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Principals' Perspectives of Mindfulness for Leadership and Equity

Structured Abstract

Corinne Brion and Gina L. Gullo

Purpose: The current study sought to explore principals' perspectives of definitions and uses of mindfulness in their leadership and equity practices.

Design: The primary researcher observed and interviewed eleven school principals using qualitative methods during the course of this study.

Findings: Four themes developed from principals' definitions of mindfulness: (1) awareness and attention, (2) present centeredness, (3) modeling listening and respect, and (4) decision-making processes. The principals' actions also presented ethical mindedness in their equity pursuits and reflection in their general leadership practices, despite establishing the presence of a stigma around mindfulness.

Research limitations/implications: Beyond the limitations of qualitative research towards generalizability, implications from this work include the need for an education-centric definition of mindfulness in educational leadership.

Originality/value: This first study to explore principals' definitions of mindfulness in leadership and equity practices offers a potential definition based on the findings: Mindfulness in educational leadership is the practice of using awareness, attention, present-centeredness, and reflection in leadership and equity practices inclusive of decision-making and modeling listening and respect. This original definition holds significant value for work that aims to bridge the research-to-practice gap in education by allowing for a conceptualization of mindfulness based on practitioner perspectives.

Principals' Perspectives of Mindfulness for Leadership and Equity

Corinne Brion and Gina L. Gullo

Emerging as a strategy available to educational leaders, mindfulness presents school leaders with numerous uses. Studies demonstrated mindfulness as an effective practice for increasing educator well-being, overall work performance (Dane and Brummel, 2013), equitable behavior decision-making (Burrows, 2011), and promotional regulatory focus (Brendel *et al.*, 2016). Other work demonstrated mindfulness as a strategy for making decisions (Huang, 2017) and monitoring implicit attitudes towards outgroups (Kang *et al.*, 2015). Although educational leaders confirm using mindfulness in their work, individuals hold divergent understandings and definitions of mindfulness (Bishop *et al.*, 2004; Bodhi, 2011; Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016; Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011). As a result, the meaning of 'mindfulness' in educational leadership remains unclear. To date, a lack of empirical research on mindfulness among school leaders exists. The current study aimed to bridge this gap by exploring how school principals self-defined and practiced mindfulness in their leadership and equity work.

Current Definitions of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is, in part, unclear due to its dual Eastern and Western roots. Eastern mindfulness is often associated with the Buddhist practices of *satī* and *sampajañña*, which can be translated to mindfulness and clear comprehension, respectfully (Bodhi, 2011). Western mindfulness, on the other hand, is often associated with practices for psychological well-being and attributed to the works of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1985, 2003) and of Ellen Langer (1989, 2000) who simply defined mindfulness as "the process of noticing new things." While neither definition contradicts the other, they both remain quite broad. Bohdi (2011) wrote: "The word 'mindfulness' is itself so vague and elastic that it serves almost as a cipher into which we can

read virtually anything we want” (p. 22). Mindfulness is inherently unclear because it is a spectrum of practices with several layers and conceptualizations.

Buddhist Mindfulness

Buddhism focuses on mindfulness as a practice involving four or more steps, “ranging from mindfulness of bodily sensations to awareness of more expansive mental content and processes, such as emotion and altered view of self” (Grossman and Dam, 2011, p. 221). These can include, for example, the contemplations of *pañña*, or Buddhist wisdom: (1) mindful breathing, (2) lucid awareness, (3) awareness of feelings and state of mind, and (4) clear comprehension of phenomena (Bodhi, 2011). These phenomena are conflicts that work against *sati*, or the practice of Buddhist mindfulness, and often relate to the five hindrances: (1) sensual desire, (2) ill will, (3) drowsiness, (4) restlessness, and (5) doubt. Grossman and Dam (2011) suggested the following definition for *sati*:

It connotes several features: (1) deliberate, open-hearted awareness of moment-to-moment perceptible experience; (2) a process held and sustained by such qualities as kindness, tolerance, patience and courage (as underpinnings of a stance of non-judgmentalness and acceptance); (3) a practice of nondiscursive, non-analytic investigation of ongoing experience; (4) an awareness markedly different from everyday modes of attention; and (5) in general, a necessity of systematic practice for its gradual refinement (Grossman and Dam, 2011, p. 221)

These considerations of Buddhist mindfulness highlight several elements: (1) a focus on awareness and attention, (2) clear comprehension of actions, (3) recognition of barriers, (4) a removal of judgement and emotion from awareness and attention (bare attention), and (5)

mindfulness as a practice. The construct of mindfulness in Buddhism embodies various applications; however, practitioners in the West operationalize mindfulness quite differently.

Western Mindfulness

Kabat-Zinn (2003) defined mindfulness as, “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Another Western researcher, Langer (1989), presented work around the use mindfulness in health, business, and education including studies finding that mindfulness could decrease pain and increase longevity in elderly populations, increase creativity and decrease burnout of workers (Langer *et al.*, 1988), and increase learner creativity (Langer and Piper, 1987) and attention (Langer and Bodner, 1995). Langer offered an interesting perspective of mindfulness by introducing the counter-term ‘mindlessness’ in her discussion. She offered paired definitions of mindfulness and mindlessness:

Mindfulness is a state of conscious awareness in which the individual is implicitly aware of the context and content of information...In contrast, mindlessness is a state of mind characterized by an over reliance on categories and distinctions drawn in the past and in which the individual is context-dependent and, as such, is oblivious to novel (or simply alternative) aspects of the situation. (Langer, 1992, p. 289)

In short, Langer (1992) conceptualized mindfulness as explicit processing and mindlessness as implicit processing of the world around oneself. This simplification, greater spreads the construct of mindfulness such that an even broader definition is possible.

Towards a Functional Definition of Mindfulness

With both Buddhist and Western meanings considered, mindfulness only grows as an indefinite concept and practice. Nonetheless, research and training on mindfulness requires a generally agreed upon understanding of what it is and what it is not. In 2004, Bishop and colleagues offered an initial operational definition of mindfulness based on the consensus of 11 researchers working on clinical application of mindfulness. Their definition included two components: (1) self-regulation of attention and (2) orientation of awareness, which they explained as (1) “observing and attending to the changing field of thoughts, feelings, and sensations from moment to moment” (Bishop *et al.*, 2004, p. 232) and (2) “making a commitment to maintain an attitude of curiosity about where the mind wanders” (p. 233) without trying to change the feelings in any way. While these components reflect a more generalized and functional definition of mindfulness, they fail to focus on how individuals use mindfulness in practice.

Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) offered a five-theme conceptualization of mindfulness based on their review of 308 peer-reviewed, English-language articles concerned with mindfulness. Because of the literature-based and practical application-focus of this definition, it offers a more clearly defined connection to the mindfulness that is practiced in schools. For Nilsson and Kazemi (2016), mindfulness definitions fell into five core elements as follows: (1) awareness and attention, (2) present-centeredness, (3) external events, (4) cultivation, and (5) ethical mindedness. Ultimately, they defined mindfulness as, “a particular type of social practice that leads the practitioner to an ethically minded awareness, intentionally situated in the here and now” (p. 190); understanding each core element creates more meaning from this definition.

The first core element, attention and awareness, was found most often in the medical literature and referred to, “being able to focus on selected aspects of reality and determine what

is to be included in awareness” (p. 185). The second core element, present-centeredness, occurred in nearly half of all definitions of mindfulness found. The authors defined present-centeredness as: “By becoming more present in the moment and obtaining greater access to the consciousness and the senses [where]...practitioners act rather than react to the things happening around them” (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016, p. 188). This aligned to the Western perspectives presented by Kabat-Zinn pointedly when authors noted, “being mindful, in an everyday context, is about paying attention in a particular way, with intention, in the present, without making any judgements” (p. 188). The third core element, external events, referred to, “biological, physical, social, and environmental factors that influence our being and impinge upon us from the outside milieu” (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016, p. 189) This definition brought back the more Eastern focus on barriers to mindfulness and could be thought of in terms of Langer’s (1992) mindlessness as well. The authors showed this link in saying, “Among other things, mindfulness encourages us to attend to the immediate moment by withdrawing from external factors, which are said to engender rumination, complex thinking, and emotional reactions” (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016, p. 189).

The fourth core element, cultivation, returned to the idea of mindfulness as a practice. The authors described cultivation with a nod towards that of Hick (2009) noting that cultivation involved looking inward to develop self-awareness, helping family and friends, contributing to the greater good of the community, and positively affecting relationships between workers and clients (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016, p. 189). Cultivation focused on self-awareness and self-acceptance to allow for compassion, and in this sense, linked to loving-kindness meditation. The fifth core element, ethical-mindedness, remained absent in definitions of mindfulness in Western literature (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016). Instead, the fusion of Western and Buddhist

conceptualizations of mindfulness guided ethical-mindedness such that the authors argued, “mindfulness should be seen as a practical blend of ‘social practice’ in a Western and Buddhist guise and ‘ethically minded awareness’ partly in a Buddhist sense of meaning” (p. 190). They went on to demonstrate the social nature of mindfulness in Western culture through training and group practices such as body scanning, yoga, and guided meditations with a focus on what they termed, ‘humane development’. “Mindfulness can be viewed as a sociopolitical tool with the potential to contribute to justice, peace, and ecological balance in the world” (p. 190). This core element most closely linked mindfulness with the equity work often sought in schools and the common good sought by school leaders.

Summary

While major differences exist between Eastern and Western definitions of mindfulness, Nilsson and Kazemi’s (2016) five-element conceptualization of mindfulness offers a starting point for theoretical explorations as used in practical settings such as education. In the remainder of this article, mindfulness is contextualized based on the Nilsson and Kazemi definition such that awareness and attention, present-centeredness, external events, cultivation, and ethical minded-ness are considered core to the term. As such, discussions of mindfulness will be viewed through the lens of this definition and the study is framed by this work.

Mindfulness in Educational Leadership

To understand how mindfulness enhances educational leadership, one must first understand some of the benefits of mindfulness for educational leaders. This understanding helps to contextualize how mindfulness offers a novel perspective that can enhance practices within the field by creating a knowledge-base that relates the benefits of mindfulness to the leadership skills principal preparation programs aim to instill in future and current educational leaders.

While few published studies directly investigated the benefits of mindfulness on educational leaders, several more theoretical pieces explore the potential of mindfulness for use by educational leaders. Wells and Klocko (2018) presented mindfulness as a potential strategy for increasing principal well-being and resilience while earlier matching findings of increasing principal stress with the potential of mindfulness to decrease stress to promote opportunities for striving (Klocko and Wells, 2015). Mahfouz (2018) further explored principal stress by noting the minimal coping strategies available to principals with abundant stressors. Her study found that principals noted three primary areas of stress: work, relationships, and time; however, the principals cited very few coping mechanisms used to support them with no principals naming mindfulness. The suggestions of Klocko and Wells (2015) and findings of Mahfouz (2018) easily extend to the school superintendent following data indicating similar increases in occupational and personal stress that tie to decreases in physical health and well-being (Robinson and Shakeshaft, 2016). Nonetheless the potential contribution of mindfulness for educational leadership goes beyond stress and administrator well-being.

Mindfulness constructs relate to general leadership skills often central to content presented in principal preparation programs (Wells, 2015). Caryn Wells (2015) demonstrated links between several of these skills and constructs including the following:

- Building Culture: Listening, non-judgment, trust, equanimity, awareness, compassion, self-compassion, patience, letting go
- Communicating: Listening, awareness, non-judgment, patience, equanimity, compassion, self-compassion, trust, letting go, non-reactivity
- Building Capacity: Compassion, non-judgment, listening, being fully present, patience, acceptance

- Modeling Change: Being fully present, listening, awareness, equanimity, letting go, non-reactivity, self-compassion (p. 6)

Other areas of leadership linked with mindfulness constructs included: creating vision, influencing, getting buy-in, reculturing, building collaboration, developing common goals, conflict resolution, performance evaluation, encouraging transformation, and recognizing, inspiring, and serving others. These links and those related to stress do not only represent the potential of mindfulness to positively affect educational leadership efficacy, but research begins to demonstrate that this potential is a reality for leaders.

Mindfulness for Stress and Well-Being

Aside from plentiful research showing that mindfulness benefited students and teachers (see Hwang *et al.*, 2017; Jennings *et al.*, 2011; Lomas *et al.*, 2017 for reviews), mindfulness-based interventions appear effective for principal well-being and leadership as well. Two metastudies looking at the use of mindfulness-based-stress-reduction (MBSR) by healthy individuals found that this kind of mindfulness decreased stress and increased empathy and self-compassion, all of which hold promise when applied to leaders working in a high cognitive load, socially-charged environment such as the modern US school (Chiesa and Serretti, 2009; Khoury *et al.*, 2015). Nurse leaders participating in mindfulness trainings in addition to leadership training showed significant decreases in stress as compared with those in the leadership training alone (Pipe *et al.*, 2009). Another study linked MBSR training participation by teachers and principals with outcomes that promote personal and professional well-being such as better sleep quality and improvements in self-regulation, self-compassion, and mindfulness-related skills such as observation, non-judgement, and non-reaction (Frank *et al.*, 2015). Pinck and Sonnentag

(2018) found that leader mindfulness can even extend to employ well-being, perhaps linking principal mindfulness to teacher well-being.

Mindfulness for Leadership Effectiveness

Mindfulness is indicated as beneficial for leaders outside education such as health care and business in ways that mirror the leadership demands of the school principal. Leaders in fields outside education exhibited specific improvements following mindfulness-based training programs. A study of business leaders including CEOs, presidents, business managers, and entrepreneurs examined links between mindfulness (defined as heightened awareness) and psychological capital (defined as hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism) on dysfunctions such as negative affect, cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety/depression (Roche *et al.*, 2014). The study found a relationship between mindfulness and dysfunctions that was mediated by psychological capital such that leaders who were mindful were able to better capitalize on these psychological skills to avoid dysfunctions in the workplace. This directly relates to the work of educational leaders who must use similar psychological capital to create a positive school climate and work towards positive outcomes despite the potential of quite similar dysfunctions. A study of lawyers engaging in mindfulness by Huang (2017) demonstrated an increase in one's ability to make a decision by affecting pre-requisites for decision-making such as lowering anxiety and fatigue, improving cognitive functioning and information gathering/processing, and increasing focus on a single task. Meanwhile, a study of leaders at an Australian engineering company used self-reported measures of mindfulness (defined as being aware in the present moment) and supervisor-reported measures of leadership performance to evaluate the potential benefits of mindfulness on leadership (King and Haar, 2017). The findings showed that leaders with higher levels of mindfulness also had higher levels of leadership self-mastery (aware of

strengths and weaknesses, sense of confidence) which in turn lead to higher levels of leadership organizational-transformation (having a vision, driving new opportunities) and vice versa. To understand what influenced leaders to engage in mindfulness trainings, Lippencott (2018) interviewed senior organizational leaders from ten countries. Their responses indicated that leaders believed mindfulness would increase cognitive functioning related to emotional intelligence and awareness, which would lead to greater leadership effectiveness. Considering the force of self-fulfilling prophecy, such beliefs add to the potential of mindfulness for leaders.

While fewer in quantity, several quality studies examined the potential of leader mindfulness within education. Mahfouz (2018) followed principals who participated in the Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) mindfulness training program finding principals showed more self-awareness, self-management, self-compassion, and a greater sense of administrator community after the training. Following the CARE program, principals engaged in more self-reflection and scanning that helped them to manage emotions and stress and communicate better. Želvys and colleagues (2019) found principal mindfulness had a large indirect impact on school effectiveness (based on student achievement and teacher efficiency, adaptability, and flexibility). This effect was moderated by the organizational climate and organizational citizenship behavior, both of which were directly influenced by principal mindfulness and were direct influencers of school effectiveness. Kearney, Kelsey, and Herrington (2013) used a mixed methods approach to evaluate principal mindfulness finding that principal mindfulness was a significant predictor of student achievement. They went on to develop a grounded theory that mindfulness worked on achievement over time through a dedicated approach to reflection, relationship-building, and perpetual renewal. As can be seen mindfulness in educational leadership and leadership in general is not only linked with increased

effectiveness, but also shares many of the common mechanisms for promoting quality leadership practices that are already core to educational leadership theory. Many of these strategies are central to the work of educational leaders pursuing school equity.

Mindfulness in School Equity

Equity in schools as undertaken by educational leaders is a broad charge that embodies several topics pursuant of a shared goal: all students receive what they need to succeed and are treated in ways that allow for such success (Riehl, 2000). Equity trainings for school leaders often focus on data collection and use inclusive of equity audits (see Skrla *et al.*, 2004) and equity walks (see The Education Trust, 2016) among other strategies, understandings of race and racism (see Zamudio *et al.*, 2011), implicit and explicit bias awareness and remediation strategies (see AUTHOR, 2019), microaggressions, culturally responsive school leadership (see Khalifa *et al.*, 2016) and cultural and value self-awareness. When referring to equity and equity work in this study, the authors focus on this collection of topics that are typical of the work done by educational leaders with a conscious awareness of the plethora of topics outside these constraints that make up the greater field of social justice and educational equity. Fully defining equity for educational leadership is outside the scope of this literature review, but we contextualize the discussion around the previously stated topics because the sample in this study was actively engaging in training on these topics.

Mindfulness in Data: Stress-Reduction, Attention, and Reflection

When educational leaders engage in data use, high-stress conditions often remain present such as accountability, student outcomes, civil rights, and funding. As discussed earlier, mindfulness is well-grounded as a strategy for stress reduction (see Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Khoury *et al.*, 2015). Data for school equity often presents additional challenges stemming from

which sub-indicators to attend to most. Strategies such as Equity Audits (see Skrla, *et al.* 2004) and Equity Traps (see McKenzie and Scheurich, 2004) offer some structure on how to approach the data and guides such as McIntosh and colleagues (2018) four-step process and Fergus' (2017) Solving Disproportionality approach present more detailed processes for equity data understanding and use. All of these focus on key elements of using data inherent to mindfulness: attention and reflection. The literature on using data for equity often discusses a need for focused attention on what data is important and how that data represents the school, which aligns to the mindful present-centeredness and ethical-mindedness presented by Nilsson and Kazemi (2016). Similarly, each approach focuses on the use of evaluation and reflection after implementing a plan for equity based on that data, mirroring the core element of cultivation. In these ways, mindfulness presents a novel perspective on equity through data-use that reflects current practices through a potentially empowering mechanism.

Mindfulness in Understanding: Reflection

Equity trainings often focus on topics such as culturally relevant pedagogy, multicultural education, race and racism, microaggressions, and identity. While the presentation of these topics inherently allows for awareness, the functionality of the training lies in participant reflection on these new-found understandings. Reflection, or cultivation of knowledge in this sense, is a core element of mindfulness present in both Western and Buddhist conceptualizations. A large body of work exists on reflection in both educational leadership (Sergiovanni, 1987) and equity (Normore and Brooks, 2008) highlighting the recursive process where reflection creates meaning and learning out of experiences. By building on reflective abilities, educational leaders enhance the potential of understandings related to equity and other topics within the field.

Mindfulness in Bias: Awareness and Attention

Mindfulness is widely implicated for its effectiveness in decreasing implicit bias, or the subconscious attitudes and beliefs that influence behavior in high-cognitive load situations that may or may not align with explicit attitudes (AUTHOR, 2019). Mindfulness-based practices, including the full and brief formats of lovingkindness and general mindfulness meditations, reduced both the expression and levels of racial, age, and general intergroup biases (Kang *et al.*, 2014; Lueke and Gibson, 2015, 2016; Stell and Farsides, 2016). Many studies link these decreases to self-awareness and attention, especially after participants are made aware of their own biases. The expression of bias may relate to what Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) referred to as external events, such that practitioners of mindfulness can detach from outside emotions and stressors to focus on the current moment. This could include detachment from split-second judgements or negative associations commonly inherent in biased interactions.

Mindfulness in Interactions: Relationships and Ethical-Mindedness

Aside from removing bias from interactions, mindfulness in interactions can create better outcomes. Burrows (2011) discussed the promise of relational mindfulness for use in educational leadership towards helping educators to calmly respond to student behaviors and potentially overcome inequities stemming from high-stress situations. Huang's (2017) study of lawyers practicing mindfulness leading to more equitable decision-making discussed earlier goes on to further demonstrate the high potential of mindfulness for educational leaders working to achieve equity in schools. Together these studies embody principles of relationship and ethical-mindedness such that mindfulness-based strategies allow for grounding and increase the potential for justice.

Mindfulness as an Adversary or Proponent of Social Justice

Jennifer Cannon (2016) wrote about mindfulness in education as ‘the practice of freedom.’ She cautions that mindfulness implemented without a focus on equity presents the potential for White dominance through a majority-perspective ideology and asserts the importance of presenting mindfulness education under the context of antiracism and critical pedagogy. This concept in conjunction with Nilsson and Kazemi’s (2016) concept of ethical-mindedness presents both a promise and a challenge for mindfulness as a tool for educational leaders. As such, the importance of understanding the conceptualization of mindfulness by school leaders is of utmost importance. While simply understanding how leaders define mindfulness is central to creating meaning from studies of mindfulness in educational leadership, understanding how leaders contextualize mindfulness in their leadership and school equity practices offers insight into whose ethics are the subject of the mindfulness. If school leaders use a majority-perspective ideology focusing on struggling students and troubled communities rather than barriers to success and collective responsibility, the potential benefits of mindfulness for equity could be mitigated. As such, an exploration of principals both engaging in mindfulness and working towards school equity is necessary to understand mindfulness in educational leadership as a potential contributor to school equity.

Purpose

Considering the potential benefits of mindfulness to leadership effectiveness and equity, the purpose of this study was to discover how school leaders currently defined and practiced mindfulness in their leadership and equity work. While those who study and practice mindfulness may be aware of various definitions and conceptualizations of mindfulness, educational leaders who are encouraged to use strategies related to mindfulness and later studied

on the efficacy of these practices are often not well-versed in formal definitions of mindfulness. As such, a general understanding of how principals conceptualize and employ mindfulness is significant in three ways: (1) it clarifies meaning in theories and current research findings related to mindfulness as used by educational leaders, (2) it allows for better research designs and interpretations when studying mindfulness in educational leaders by allowing researchers to make meaning based on the principal's perspective mindfulness, and (3) it further guides practice and training of future work using mindfulness in schools by creating a starting point for understanding the principal's perspective of mindfulness. While this study does not seek to broaden the theory of educational leadership in general, it creates the conceptualization of mindfulness in this definition building process that is necessary for robust interpretations and understandings of the ever-expanding research collection on mindfulness as a tool for educational leaders. Such work can help to bridge the research-to-practice gap by creating a common language for practitioners and researchers when discussing mindfulness and the applications of mindfulness in educational settings and is a first step in creating a greater theory of mindfulness in education leadership.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Grant and Osaloo (2014) defined the theoretical framework as the blueprint for a study and its analysis as based on published theory and a conceptual framework as the structure and flow of concepts that make meaning of the study. Based on the intended purpose of this study, we propose the conceptual framework displayed in *Figure 1*. We begin with a theoretical framework rooted in the work of Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) that created a definition of mindfulness around five core elements as described earlier. This theoretical framework is appropriate for this study because it not only combines Western and Buddhist roots of the term,

but it also reflects findings from a vast review of the literature on mindfulness when used practically and in healthy individuals. While others have attempted definitions of mindfulness, this definition is well-rooted in literature reflective of many of the applications reflective of those applications studied in educational leadership. As displayed in our conceptual framework (see *Figure 1*), we used Nilsson and Kazemi's theoretical core elements (as detailed earlier) to conceptualize meaning from the responses of the principals and better understand these definitions as represented in their practices. We hypothesized that cultivation would represent the learning process; awareness and attention, present-centeredness, and external events would reveal more about the leadership process; and ethical-mindedness would reveal most about the equity process. While the literature reflects several core elements involved in both leadership and equity, we based this conceptual framework on justice-seeking focus of ethical-mindedness that would contextualize other core elements when applied to equity in schools.

[PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE]

Methods

This exploratory qualitative study used a semi-longitudinal design (Patton, 2015) and single, holistic case study approach (Yin, 2014). The semi-longitudinal design is a research design that involves repeated observations of the participants over an extended period of time. This design allowed the researchers to study participating school principals over a period of 8 months between August 2018 and April 2019. The researchers opted for a holistic case study approach because it provided the ability to examine a phenomenon over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Yin, 2014). A

holistic case study design is relevant when the theory underlying the case study is itself, holistic in nature (Yin, 2009) making it an appropriate approach to the present exploration. In this study the researchers opted for a *single* holistic case study of principals who were participating in a school equity professional development, the Equity Fellow Program. The researchers used a single case study design because this design allows researchers to confirm, challenge or extend theory. The researchers sought to add to the existing theory of mindfulness in educational leadership by understanding how principals understood and conceptualized mindfulness. An IRB review request was submitted and approved by the primary researcher's university Institutional Review Board. In this study, the researchers explored the following research questions:

1. How do school principals define mindfulness?
2. How do they practice mindfulness in their equity work at their schools?
3. How do they practice mindfulness in their leadership?

Participants

The researchers used convenience and purposeful sampling to select eleven participants from a group of principals participating in an Equity Fellow Program. Including principals from a single case, the Equity Fellow Program, allowed the researchers to understand the extent to which the study participants defined and practiced mindfulness in their leadership and equity work because the Equity Fellow Program offered a shared context and conceptualization of leadership and equity for these principals. The inclusion of 11 participants increased transferability and, “develop[ed] more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 1972). Multiple participants within the case study also allowed the researchers to look beyond initial impressions and see the evidence through multiple lenses while accounting for contextual conditions and variations in the sampling.

Maximum variation was employed in the purposeful sampling to study a wide range of cases (Patton, 2015) using the following criteria: 1) being a practicing principal for at least one year; 2) having a balance between genders, ages, and predominant races in the district studied; and 3) having principals working at all levels of the educational system from preschool to high school.

All 11 principals signed an informed consent form during an initial meeting. Pseudonyms are used when referring to each principal to maintain anonymity. *Table 1* details the school levels and principal demographics by pseudonym. The schools represented by these principals ranged in size from 450 to 1500 students. Most schools served a predominantly White and/or African American student population. All schools received Title 1 funding and had a large percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch at the time of the study.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Equity Fellow Program

The Equity Fellow training aimed to provide knowledge and practical tools related to issues of equity to 11 school teams in a Midwestern state. The goals of this grant-funded initiative were to promote ownership of data, mindset changes, and the adoption of best practices that impacted equity and collaboration between teams in school buildings, school districts, local colleges, and preschools. Fellows were school principals and teachers. During the school year 2018-2019, the principals and their teams attended a two day retreat in July, four two- hour bi-monthly sessions, and five two-hour monthly sessions. The bi-monthly training sessions took place between September and December 2018, were theory-oriented, and focused on understanding concepts of equity, racism, White privilege, and reflection. In a typical session

fellows watched videos, discussed articles, examined their biases, and explored national and regional data on race and student outcomes. Fellows were asked to journal and complete homework prompts. During monthly sessions, fellows were asked to: (1) develop an equity mission; (2) analyze their school data; (3) identify equity issues; (4) conduct a root cause analysis of these issues; and (5) write a plan of action. These monthly sessions were practice-oriented and aimed to foster an open-mind and mindfulness, although not explicitly called such, around issues of diversity.

Data Collection

Data collection included interviews, observations and site visits, journal entries, and field notes.

Interviews

The primary researcher, based in the state where the Equity Fellows Training occurred, conducted 11 one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews that were designed to be guided conversations rather than structured queries (Yin, 2009). These interviews occurred in December 2018. The researchers collaboratively created a semi-structured interview protocol. Examples of questions included: “How do you define mindfulness?” and “Tell me how, if at all, you use mindfulness in your leadership practice.” The interviews took place in the participants’ schools or in the primary researcher’s office depending on the proximity and availability of the principals. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Observations and Site Visits

The primary researcher attended and observed each session of the Equity Fellows Training, totaling to 26 hours of observation between August 2018 and April 2019. During these observations, the researcher was able to take note of interactions and comments made related to

mindfulness. Furthermore, the investigator observed and noted behaviors that revealed elements of mindfulness. In addition to the observations during the training, the researcher visited seven of the principals' schools in December 2018. During these visits, she was once again able to witness comments or behaviors related to mindfulness between principals and other stakeholders at the schools.

Journal and Field Notes

The primary researcher kept a journal to record her observational notes regarding the participants and make analytical memos (see Saldaña, 2009). Analytical memos included researcher feelings, emotions, and reflections about the content of the training. Field notes included comments pertaining to the data, methodology, and contextual factors such as who was present, late, or engaged.

Data Analysis

To preserve the anonymity of the schools and participants, researchers used pseudonyms during the transcription, coding, and writing processes. For confidentiality, the recorded interviews and transcripts were stored on the primary researcher's computer and password protected.

The primary researcher coded all transcripts and documents using a qualitative software, *Atlas.ti*. Coding was the base of the analysis as was the interpretation of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Coding began immediately after interviewing and after writing preliminary field and journal notes. The investigator relied on theoretical propositions to analyze the data (Yin, 2009) and used Nilsson and Kazemi's (2016) conceptual framework as categories whenever identical themes emerged from the data using two cycles of coding. In cycle one, the researcher developed open

codes for each key point emerging from the interviews, observational notes, and journal. In cycle two, codes were grouped into overlapping categories to create themes.

First Cycle Coding

The researcher used descriptive coding for memos, field notes, and journals to get a general sense of the data. For the in-depth interviews the researchers used in vivo coding. In vivo coding relied on the participants' own words. It was useful to understand different cultures and worldviews (Saldaña, 2009). Codes were developed for each key point identified in the interview transcripts and documents. The coding sought to inventory and define key phrases, terms, and practices that the people interviewed used to make sense of their world. There were 24 codes emerging from first cycle coding. Examples of codes included: being aware, listening better, not rushing to make a decision, accept failures and successes, reflect on my childhood to help me pay it forward, more patient, cognizant of others around you, being reflective, being intentionally present for others, and being respectful of others.

Second Cycle Coding

The researcher used axial coding in the second cycle coding. Axial coding aimed at determining which codes in the research remained dominant and the ones that emerged as less important. During this coding cycle, the codes that surfaced from the first cycle of coding became themes. Examples of themes included: awareness and attention, presence, modeling, listening, and respect. Themes were contextualized with regards to the research questions as presented in the findings of this manuscript.

Researcher Identities

The primary researcher was an assistant professor at a Midwestern university. Her interpretations may have been biased by her regular interactions with the study participants. The

researcher took precautions to preserve its integrity and to avoid validity threats. Because the investigator was obligated to forthrightness in relating to the participants (Wolcott, 1994), she engaged in daily reflective practices (such as journaling) throughout the process to manage her own subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988). The secondary researcher was an adjunct and educational consultant involved in professional developments on implicit bias for educational leaders during the time of the study. Her interpretations may have been biased towards mindfulness as a strategy towards equity. Biases were counterbalanced by the use of a dual researcher model and reflective and reflexive practices that checked data for potential biases by making sure that data backed interpretations.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the ultimate goal in qualitative research (Wolcott, 1994). Since the investigators were obligated to forthrightness in relating to the participants, the researchers engaged in reflective practices, such as journaling throughout the process to manage their own subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988). The journals also allowed the investigators to understand the influence they had on the participants as well as the influence the participants had on them (Saldaña, 2009).

In conducting this study, the researchers took a series of precautions to preserve the trustworthiness of the study and to avoid validity threats. The primary researcher engaged in prolonged engagement and observation through her several hours observing and engaging with the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). She wrote thick descriptions of this data in her field journal to increase transferability. Having two researchers involved in this study allowed for reflexivity through data discussion and partial investigator triangulation (Barry *et al.*, 1999) and triangulation of analysts (Patton, 1999). Additionally, the primary researcher went back to the

participants for member checking. Moreover, data triangulation occurred through the use of several different sources of data such as the 11 in-depth interviews, the longitudinal observations, as well as the seven site visits (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002).

Findings

The researchers used the conceptual framework shown in *Figure 1*, based on Nilsson and Kazemi (2016), as an interpretive guide. Findings are ordered, based on the research questions: (1) principal definitions of mindfulness, (2) principal equity-focused mindfulness practices, and (3) principal leadership-focused mindfulness practices.

Defining Mindfulness

Principals described mindfulness in four ways: (1) awareness and attention, (2) present-centeredness, (3) modeling listening and respect, and (4) decision-making processes. Participants seemed to use elements of these representations in both their discussion of equity-focused and leadership-focused mindfulness practices. Furthermore, a stigma around the discussion of mindfulness was noted in participant responding and behavior.

Awareness and Attention

Molly, Joe, Margaret, and Martin defined mindfulness as being aware, attentive, and caring. However, being aware and attentive was operationalized differently between the principals. Each expressed mindfulness as being aware of one's own emotional and physical needs, the needs of others, and as being caring and cognizant of others. Joe exemplified these findings when he said:

You know when you talk about diversity and equity, it is a heated topic. Some people, or I know, I can react quickly to something that is being said, and mindfulness to me means being able to know that about yourself and moderate your actions or reactions.

Molly understood mindfulness as being aware of her physical needs such as feelings and reactions. She stated:

To me, mindfulness is as a state of mind in which I pay attention to my physical needs too because if I am not well, people around me feel it and it affects everyone work with... that is why I leave for a vacation every time we have a day off and in fact, I am about to travel next week.

Molly was able to connect mindful attention to stress-reduction as noted in the literature both through a lens of shared well-being and personal well-being. For Margaret, mindfulness meant being attentive to others. Margaret affirmed that part of being mindful should be to, “know students and teachers,” and explained her focus on building relationships with her constituents—viewing that practice as being aware and mindful. She said:

How can you lead or work in a school if you are not aware of others and if you do not teach others to become aware? We are a community and we need to work together to help each other.

For Margaret, mindfulness meant being attentive and aware of others’ needs for the good of the community, which relates to Burrows (2011) discussion of relational mindfulness as a tool for effective leadership. Linked to the idea of being observant and cognizant of others, Martin noted, “Being mindful, to me, means greeting parents and having an open-door policy, so that they know I am available, caring, and transparent.” Ultimately, Margaret indicated that mindfulness was being aware and attentive to oneself and others while Catherine, Alma, Jeannette, Bruce, and Mike found mindfulness had more to do with being present-centered.

Presence-Centeredness

Catherine, Alma, Jeannette, Bruce, and Mike talked about mindfulness in terms of presence, reflection, and meditation. Catherine described mindfulness as, “being grounded with who you are.” When probed further, she shared: “it is accepting who you are and the way you are in order to accept others.” Bruce mentioned that being mindful also meant, “accepting failures and successes because it is all part of being grounded and present for yourself and others.” Others (Alma, Jeannette and Mike) saw mindfulness as a way to quiet their minds, with Margaret explaining, “For me, I need to find myself and calm myself before I tackle a difficult issue, mindfulness helps me do that by breathing and taking a time out, it is like giving myself space before entering a situation.” Margaret makes a connection between stress-reduction and personal well-being through presence-centered mindfulness similar to that seen in awareness and attention.

Bruce and Harry mentioned mindfulness had to do with intentional reflection and meditation. Specifically, Martin shared, “Reflecting on my childhood and who helped me helps me to pay it forward and to be able to reflect, I need to intentionally take time out, be present with myself.” These findings were consistent with two of the five categories of Nilsson and Kazemi’s (2016) definition: awareness and attention and present-centeredness. Participants added other elements to the conceptualization of mindfulness in educational leadership with their perceptions of mindfulness as modeling listening and respect as well as the processes around decision-making,

Modeling Listening and Respect

A novel theme emerging from the data was the concept of modeling listening and respect as a presentation of mindfulness unique to educational leaders. Alma perceived mindfulness as

the act of, “modeling the behaviors you want to see in others by listening well.” For Alma, being mindful meant modeling good listening skills. Listening was mentioned by Mike who said, “I am mindful even when I do not have time to listen to someone; I take the time and make myself fully available in body and in mind. I try to be a better listener every day.” Here, Mike showed a self-awareness of his time and self-management of his behaviors. These self-skills were noted by Mahfouz (2018) when following principals involved in the CARE mindfulness program as well.

Martin, Harry, Samantha, and Molly referred to mindfulness as modeling respect. They mentioned how respecting each other and the environment was a reflection of practicing mindfulness, as Samantha explained:

You see me in the building, I am always picking things off the floor, modeling respectful exchanges with others and treating others as I would want to be treated, to me that is mindfulness because I do this purposefully even when I do not feel like it.

Molly further asserted, “Mindfulness is the way you act among others, model the way you consciously build trust among people and show respect.” These principals commented on their behaviors as being representations of mindfulness based on their intentions of modeling and their actions related to listening and respect again reflecting both relational and self-skills stemming from mindfulness.

Decision-Making Processes

A second novel theme emerging in the principals’ discussions of mindfulness was the embodiment of mindfulness in the decision-making process. Bruce claimed mindfulness was making conscious, data-driven decisions rather than decisions based on gossip and emotions. He explained, “You see, gossips are all over, mindfulness is a way to deal with that because you have to look at the data to make your decisions and know what is gossip and what is valuable to

know.” Molly added, “Before we make an important decision, we pray on it, and to me that is mindfulness, making decisions based on facts and using a quiet mind.” Bruce and Molly conceptualized mindfulness around a thoughtful decision-making process that used data or facts to drive a decision rather than potentially rumor-driven information. This reflects the work of Huang (2017) where decisions were amplified through mindfulness using a reduction in anxiety and fatigue, increase in cognitive functioning and information gathering, and improved focus. Joe added, “Mindfulness to me is making the right thing, not doing the thing right and that takes courage and a quiet mind to arrive at that.” Joe discussed decision-making more around the process of creating an outcome rather than following a path, again with a focus on the process of arriving at that decision. Together, these perspectives highlighted the decision-making process as one inclusive of mindful practices.

Summary

While a majority of principals identified mindfulness within our expected theoretical framework with similar terms to Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) including being aware and attentive as well as present-centered, others viewed mindfulness through behaviors such as the acts of modeling listening and respect as well as making decisions. The subsequent research questions explored how principals practiced mindfulness in their equity-focused and overall leadership work at schools.

Mindfulness for Equity

While principals were able to define mindfulness, when the researcher asked them how they implemented mindfulness in their equity work, principals seemed unsure and reluctant to share. Martin believed he used mindfulness in his equity work saying: “He met the teachers where they are in their learning.” In this manner, he remained cognizant of his teachers’ skills and abilities in

matters of equity and knew when to challenge the teachers and when to step back, given the sensitivity of equity issues. The definition of mindfulness supports this through awareness and attention as well as present-centeredness. Joe shared he used mindfulness in activities related to equity provided for teacher meetings. While this notion somewhat aligned with Nilsson and Kazemi's (2016) definition element of ethical leadership, the definitions provided by the principals did not explicitly note this core element. Harry noted he used mindfulness in equity work, "By making conscious equitable decisions that impact equity outcomes." This discussion of mindfulness in equity work aligned best with the principals' conceptualization of mindfulness around the decision-making process, but the limited data demonstrated principals faced difficulties seeing potential applications of the mindfulness definition in their equity work. From the responses gathered, only three principals (Harry, Joe, and Martin) demonstrated an ability to conceptualize mindfulness for equity work in their schools.

Observational data indicated principals used mindfulness when engaging with discipline issues through caring and meeting students and parents where they were. For example, the researcher witnessed an African American child screaming in the office. Jeannette defused the situation by asking how the child was and distracting him from his tantrum. Another example occurred when Joe stopped his office work to listen attentively to two students having a disagreement. Joe attentively listened to each side of the story and in a caring and respectful manner explained that he was going to speak to the teacher and let them know his decision. Using one of the participants' definitions of mindfulness, these leaders demonstrated themselves as aware, cognizant, and caring to others, which aligns with theory related to relational mindfulness (see Burrows, 2011). Despite being involved in The Equity Fellows Program, principals did not often contribute explicit examples of how they enacted mindfulness when

working towards equity although they did demonstrate use of mindfulness-related strategies when potentially working towards equity. The final research question aimed to examine how principals applied concepts of mindfulness in their general leadership.

Mindful Leadership

Molly, Harry, Jeannette, Martin, Samantha, Margaret, and Joe reported using mindfulness in their leadership practices as a self-reflection tool, as exemplified by Molly stated, “I often ask myself: did I do the right thing today?” and Harry further explained, “I ask myself if I was present for the teachers and students [by] wondering if I can learn to listen and to be more patient with adults [or by] having a notebook to reflect.” The primary researcher also noted in her journal that participants wanted more time during the training sessions to reflect because, “We do not always have the time, or take the time to do it and it is beneficial.” The data suggested reflection was a chief practice the leaders utilized in their leadership roles. Reflection as a mindfulness strategy aligns with the Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) mindfulness element of cultivation such that mindfulness is used as an element of the learning process that refines practices. Reflective leadership also aligns well with the larger body of literature in educational leadership (Sergiovanni, 1987) and leadership for social justice (Normore & Brooks, 2008).

A Mindfulness Stigma

Although, not an intended outcome of this study, a potential educational leader stigma related to mindfulness was noted throughout the data collection and analysis process. When the primary researcher asked principals about their definition of mindfulness, participants’ levels of comfort seemed to change. Participants went from being confident and enthusiastic to answer questions about their schools, experiences, and goals to becoming hesitant—and even afraid—of defining mindfulness the wrong way. For example, the researcher heard, “I do not know, let me

think” or “I might be wrong but let me try” in addition to several extensive moments of silence prior to responses. The silence seemed uncomfortable for the participants as the researcher mentioned in her journal, “Participants seem uncomfortable, they start fidgeting, sighing, and their demeanor changed. The atmosphere went from being friendly and light to feeling heavy and as if I was putting them in a position of failure.”

Three participants shared associations of mindfulness with Buddhism. Mike and Catherine did not name a philosophy but perceived mindfulness as being linked to yoga and “*those* kinds of approaches and philosophies.” There seemed to be a stigma around mindfulness among educational leaders in the sample, as Martin shared: “It seems link to Buddhism and I am not a Buddhist, so I am not sure what it is.” This religion-associated stigma occurred in previous studies in education: “The ‘stigma of mindfulness’ needed to be overcome with informative dialogue with district decision-makers. A gut reaction to the term mindfulness often elicits non-secular visualization of worship, prayer, and meditation” (Nuss, 2012, p. 411). Whether principals in the present study were aware of this stigma with relation to discomfort or possible Buddhist roots was unclear; however, the presence of stigma is noteworthy given the hope of this study to guide future practice and research.

Discussion

Mindfulness by Several Names

Principals defined mindfulness in ways that both reflected and added to the conceptualization of mindfulness already established in the literature. Discussion of mindfulness around awareness and attention as well as present-centeredness aligned with themes described in the theoretical framework based on the work of Nilsson and Kazemi (2016); however, novel themes reflected behaviors that embodied mindfulness including the modeling of listening and

respect as well as the decision-making process. These themes were neither discussed in the theoretical framework nor easily adapted to align with that work in isolation of equity and leadership pursuits. The discussions and observations of the principals focused how the principals used mindfulness in overall leadership and toward school equity introduced additional elements supported by the theoretical framework including the use of mindfulness in the decision-making process and in experiential learning, which aligned to the core concepts of ethical mindfulness and cultivation (or mindful reflection) found in the theoretical framework. Similar to the findings of Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) this study found that definitions of mindfulness did not include explicitly stated aspects related to ethical mindfulness, but rather the practice of mindfulness seemed to express these notions.

Despite these other representations of mindfulness expressed in principal use towards specific goals, principals did not express or define mindfulness through external events at all. This is of interest due to the potential of mindfulness to reduce bias in decision-making through the separation of decisions and vulnerability caused by external events (AUTHOR, 2019). While it is possible that principals simply did not recognize the separation of external events from decisions as mindfulness, such a lack of recognition might indicate that stand-alone suggestions for principals to use mindfulness to avoid the implicit bias in schools might be ineffective. Nevertheless, the ideologization of mindfulness as represented through the decision-making process might be a more education-leadership focused conceptualization of this same process.

Effectiveness of Mindfulness for Leadership and Equity

A greater understanding of how principals used mindfulness and explained their use of mindfulness for leadership and equity warrants an exploration of the connections between actual and empirically-effective uses. Principals' conceptualizations and uses of mindfulness seemed to

reflect the literature, but often only in an implicit fashion. Principals used mindfulness as a tool for stress-reduction and well-being, self-skills, relationships, decision-making, and reflection. When using mindfulness for stress-reduction and well-being, principals often described awareness and attention to emotional states and needs which is associated with better use of psychological capital to decrease system dysfunctions (Roche *et al.*, 2014) and greater self-skills (Mahfouz, 2018). Self-skills presented in even more implicit ways as principals described their self-awareness as understandings of where they were in the moment (often as presence-centeredness) and showed self-management through modeling listening and respect. These skills are associated with greater leadership self-mastery (King & Haar, 2017) and indirectly with higher levels of student achievement (Kearney *et al.*, 2013). Relational mindfulness seemed more explicitly noted, which links to improvements in leaders' abilities to address classroom management, teaching, and emotional challenges (Burrows, 2011). Decision-making benefits appeared well understood and several principals adeptly noted increases in focus and information gathering as documented by (Huang, 2017). Principals seemed quite aware of the power of reflection to create learning from experience (see Sergiovanni, 1987) and employed this strategy as a mindfulness technique regularly.

These skills aligned with the areas of equity work benefited by mindfulness described earlier: data, understanding, bias, interaction, and social justice; however, some elements core to these areas remain absent from the findings. While principals acted in ways demonstrated ethical-mindedness, they did not comment on a social commitment towards ethics involved in mindfulness. This absence highlights the concerns with regards to social justice presented by Cannon (2016) because leaders do not appear to consider who's ethical structures they uphold in their mindfulness practices. If principals remain aware of needs and presence-centered with a

biased lens that disregards minority perspectives, mindfulness intended to promote school equity could instead maintain school inequities. While principals appeared to remain aware and attentive through mindfulness, potentially unintentional non-awareness could create unfavorable outcomes for school equity. As such, consideration and an explicit focus on ethical-mindedness may be required to ensure socially just mindfulness in schools.

Towards an Education-Centric Definition of Mindfulness

Based on the findings, the researchers posit that an expanded definition of mindfulness is needed that specifically relates to educational leadership. Educational leaders viewed mindfulness differently than traditional definitions construe the practices. While some principals perceived mindfulness as being aware and attentive or present-centered, others viewed mindfulness as encompassing, “good listening skills, modeling, and making conscious and thoughtful decisions.” These values are similar to values embedded in sound leadership practices; hence, the authors postulate that mindfulness may take various, unique forms in educational leadership contexts. A broader definition of mindfulness that is specific to educational contexts would allow principals to use mindfulness in their leadership and equity practices by freeing them from the stigma related to religion-oriented perceptions of mindfulness. An education-centric definition would allow leaders to take ownership of mindfulness practices in schools and create a level of relevancy that may help to bridge the research to practice gap.

Conceptualization to Practice for an Expanded Definition

While the conceptual framework set forth for this study was not fully upheld, a modified framework as depicted in *Figure 2* found support. Principals defined mindfulness through discussion of their understandings and behaviors around mindfulness to reflect four out of five

elements of the Nilsson and Kazemi (2016) definition but complemented this conceptualization with elements specific to educational leadership. This brings the conceptualization of mindfulness for educational leadership to a place where it is defined through a hybrid of explicit expression and practical expression. Based on the findings and this new framework is the following educational leadership-specific definition of mindfulness:

The practice of using awareness, attention, present-centeredness, and reflection in leadership and equity practices inclusive of decision-making and modeling listening and respect.

Based on ethical mindfulness (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016), mindfulness for equity in educational leadership is then considered as an ethically-driven practice. While this definition requires further exploration and refinement through research and practical considerations, it provides a starting point from which those exploring mindfulness in educational leadership can begin to understand the potential lens educational leaders bring to mindfulness.

Limitations

Like all studies, this study has several potential limitations. While not a limitation of a qualitative study, this research took place in only two school districts in one Midwestern, US state with a limited sample of 11 principals making the findings unlikely to be generalizable to the population at large. Principals were further individualized due to selection based on attendance at an equity training limiting the scope of the study. While the researchers have no reason to believe that principals' definitions of mindfulness would vary greatly from that of the sample, a less-focused sample would broaden the definitions and conceptualizations around the meaning and practices of mindfulness even further.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications including: (1) a need for further study on principal conceptualizations of mindfulness as they relate to leadership and equity practices, (2) an interpretive lens for understanding practitioner use of mindfulness in schools and theory related to mindfulness in educational leadership, (3) the need for an education-centric and inclusive definition of mindfulness, and (4) the need to develop a shared definition of mindfulness when leading related trainings and research endeavors with educational leaders. The limited scope of this exploratory study offers only an introduction to principal conceptualizations of mindfulness making future research necessary; however, the findings create a starting point for understanding current research and theory. This only study to explore principal-defined conceptualizations of mindfulness is significant as the research body on mindfulness as it relates to educational leadership continues to grow because it provides both context and clarity to the meaning of findings as perceived by the principals in each study and to the theories of mindfulness within the domain.

This study revealed that principals have varying understandings of mindfulness and the implementation of mindfulness in schools that is subject to potential stigmatization. As such, work involving educational leaders and mindfulness must begin with the development of a shared definition that is meaningful to all parties. This practice might alleviate incongruities between researchers and practitioners, between educational leaders and teachers, and between educational leaders. Such shared understandings of mindfulness are critical to the study and practice of mindfulness in educational leadership due to the variability in understanding. We offer a definition to act as a starting point for the development of a shared definition, but caution that this definition must be contextualized within the group of individuals sharing the learning.

A derivative implication of this study is the social justice concern that stems from a non-awareness of ethical-mindedness such that school leaders using mindfulness may not consider whose perspectives dominate their mindfulness practices. While equity trainings that focus on mindfulness for data, understanding, bias reduction, and pro-social interactions can assist in the development of a more ethically-minded mindfulness, this consideration must be made explicit. Once again, starting with the development of a shared definition of mindfulness presents an opportunity to state this concern in trainings and research endeavors; nonetheless, the implications of non-awareness in ethical-mindedness warrant further study.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study sought to better understand how principals conceptualized and defined mindfulness in their leadership and equity practices. The study revealed that principals defined mindfulness around four key themes: (1) awareness and attention, (2) present centeredness, (3) modeling listening and respect, and (4) decision-making processes. These definitions were expanded through practice to include “ethical mindedness” when pursuing equity initiatives and “cultivation” through reflection during general leadership practices. A stigma was noted in principals’ discussions of mindfulness that might be curtailed by an education-centric definition of mindfulness that could develop a feeling of ownership over mindfulness as a strategy when used by school leaders. We suggest the following definition: “Mindfulness in educational leadership is the practice of using awareness, attention, present-centeredness, and reflection in leadership and equity practices inclusive of decision-making and modeling listening and respect.” Further research and use of this definition will help to substantiate this work further and remove several of the study limitations while increasing impact by bridging the research-to-practice gap.

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Tables

Table 1

Overview of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Race	Age group	Years in Position	School Level
Molly	White	60+	15	Preschool
Catherine	White	30-39	1	Elementary
Samantha	White	50-59	10	Elementary
Joe	African American	50-59	15	Elementary
Alma	African American	40-49	7	Middle
Margaret	African American	30-39	1	Middle
Mike	White	30-39	1	Middle
Bruce	White	30-39	3	High
Martin	African American	50-59	17	High
Harry	African American	50-59	25	High
Jeannette	African American	50-59	10	High

Figures

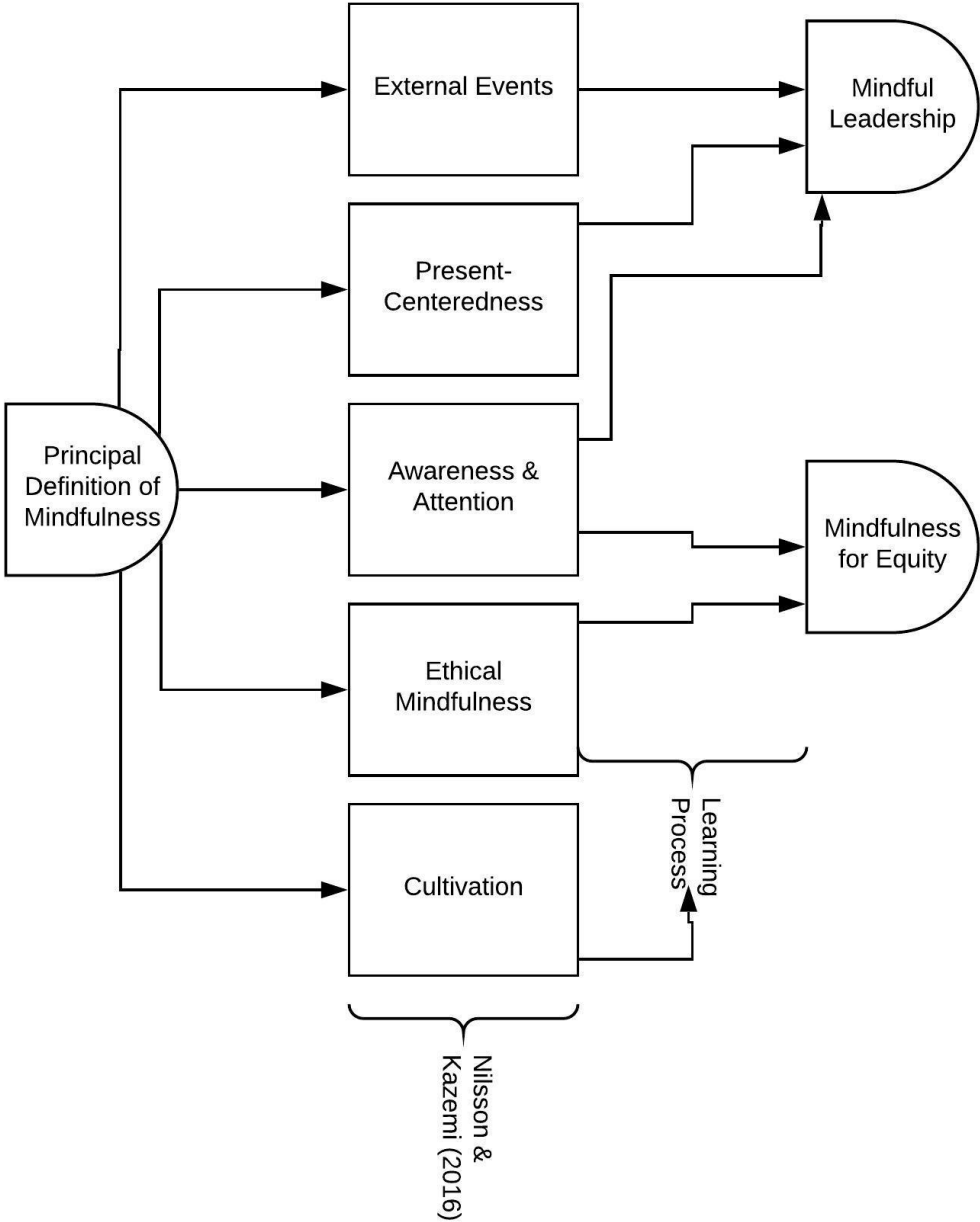


Figure 1. A conceptual framework depicting how principals' definitions of mindfulness will relate to their leadership practices and the current literary base.

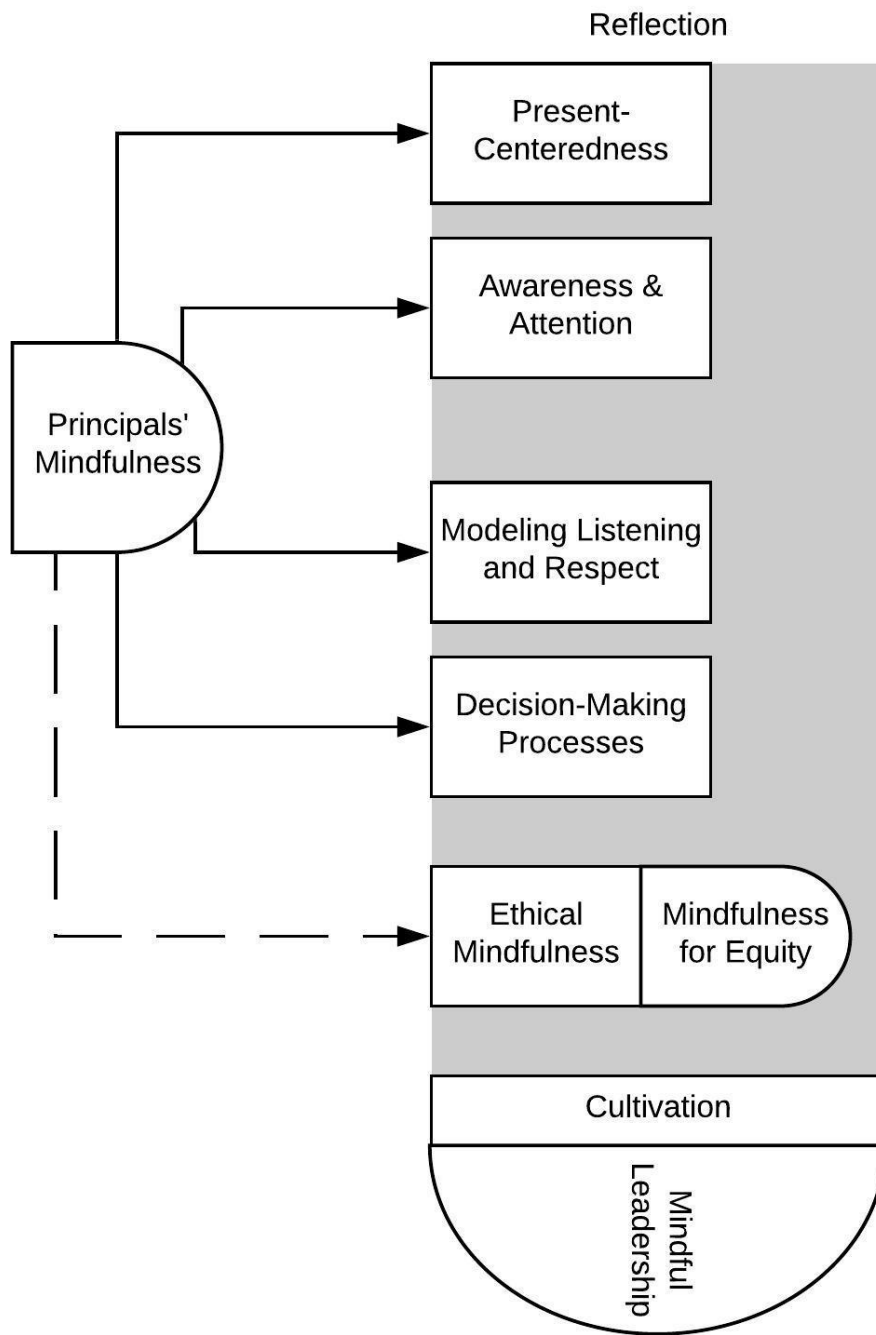


Figure 2. *A modified framework depicting how principals' conceptualizations of mindfulness created an expanded definition for mindfulness in educational leadership.*