



# Empowering Educators to Support Students' Social and Emotional Learning Through Use of Mindfulness Methods, Meditation, and Growth Mindset Language

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## Abstract

*This paper is focused on practical strategies utilized in a New York City teacher preparation program to empower future educators to support children's social and emotional learning through use of mindfulness methods, meditation, and growth mindset language. Techniques presented are intended to foster calmness in the face of adversity, as well as increased levels of emotional wellness to help support educators and young learners in coping with multi-faceted challenges of attaining deeper levels of learning inherent in striving toward mastery of 21st century competencies. A primary goal is to share wellness techniques integrated in undergraduate and graduate level teacher education course curricula and diverse childhood education settings to support social and emotional learning. Additionally, use of mindfulness and mediation techniques implemented in a summer pilot program designed to support young struggling readers are highlighted. Many strategies are geared toward teaching young learners new ways to cope with the frustration of ongoing learning challenges and coping methods for facing obstacles to learning, such as multiple academic struggles and life stressors are discussed. However, techniques can be adapted for use with a wide range of audiences and age groups. Lessons learned and reflection on successful implementation of wellness strategies for supporting social and emotional learning will be shared.*

**Keywords:** *Social and emotional learning, mindfulness, meditation, wellness, growth mindset, self-empowerment*

## 1. Introduction

The current global educational landscape has created unique challenges for modern learners of all ages, as well as educators preparing to teach them. Some of these challenges simply did not factor into teaching-learning processes as prominently just a generation ago. For instance, the impact of technology integration, a focus on mastery of 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies, the quest for global citizenship, and coping with the resultant frustrations of striving to excel in all realms simultaneously, has led to new levels of stress for educators and students alike. These added variables go far beyond teaching and learning the requisite content area knowledge and skills of the childhood education curriculum and have made it even more important to focus on educating the whole child to adequately prepare children for future. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has long advocated the need for a *Whole Child* approach to education. ASCD developed the *Whole Child Compact*, which identified investing in children's health, safety, engagement, support, and challenge as essential elements of educating 21<sup>st</sup> century learners [1]. Toward that end, it's imperative for educators to carefully consider ways to help nurture the many, and often complex, facets of a child's overall development, which include the development of social and emotional learning components, along with academic knowledge and skills. In 2005, ASCD published a *Whole Child* themed issue of its *Educational Leadership* journal, in which Noddings discussed the innovative goal of happiness as one that might support pedagogical choices and contribute toward inspiring the joy of learning as part of educating the whole child. Broadening the scope of childhood education curricula to include more focus on social and emotional learning is pivotal toward better preparation for success later in life.

## 2. Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been defined by Reilly [3] as an instructional approach that takes into account emotional components that either facilitate or impede learning built on safe, positive

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relationships cultivated between educators and students. She described the cumulative goal of education as offering students interrelated academic, personal, and social competencies that have long term impact on their lives and stressed two key tenets of a social-emotional approach to learning as a caring, responsive school climate for both students and adults, along with children's emotions, behaviors, learning, and regulation being inextricably intertwined [3, p. 57]. Key to SEL, students' emotional wellness comprises a substantial component of their overall well-being and mental health. Curiosity and joy for learning can become muted when social and emotional struggles become part of the equation. While modern educational systems continually have been developing programs to help educators and families support students' social and emotional health, more work needs to be done to help provide students with the tools they need to thrive despite incremental stressors and potential obstacles to their academic success ever present in our modern global society.

Within the realm of SEL, the use of mindfulness techniques is on the rise in a variety of educational settings. Mindfulness can be defined, generally, as consciously focusing on the present moment. Mindfulness expert, Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as paying attention, intentionally, in the present moment, and non-judgementally [4]. Some researchers discussed mindfulness practices in terms of breathing and focusing exercises that enhance attention and awareness, have reported the benefits of incorporating mindfulness to support social and emotional learning, and stressed the ability to manage stress and pay attention as important determinants of well being and successful learning [5]. A review of the literature revealed school-based mindfulness research that included a specific focus on social and emotional learning. Broderick and Metz [6] successfully piloted a mindfulness curriculum for adolescent learners in 2009. Later, a SEL program involving mindfulness and caring for others, designed for elementary school students, was explored extensively by Schonert-Reichl et al. [7]. Significant gains in cognitive control, stress physiology, empathy, perspective-taking, emotional control, optimism, school self-concept, and mindfulness were reported for the children who received the SEL program with mindfulness [7].

### 3. Practical Applications

A mindfulness approach can be particularly beneficial in childhood education settings as a foundation for future self-care, caring for the welfare of others, and development of stress management tools. Mindfulness research findings have supported utilization of mindfulness approaches to help foster students' social and emotional development. Such evidence warranted reflection about how we prepare future teachers to enter their chosen profession and careful consideration of more prominent infusion of SEL elements in curricular redesign of teacher preparation programs that aim to nurture caring, competent, and confident educators.

In early 2018, the *Learning & the Brain* organization's *Educating Mindful Minds: The Science of Stress and Resilience* conference, held in New York City, provided an invigorating forum through which a plethora of brain-based research was shared by leading mindfulness experts on the neuroscience aspects and benefits of this essential component of learning. Initial steps for incorporation of mindfulness in teacher education course curricula that have been piloted at Wagner College, a private, 4-year, liberal arts college in New York City, were shared through poster presentations at the conference. This presenter focused on SEL and use of related mindfulness techniques, which have been successfully integrated into the course curricula of Wagner College's undergraduate and graduate level teacher education programs in Childhood Education (grades 1-6). More specifically, the piloted mindfulness strategies shared included: a) implementation of a growth mindset approach to providing effective, actionable feedback that helps foster communication between teachers and students to develop professional relationships and establish a rapport conducive to learning, b) cultivating kindness and nurturing a culture of mutual respect in which students feel valued and safe to take academic risks; and c) mindfulness methods that help manage stress and foster resilience.

In several teacher education courses, mindfulness techniques were modeled consistently spanning six semesters. Students learned about the benefits of self-care as crucial for success rather than a welcomed enhancement and focused on guided meditation, kindness strategies, a growth mindset approach, yoga for children, movement breaks, deep breathing, body scanning, nutritional tutorials, high quality sleep, and relaxation. The mindfulness techniques were taught and modeled in an effort to support SEL and provide stress management training to help foster higher levels of resilience and self-confidence. Some techniques were modeled through "thinking out loud" to demonstrate why mindfulness strategies such as



kindness training and use of growth mindset language could be beneficial in each scenario and how they might be utilized in diverse childhood education settings. Others were modeled through active demonstration requiring substantial student participation, including guided meditation, deep breathing, yoga for children, and body scanning. Students were encouraged to implement the mindfulness methods learned in their teacher preparation courses in corresponding professional classroom field experiences in preparation for the upcoming immersive student teaching semester. Table 1 presents easily accessible, cost free resources and techniques that were utilized with initial implementation of mindfulness methods in teacher education programs, as well as in diverse childhood education settings, to help support students' SEL.

Easily Accessible Mindfulness Resources	Getting Started with Mindfulness Techniques
1. Mindsetworks.com	1. Strategic self-care
2. GoZen.com	2. Guided meditations
3. MindBodyGreen.com	3. Deep breathing
4. MeditationDojo.com	4. Dissolve-A-Thought
5. StressBetter Blog (Renee Jain)	5. Quality sleep
6. KidsYogaStories.com	6. Body scanning
7. Mindfullnquiry.org	7. Purposeful nutrition
8. Littlefloweryoga.com	8. Mindfulness breaks
9. Mindful.org	9. Fun physical exercise
10. YourTherapySource.com	10. Movement infused in learning activities
11. Shambalakids.com	11. Feelings Yoga/Yoga for Children
12. Mamarooyoga.com	12. Journaling
13. TheMindfulClassroom.wordpress.com	13. Growth mindset language/behaviors
14. Calm.com/schools	14. Compassionate voice work
15. Mindfulschools.org	15. Goal setting
16. Sleepbeditations.com	16. PLAY!

Table 1. Mindfulness Resources for Educators.

Consistent use of growth mindset language can help educators clearly communicate their belief in students' abilities to improve, along with their commitment to help them strategize how to do so. Through use of growth mindset-based communication, children aren't left feeling defeated in accepting a grade with no additional feedback. Rather, their effort might be acknowledged more positively, coupled with specific comments on components needing more work. For instance, an educator might communicate the following comment to a student that demonstrated much effort but still hasn't achieved mastery. The comment might be framed as "I'm proud of the extra time you've put in to work on your problem-solving skills, but let's conference soon to figure out where you are still experiencing difficulty and construct a plan together. This sends a message to the student that the teacher recognized the effort expended and is offering further support, indicating a more collaborative teacher-student partnership, rather than simply indicating the work was not completed successfully with a low grade and no feedback. This may help a student identify the teacher's belief in their ability to improve, which will encourage the student to continue working toward mastery. A growth mindset approach to classroom communication and modes of feedback can help children develop self confidence in their own abilities, begin to appreciate the power of perseverance, and believe in their own potential for success. Dweck [8] explains, in her pioneering work on mindsets, that a growth mindset thrives on challenge and sees failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a promising springboard for growth and for stretching our existing abilities. Additionally, growth mindset-oriented feedback can inspire successful students to even higher levels of achievement. Stemming from the aforementioned teacher education curricular expansions, mindfulness also was infused throughout a summer pilot program at Wagner College, designed to help first-grade children learn calming techniques for relaxation, anxiety relief, and focusing attention for use in coping with the disappointment that can arise when experiencing reading difficulties, along with other academic and life stressors. This proved to be particularly helpful for many student participants who were experiencing rather extreme hardships beyond their academic struggles and clearly needed support in managing their frustrations in order to be able to focus and concentrate on literacy development. One of the program's primary goals was that children would continue to utilize some of the mindfulness techniques used in the reading intervention program in their daily lives both in and out of school going forward. The mindfulness



components proved to be essential program elements, teaching children simple techniques for calming their minds and bodies to prepare to focus on learning, as well as to cope with frustrations they may face both in and out of the classroom. Some of the mindfulness techniques were deep breathing, guided meditation, yoga for children, journaling, and stress release through movement. Many of the deep breathing exercises corresponded directly with the characters in the daily reading texts, such as “Moose Breathing” for the *Morris the Moose* text and the “Elephant Sigh” stress release exercise for *Horton Hears a Who*, a Dr. Seuss text in which the main character, Horton, was an elephant.

Children reflected in personal “*My Mindfulness*” journals each day after participating in the mindfulness exercises. Each entry highlighted the name of the day’s technique and included either a drawing of the exercise or a few words about how students felt about it. At the end of the program students took the journals home as a resource to support continued mindfulness practice and journaling. Student testimonials, journal reflections, and attitude surveys evidenced predominantly positive responses to the mindfulness techniques and growth mindset language implemented throughout the duration of the program. Many students began to self-correct with use of growth mindset language toward the end of the program through replacement of their former negative responses and frustrations characterized by consistent “I can’t” language with “I can’t do this yet, but these are the things I will do to improve so that I can”. A related program objective was to help struggling readers improve their attitudes toward reading and to believe in their abilities to grow as young readers despite multiple reading difficulties. Consistent use of growth mindset-oriented language and behaviors were modeled to encourage students to embrace the idea of learning as a growth process full of mistakes needed for improvement and development of perseverance. It helped the children begin to view literacy mistakes as learning opportunities rather than defeats and validated students’ expressions of frustration they experienced with literacy, while providing encouragement and support strategies to help them overcome hurdles. Simultaneously, many participants demonstrated higher levels of self-confidence regarding literacy skills and willingness to persevere, along with more positive dispositions toward reading. Observation of students utilizing some of the mindfulness techniques and growth mindset language on their own when needed, truly was a program highlight.

#### 4. Discussion

There are a multitude of strategies to help educators cope with stressors in their own lives to better position them to support their students’ SEL toward that same end. Learning more about the role of SEL in students’ overall academic success can help educators to better prepare children to face the inherent challenges of striving to become productive, caring citizens of our multidimensional global society. Wagner College’s teacher preparation programs have grown in breadth and depth through expansion course curricula to include more focus on SEL, including mindfulness and wellness methods, to help educators teach students how to cope with stressors both at school and outside the classroom. The curricular shifts were well received by the teacher candidates. Unanticipated outcomes of integrating mindfulness methods into multiple teacher education courses arose as the majority of teacher candidates continually expressed how much the mindfulness techniques they were learning to implement with diverse student populations were beneficial to them as adult students. Each semester, without exception, several teacher candidates expressed how much they used the mindfulness techniques learned in class to cope with their own academic and life stressors, and more importantly, how they would’ve been very helpful throughout their prior schooling as younger learners. Consistent themes prevalent in feedback included sentiments such as, “I can only imagine how much more enjoyable school might’ve been for me if I’d had access to coping strategies like simple meditation or deep breathing work I could use on my own without needing help from an adult because I wouldn’t have felt so overwhelmed”.

Infusion of mindfulness methods in teacher preparation programs can begin slowly, with perhaps just a few techniques, and can create a shift toward positive changes with potential for substantial impact on students’ social and emotional development, which can empower educators with practical tools to support struggling students. A plethora of free and easily accessible online resources utilized as supplemental course resources were included. Additionally, these resources can be shared with families through home-school partnerships to continue mindfulness practice at home. Jain [9] believes mindful children react differently to challenges. She touts mindfulness as a skill that can improve children’s impulse control, calmness, kindness, patience, compassion, empathy, executive function, and attention spans, as well as contribute toward nurturement of self-respect and self-compassion. In light of the multifaceted challenges



modern learners face in today's global society, consideration of infusing a focus on mindfulness in teacher education programs and, in turn, diverse classroom settings, can benefit all stakeholders with minimal effort and cost, and a substantial return on investment.

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