions are broad and the potential to alter the learning environment of schools throughout the territory starts with valuing paraprofessionals and recognizing the impact they have on the students they work with. Not all paraprofessionals will seek training for self-care on their own.

• **Value of training:** Mindfulness training of paraprofessionals is something that is both wanted and needed to ensure a healthy school and working environment. Paraprofessionals in this study indicated that more training would be beneficial.

• **Ongoing Territory-wide training:** To reach a larger proportion of paraprofessionals, I recommend that the training be provided territory-wide. However, territory-wide training in self-care practices should not be reserved for summer academy with large groups of people. Ongoing training throughout the year on Professional Development days or during specific times of the workday each week would benefit all paraprofessionals. Perhaps a wellness module, focusing on mindfulness, could be designed as a paraprofessional training module in the future. However, in addition to this type of training module, paraprofessionals would also need some time to practice the skills.

• **Small group settings:** From my findings, it was clear that the small-group setting provided a welcoming, supportive, bonding experience for staff, where they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with others. Small group settings, which allow for greater bonding, can help increase support between staff and decrease competition. I feel
too many people in the group would negatively impact the overall results of the mindfulness training.

- **School-based administration support:** Paraprofessionals need to feel supported by their administration and within their own school setting. Given the known link between personal well-being of staff and impacts on students, supporting in-school improvement of staff well-being should be a priority of the school. Paraprofessionals need to feel their mental and emotional well-being are important to administration and be able to work together to ensure time is set aside for supporting emotional development.

- **Increased Time:** Personal and professional time pressures continued to be a factor influencing participants’ ability to actively practice meditations at home. Providing time at school for self-care and ongoing supportive small-group practice sessions can help mitigate these barriers.

Although my participant group was small, the impacts of the training were profound, demonstrating a need for further study and implementation of quality mindfulness training for paraprofessionals.

**Summary**

This chapter restated the importance of the action research study and highlighted the value of the mindfulness training on all participants. The study answered the question, “How can I increase my own mindfulness and ultimately help other paraprofessionals increase their mindfulness practice?” Based on thoughtful examination of the feedback of the mindfulness training sessions, final recommendations have been made to encourage implementation of mindfulness training for paraprofessionals in more schools in Yukon. In acting on recommendations of ongoing, Territory-wide, small group, in-school training groups with
support by administrators, Yukon Education would be sending the message that all members of
the school community are valued.
References


WHY MINDFULNESS MATTERS


https://explorable.com/ecological-systems-theory

wellbeing, reducing burnout, and improving recovery experiences among Hong Kong

Student Support Services. (2013, October 7). Student Support Services Advisory Committee
Minutes. Retrieved from

inclusion identified by a group of international school teaching assistants. Journal of

Taylor, C., Harrison, J., Haimovitz, K., Oberle, E., Thomson, K., Schonert-Reichl, K., & Roeser,
R. W. (2016). Examining ways that a mindfulness-based intervention reduces stress in
doi:10.1007/s12671-015-0425-4

Townsend, A. (2014). Weaving the threads of practice and research: Reflections on fundamental
features of action research. In Rauch, F., Schuster, A., Stern, T., Pribila, M., &
Townsend, A. (Eds.), Promoting change through action research (pp. 7-22). Boston,
MASS: Sense Publishers.


Appendix 1: Overview of Mindfulness Practices Discussed in Training Sessions

The following section provides a breakdown of common mindfulness practices used in training programs and a brief description of each.

Meditation. In a synthesis of research on mindfulness meditation, Hölzel et al. (2011b) found that there appeared to be five components underlying how mindfulness works, which are (1) attention regulation, (2) body awareness, (3) emotion regulation (reappraisal), (4) emotion regulation (exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation), and (5) change in perspective on the self (p. 539). There are many different forms of meditation, including sitting meditation, walking meditation, object meditation, and loving-kindness meditation.

Sitting meditation. “The sitting meditation is at the heart of daily practice, featuring an alert yet relaxed body posture while anchoring one’s attention to the breath—breathing in and breathing out” (Eva & Thayer, 2017, p. 23). Annesley (2015) suggests, “most people opt to start their meditation practice in a sitting position because it is familiar, comfortable, accessible almost anywhere, and helps you remain alert yet relaxed” (p. 94). Meditators may choose to sit in a chair or on a cushion on the floor in different positions, such as the ‘Half-Lotus.’ ‘Lotus’ or ‘Burmese’ postures (Annesley, 2015, p. 95). Regardless of the sitting position, meditators are encouraged to “think of yourself as a mountain: stable, balanced, grounded, dignified” (Annesley, 2015, p. 94). Kabat-Zinn (1990) explains the importance of the seated position:

It helps a lot to adopt an erect and dignified posture, with your head, neck, and back aligned vertically. This allows the breath to flow most easily. It is also the physical counterpart of the inner attitudes of self-reliance, self-acceptance, and alert attention that we are cultivating. (p. 61)

Kabat-Zinn (1990) describes the significance of bringing attention to breathing:
When we have assumed the posture we have selected, we bring our attention to our breathing. We feel it come in, we feel it go out. We dwell in the present, moment by moment, breath by breath. It sounds simple, and it is. Full awareness on the inbreath, full awareness on the outbreath. Letting the breath just happen, observing it, feeling all the sensations, gross and subtle, associated with it. (p. 62)

By repeatedly bringing your attention back to the breath each time it wanders off, concentration builds and deepens, much as muscles develop by repetitively lifting weights. Working regularly with (not struggling against) the resistance of your own mind builds inner strength. At the same time you are also developing patience and practicing being non-judgmental. (p. 65)

**Walking meditation.** Walking is something that most people do mindlessly, or on auto-pilot. Walking mindfully differs from auto-pilot walking, in that “you walk in the present moment, attending to your bodily sensations” (Annesley, 2015, p. 133).

**Object meditation.** The purpose of object meditation is to focus attention on an object non-judgementally. By using all of your senses, you explore every aspect of the object, including the colour, shape, smell, and texture (Annesley, 2015, p. 114). “Many natural objects make a good focus for meditation. Try stones, crystals, pebbles, shells, acorns, pinecones, twigs, feathers, flowers, fruit, or vegetables” (Annesley 2015, p. 116).

**Loving-kindness meditation.** Based on the Buddhist practice of cultivating selfless love, loving kindness meditation trains “ourselves to be more patient, tolerant, generous, forgiving, and kind” (Annesley, 2015, p. 138). One must start with developing self-compassion by learning to accept their own flaws and then move on to other groups of people. Practicing building
empathy for others can help turn negative thoughts and feeling into positive ones (Annesley, 2015, p.138-139).

**Body Scans.** In a body scan, attention is focused on one region of the body at a time. “As your focus moves from one area to the next, you will become aware of bare physical sensations, such as pulsing, tension, heaviness, burning, stiffness, and so on, and you may also recognize emotions that reside within your body” (Annesley, 2015, p. 121).

Eva & Thayer (2017) provide an overview of what happens in a body scan:

Individuals focus their attention on relaxing body parts from head to toe (or vice versa). This systematic and intentional practice can be beneficial any time of the day for stress reduction, and some practitioners use it to prepare for sleep or to address insomnia symptoms. Online audio recordings typically feature 20–45-minute body scans. However, even a short scan in the middle of a school day can be helpful (e.g., during a lunch break or prep period). (p.23)

Eva and Thayer (2017) provide the following script (from UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center), which features an abbreviated three-minute body scan:

Begin by bringing your attention into your body.

You can close your eyes if that’s comfortable for you.

You can notice your body seated wherever you’re seated, feeling the weight of your body on the chair, on the floor.

Take a few deep breaths.

And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen enlivening the body. And as you exhale, have a sense of relaxing more deeply.
You can notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor. The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.

You can notice your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.

Notice your back against the chair.

Bring your attention into your stomach area. If your stomach is tense or tight, let it soften. Take a breath.

Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight? See if you can allow them to soften.

Notice your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Let your shoulders be soft.

Notice your neck and throat. Let them be soft. Relax.

Soften your jaw. Let your face and facial muscles be soft.

Then notice your whole body present. Take one more breath.

Be aware of your whole body as best you can. Take a breath. And then when you’re ready, you can open your eyes. (p. 23)

**Yoga.** Yoga originated in India over 5,000 years ago (Annesley, 2015, p. 150). In western culture today, Hatha yoga is the most common form of yoga practiced. The word *hatha* is derived from *ha*, meaning *sun*, *tha*, meaning *moon*, and *yoga* meaning *yoking together*, which describes the mind-body connection. Hatha yoga utilizes traditional poses, called *asanas* to “work on all the body’s systems, offering strength and flexibility, as well as promoting healthy digestion, balancing the hormones, and calming the nerves” (Annesley, 2015, p. 150). Annesley (2015) explains the potential effects of yoga by stating:

Focused awareness in yoga practice allows us to perceive deep patterns of emotion and thought. From this self-understanding comes profound transformation - a fully
awakened personal wholeness and wisdom. There’s an obvious affinity between this process and the mechanisms of mindfulness meditation. (p. 150)

**Mindfulness applications.** With the advent of technology and the desire to share knowledge, many resources and applications are available to guide educators, parents, and students. Eva and Thayer (2017) share four applications to help teach mindfulness:

- **Buddhify:** 80 guided meditations custom-made for wherever you are and whatever you’re doing.
- **Insight Timer:** Choose between Tibetan singing bowls or guided meditations to enrich your mindfulness practice.
- **DeStressify Stress Relief:** Begin with pre-selected exercises or customize your own plan.
- **Headspace:** 10-minute mindfulness activities geared toward beginners that also incorporates a “buddy system” where you can connect with friends. (p. 24)

A couple other applications to choose from, that are my personal favourites, are:

- **Calm:** Daily guided tracks, sleep stories, and an abundance of meditations relating to targeted themes, such as self-care, inner peace, resilience, stress, etcetera. Free for educators too – see the “classrooms” tab at the bottom of the website.

- **Relax Melodies:** Choose from a variety of calming sounds or different meditations.
Appendix 2: Coding Categories by Character Strengths and Virtues of Positive Psychology

Below are the 24 strengths found to be universal (cross-cultural) and within human beings. Each of these is an internal quality you have the potential to develop. For each strength, I’ve provided a very simple phrase that captures the essence of the strength.

Creativity *Do things in a different way.
Curiosity *Ask questions, lots of them.
Judgment/critical thinking *Examine the details.
Love of learning *Learn something from every situation.
Perspective *Offer good advice.
Bravery *Face what you are afraid of.
Perseverance *Don’t give up.
Honesty *Tell people the truth, (almost) all the time.
Zest *When in doubt, take action!
Love *Be a warm and strong listener.
Kindness *Be helpful, err toward caring.
Social intelligence *Be friendly.
Teamwork *Work side-by-side with others.
Fairness *Treat people the way you want to be treated.
Leadership *Organize activities for others.
Forgiveness *Let it go.
Humility *Place attention on others.
Prudence *Think before you act.
Self-regulation *Manage your feelings.
Appreciation of beauty/excellence *Find beauty in nature, art, ideas, and people.
Gratitude *Tell people “thank you,” often.
Hope *Be positive, especially when others are not.
Humor *Laugh a lot with others.
Spirituality *Look for what is sacred in this moment.