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## Meditation and the Inner Life of Today's Educator

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**Meditation and The Inner Life of Today's Educator**

by

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

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## **Abstract**

This project stemmed from the researcher's feeling stress as a new teacher and the need for self-care. The study is contextualized and the theoretical frameworks include meditation and mindfulness. (Venditti et al., 2020). Teaching is a stressful profession and many teachers experience daily stresses that can often lead to teacher burnout. When teachers are stressed, their ability to effectively teach and connect with students is diminished. This is further exacerbated by the fact that educators are teaching through the unprecedented times of COVID-19. Meditation and mindfulness are universal and free tools that educators can use to decrease stress and increase joy in their own lives.

This study used a mixed methods approach to the study in a group setting with 8 educational professionals who met weekly for 6 weeks. The findings of this research indicate a universal sense that these educators are feeling lonely and seeking community, that there are high levels of criticism around meditation and self-care, and that the impact of participants in group mediation resulted in participants engaging in activities beyond the core practice of the group. This has important implications for time and resources for teachers to gather and for community practices that focus on meditation or other self-care practices.

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## **Preface**

“The things that matter most in our lives are not fantastic or grand. They are moments when we touch one another.” - Jack Kornfield

## Chapter 1: Introduction

As a highly energetic person with a Type A personality for most of my life, I began my career as a nurse. I vigorously studied scientific theory and evidence-based practices. I could explain the reasons diseases occurred and why people acted the way they did, based on science. As a child who grew up with devout religion, all of my beliefs melted away when I began studying anatomy and physiology, microbiology, and psychology. The reasons humans acted as they did, I learned, could be explained based on science, not religion, and the world made much more sense to me. I felt comfort in the science, in understanding the human body and the cause and effect. I began to see humans as proteins and chemical reactions, responding to our environments and responding to the neural networks within our brains. I approached the world as a scientist and I logically released all of my religious dogma.

I enjoyed being a nurse. I liked helping people and I was fascinated with the way the human body worked. I spent much of my career in hospice. I could explain to patients and families the pathophysiology involved when organ systems shutdown as humans begin to die. I enjoyed providing education on symptom management, pharmacological interventions, and interdisciplinary team approaches. Above all, I enjoyed the human connection with patients and families.

But I couldn't explain the science of why I felt so sad doing the work. I considered myself an empathetic person, but I thought I was skilled at putting up healthy boundaries between myself and my patients and their families. Yet as the years went on I realized that I couldn't navigate the sorrow and grief that accumulated in my own mind as I sat on the bedside of hundreds of dying patients. I became quite depressed, and my scientific mind became challenged with the emotional toll of my profession. After many years of working as a hospice nurse, I

decided to remove myself from the work of the dying. Instead I switched gears entirely and became a teacher.

I soon learned that teaching was even more stressful than being a hospice nurse, but in an entirely different sort of way. I felt like a cartoon version of a waiter, juggling precarious loads with both hands, on their nose, their elbows; comically trying to keep everything upright. It was at this point that I discovered meditation. My scientific mind was fascinated with the compelling evidence of how meditation could increase awareness in our lives, how the simple act of slowing down and going within could reset our neural circuitry, decrease heart rate, and provide demonstrable evidence of heart and brain coherence.

And yet beyond the science-based evidence that meditation espoused, I was fascinated with the way I felt both while I meditated, and also in the hours and days outside of my meditation practice. I realized that this simple act of turning within and turning off the noise and chatter and clinginess to my mental noise provided a most perfect sense of calm. It gave me a place to escape to. It allowed me to simply stop, go within, and feel the stress of my day melt away as I visited that soft and perfect place inside my own mind where I was not attached to the trappings of my day. It was a beautiful place to be.

From there my whole life changed. As a new (and highly stressed teacher) I couldn't deny that I was becoming more centered, more calm. I realized that I was less reactive to my students. I was better able to "read the room". I could hold the space that students needed without judgment, and without personal emotions clouding the space. I wasted less time disengaging from my life through mindless scrolling on my phone. I became a better mom at home, a better teacher in the classroom, and I felt more alive and centered as a human than I ever had.

## **Statement of Purpose**

Teaching is a stressful profession and many teachers experience daily stresses that can often lead to teacher burnout. When teachers are stressed, their ability to effectively teach and connect with students is diminished. This is further exacerbated by the fact that educators are teaching through the unprecedented times of COVID-19. Teachers across the country are being asked to flip their classrooms to online or hybrid learning as well as navigate the challenges of keeping themselves safe and healthy during a pandemic.

Mindfulness based meditation practices are meant to foster moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness through the act of paying attention. Meditators are invited to pay attention, including to their breath and body through body scanning while maintaining an open heart (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). There are numerous health benefits of meditation including reduced levels of stress and emotional regulation (Ameli et al., 2020), overall physical health and increased immunity (Barrett et al., 2018), and overall emotional wellness (Emerson et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that meditation has long acting benefits that can be employed later during times of stress (Desbordes et al., 2012).

There is a gap in the literature tracking the effect that a regular collegial (a group of teachers) meditation practice has on the inner life of an educator. This gap is further enhanced by the fact that we are living through a pandemic and educators are experiencing higher levels of stress. As educators navigate the stresses of teaching, particularly during the time of a pandemic, what are the effects of a consistent meditation practice? Through this research I examined the findings of a weekly meditation group practice as it relates to the inner life of the educators who agreed to participate.

## **Overview of the Research Design**

To gain insight on my question, “What are the effects of meditation on the inner life of today’s educator,” I created an online meditation community that met every week for 6 weeks. Participants were all high school educators who lived in the state of Maine. I utilized a mixed methods, phenomenological research project based in a constructivist worldview. I conducted individual interviews prior to and at the end of the meditation sessions. I collected likert scale surveys and collected data through analytic memos, weekly conversation, and nonverbal cues.

## **Significance of the Study**

Through the research, I came to understand the importance of community and how that affects our individual lives in holistic ways. The research came at such an isolating time, during the time of COVID-19, and everyone was feeling the effects of self-isolation and the lack of community that entailed.

This study identified that a significant barrier to personal meditation practice was in marriage with the self-critique that individuals have regarding their “ability” to meditate. The inner dialogue that can come up during meditation can be critical, especially for those who are new to meditation and without practice. Additionally, educators are busy, and carving out time can be a challenge.

The beauty of meditation is that it provides tools beyond the practice of meditation itself. It helps regulate emotions and promotes a sense of peace. There is great potential in these carry over effects, and this research was able to identify ways that the practice of meditation helped foster healthy choices in other areas of life.

This study can aid in understanding the benefits of meditation through the lens of an educator. Educators have unique needs and are required to maintain expectations while being the

“sage on the stage”. There is a lot of research available to us about the effects of meditation in the classroom, but this research helped illuminate the effects of meditation on the sages themselves: the teachers.

The success in the study was measured in the enthusiasm that the participants conveyed about the experience and their willingness to continue to meet via zoom, outside of the research. Ultimately we created a wonderful online community, where a group of previous strangers and loose acquaintances were able to meet and talk about our own experiences with stress and mindfulness as it related both to our jobs as educators and to our lives.

### **Research Implications**

This research lends itself as an opportunity for further exploration into the effects of meditation within the role of the educator and the educator communities. For districts and administrators looking to support the mental health of its staff, utilizing the role of meditation is a powerful and inexpensive tool. There are a number of ways that administrators could support meditation among staff. Scheduling a dedicated time for mindfulness and meditation would be a policy shift that could have powerful yield in regard to educator wellness, however it would need to be supported with enthusiasm for the tenants of meditation from the top up. Administrators would need to embrace meditation and help instill confidence in staff.

Meditation could be supported through professional development. Bringing in meditation experts, enthusiasts, or even teacher leaders would be an adjunct to instilling confidence in educator meditation practices within its educators. Holding group meditations would help instill confidence in the practice of meditation, as well as support community building. Administrators may choose to find a dedicated meditation space where teacher led meditation groups could meet. This would have the benefit of not only encouraging a meditation practice, but in helping

to foster a sense of community among staff and a sense of belonging among individual educators.

Meditation is the tool that requires no money, equipment, or intensive training. It can benefit people of diverse backgrounds, education, race, and economic status. It is a highly equitable intervention to support a school community and as the research findings support, its benefits extend beyond the practice of meditation itself, supporting emotional regulation, health, and wellness.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

At the time of this writing, the world is experiencing a pandemic due to the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Teachers are navigating wholly unfamiliar landscapes of online teaching or teaching behind personal protective equipment and social distancing. Life outside of education has changed dramatically with the pandemic, and it carries with it a heavy responsibility to stay healthy and to help others stay healthy. Additionally, the physical stress of contracting COVID-19 looms large, and there is evidence that people who have experienced this public health emergency experience varying degrees of stress even after the immediate danger is reduced, and that this brings a heightened need for care and concern (Lv, et al. 2020).

### **Educator Stress**

These new factors, while coupled with the already existing stressors of administrative tasks, classroom management, equity concerns, and personal feelings of ineffectiveness in an educational system that struggles to fully support each student can put educators at risk for emotional exhaustion. Factors that produce emotional exhaustion include overextension, draining of emotional resources, and lack of emotional energy, all relevant to the current climate in education (Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012). People with this type of stress lose feeling and concern, as well as interest and spirit and are at risk of experiencing burnout (Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012).

Research has demonstrated that mindfulness practices reduce stress and anxiety, improve attention and wellbeing, and help gain a tighter control on emotional wellbeing and response to distractions. Numerous studies show overall performance for tasks involving concentration spans are increased when concurrently employing mindfulness practices. For instance, mindfulness has been demonstrated to create changes in the brain to correspond to less emotional reactivity and

increased efficiency. (Tang et al. 2015). Mindfulness helps deepen compassion and increases the likelihood of responding to others in distress. (Condon, Paul, et al. 2013). Mindfulness also improves self-reported feelings of stress and anxiety when confronted with stressful situations. (Hoge et al., 2013).

There has been a lot of attention placed on students and their social emotional learning, but how are our teachers? Most teachers that I've asked will say that they became teachers because of the connections they form with their students. Now that many teachers are either teaching behind extensive PPE and reduced classroom time or teaching fully remote, how are their hearts and minds when the very thing that provides job satisfaction is so greatly altered? How is the inner world of today's teacher? What tools do teachers have to cope? The purpose of this literature review is to better understand the concepts of mindfulness and meditation and to gain understanding as to how these concepts can be applied to and affect the lives of today's educators.

### ***COVID-19 and teacher burnout***

Navigating a global pandemic has put an incredible strain on education systems and it has tested the structures within it. Since most governments were playing catch-up to COVID-19's exponential spread, institutions had little time to plan for a remote-teaching regime. (Daniel, 2020). Due to the abruptness of such closures, ambiguity about their length, and relatively poor awareness of distance education, UNESCO (2020) has listed frustration and stress among teachers as one of the negative consequences of school closures. In fact, several studies have shown that even at the start of the pandemic, teachers experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, owing to the fact that they had to teach online. (Al Lily, 2020; Besser et al., 2020). Lower quality teaching, negative teacher well-being and wellbeing,

and ultimately teacher attrition and burnout are all consequences of high stress levels among teachers.

### ***Teacher burnout***

There are significant bodies of research around the role of burnout among educators (Johnson et al. 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout, occurring in individuals who do “people work”, exhibit emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal success. Maslach (1993) states that burnout is not a consequence of boredom from tedious, repetitious work, but experiencing a toll on one’s personal resources after being highly invested over a period of time. Navigating the role of educator during a global pandemic could certainly be considered a toll on personal resources. Teachers experiencing burnout, according to Cherniss (1980), are unable to adequately cope with stress while also being unable to reduce or prevent stress.

So what can we do for our educators to help them navigate the insidiousness and pervasiveness of stress, during a pandemic and during normal times? There is considerable research about the importance of students maintaining adequate social emotional learning in the classroom. Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) discovered that teachers' self-reported burnout was related to students' physiological stress control as calculated by the diurnal pattern of cortisol in a Canadian study of 406 elementary school students and their teachers. Milkie and Warner (2011) examined data from a nationally represented sample of over 10,000 first graders and discovered that children in classrooms where teachers indicated higher levels of stress had more internalizing and externalizing disorders. Arguably, during the pandemic this would be significantly heightened. If educators are not maintaining their own mental health, their ability to convey effective social emotional learning could be lost. It is important for educators to find

ways to navigate their own stresses and mental health so that they can be effective within the classroom.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest that teachers' ability to cope with the demands of teaching and avoid burnout is aided by some social and emotional competencies. These skills include self-awareness of emotional states and cognitions, as well as the ability to effectively control their emotions when teaching so that they do not become emotionally drained and can effectively respond to students' needs. According to the prosocial classroom theoretical model that they lay out, teachers' well-being deteriorates and contributes to a deterioration of the classroom environment and teacher stress when they lack the social and emotional competencies needed to meet the demands of teaching, causing a "burnout cascade" (p. 492). Teachers with high levels of social and emotional competence, on the other hand, are more successful. They are more capable of dealing with classroom demands, maintaining a positive classroom environment, developing and maintaining constructive relationships with their students, and establishing consistent classroom experiences that foster student learning.

### **Mindfulness Based Interventions**

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are tools to reduce stress and promote emotional awareness and self-regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). MBIs have gained popularity as a method of stress reduction, notably through Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction program. This landmark research was born in 1982 when Kabat-Zinn created a clinic at University of Massachusetts Hospital for patients suffering from chronic pain for whom traditional eastern pain management tools had not been effective. The clinic aimed to help patients with their pain by providing an intensive training in mindfulness meditation. Kabat-Zinn stated that the clinic was:

Meant to serve as an educational (in the sense of inviting what is already present to come forth) vehicle through which people could assume a degree of responsibility for their own well-being and participate more fully in their own unique movement towards greater levels of health by cultivating and refining our innate capacity for paying attention and for a deep, penetrative seeing/sensing of the interconnectedness of apparently separate aspects of experience, many of which tend to hover beneath our ordinary level of awareness regarding both inner and outer experience. (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)

Secular mindful awareness practices, while adapted from a number of religious beliefs, do not include religious belief, language, or ritual, and the reasoning for participating in such practices is grounded in research. Mindfulness and meditation as they will be discussed in this research, are centered around the concept of placing attention on the present moment, thereby creating an inner silence. The inner silence of meditation and mindfulness allows for the development of increased self-awareness (Venditti et al., 2020). Inner silence can therefore be considered a powerful tool to counteract the negative effects of overabundant environmental noise, thanks to its power to relieve stress-related symptoms.

### **Meditation and Buddhism, a Historical Framework**

In the traditional sense, meditation was a spiritual practice which developed within the Buddhist religious traditions of Southeast Asia to bring about certain desired mental states thought to promote the “enlightenment” of its practitioners. According to Thurman (2006):

Meditation translates from the Sanskrit Dhyana, Bhavana, and even Samadhi, which all designate organizations of the mind-body complex considered different from sensory and intellectual receptive states (as in learning) and intellectual reflective or discursive states, though they include these states sometimes. (p. 1765)

Nearly every world religion can boast some sort of meditative or contemplative practice included within its ritual base. However it has been primarily through the Buddhist tradition that meditation was introduced to the West as a comprehensive practice unto itself (Thurman, 2006).

Along with the development of self-inquisitive psychology and the psychedelic drug experimentation of the 1960's, meditation became popular in America. Since that time, the practice of meditation has branched out to include diverse practices within many fields, including psychology, medicine, therapy, social work, and education (Truman, 2006).

Formal meditation is best defined by looking to its origins within the traditional Buddhist literature. Although there is substantial variation within the diverse methodological perspectives of Buddhism, most schools agree that meditation can be broadly broken into two distinct categories (Lamrimpa, 1992):

1. Samatha – a form of meditation, which creates a stable mind capable of focusing single-pointedly on any phenomena.
2. Vipassana: – a form of meditation in which a calm, stable mind is able to perform analysis and inquiry into the nature of reality

These are broad categories, subject to interpretation, and encompassing a wide variety of individual techniques and practices. For the purpose of this literature review, we will focus solely on articles dealing with what can be considered samatha meditation practice. In addition, we will also include a subcategory of Samatha, referred to by its English equivalent: mindfulness.

### ***Mindfulness***

Kabat-Zinn (2005) 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. 144). Bishop et al. (2004) further categorized mindfulness in two

primary dimensions: (a) directing one's attention to the present moment and (b) cultivating an orientation to one's experience marked by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

Mindfulness is the ability of taking one's attention to the present moment without judgement, which can be learned through meditation or other forms of training (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness is described by Schoeberlein (2009) as a calm awareness of one's bodily functions, feelings, content of consciousness, or consciousness itself. As this definition states, the practice of mindfulness involves an awareness akin to the single-pointed concentration most commonly associated with Samatha and fits well within such a definition.

### ***The Relationship Between Meditation and Mindfulness***

Mindfulness has its roots in the Eastern contemplative traditions outlined above and is often associated with the formal practice of mindfulness meditation. In his 2003 paper, Jon Kabat-Zinn states that mindfulness has been called the "heart" of Buddhist meditation. Mindfulness, however, is more than meditation. It is "inherently a state of consciousness" which involves consciously attending to one's moment-to-moment experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Meditation practice is simply a tool used to develop the state, or skill, of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Western practitioners have used meditative techniques in a variety of mindfulness-based treatment services without the Buddhist rituals in which they were originally rooted. The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program (Kabat-Zinn, 1982) is an example of a clinical program that utilizes meditation to increase mindfulness. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) utilizes meditation as a means for mindfulness with depression relapse prevention in patients with clinical diagnoses of depression (Teasdale et. Al., 1995).

Concerns related to utilizing meditation and mindfulness within a classroom could be with the time required for training. An MBSR program typically involves a weekly session of two hours for eight weeks, and 45 min daily practices (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Kocovski et al. (2009) suggested looking for ways to include mindfulness services that don't take a lot of time. Examples that they utilized for their study of patients with social anxiety included “informal mindfulness of daily activities such as eating, showering, and walking.”

### **Meditation and Mindfulness in Relation to Stress**

Though there are many changes that we must endure as we ride out the pandemic, there are aspects to our mental wellbeing that we do have control over, most specifically, our responses to stress and change. Our response can dictate our sense of happiness, well-being, how we relate to our students, and interconnectedness with others. We need to respond to the forces at play in our lives both outwardly and inwardly. Ultimately it's not the stress itself that creates challenges in our lives, but rather how we respond to it.

There is a difference between reacting and responding to stress. Reacting is an automatic, mindless activity that is often fraught with emotion. Responding can allow us to examine the stress from a grounded vantage point and conscientiously choose our reactions. Responding mindfully can prevent a stress reaction cycle which can have negative effects on our emotional wellbeing and health (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Responding to stress does not take away the situation that is stressful, but it allows us to be in relation to it in a meaningful and thoughtful way. It allows us to adapt to the circumstances around us. Employing a mindfulness and meditation practice helps regulate our emotions to make us less reactive to situations (Patel et al., 2018). Self-referential processing can be influenced by meditation, and present-moment perception can be improved. Following mindfulness training, the default mode networks—which promote self-



awareness and include the midline prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex—can change (Tang et al., 2015).

### **Meditation and Mindfulness in the Classroom**

The role of mental health in today's school children, as well as educators, cannot be underplayed. Meditation and mindfulness create tool sets to be used to mitigate the mental health concerns. For instance, Britton, et al. (2012) found that in comparison to controls, meditators were substantially less likely to experience suicidal ideation or thoughts of self-harm. The researchers created a randomized, controlled study that examines the effects of teacher taught mindfulness over six weeks. Meditation instruction in the intervention group involved instruction on Internalizing, Externalizing, and Attention problems. There were 101 participants in grade six (55 boys, 46 girls). Two classes were involved: an Asian history course which implemented a meditation practice (intervention group) and an African history course which did not have a meditation practice (controlled group). The efficacy of the intervention was assessed through student self-reported measures. These findings indicate that mindfulness training can provide both specific benefits to mental health in students.

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic is isolating, and this is necessary to mitigate the spread of the virus. This isolation can deepen the feelings of stress, however incorporating meditation can help offset the negative side effects of stress. Sabinga et al., (2016) had examined the effect of mindfulness meditation has on public school children. Through a randomized active-controlled trial in Baltimore City, these researchers implemented the MBSR curriculum versus general health curriculum to 300 fifth to eighth grade students. Somatization, depression, negative affect, negative coping, rumination, self-hostility, and posttraumatic symptom severity were all significantly lower with the students who practiced MBSR.



### ***Compassion***

Holding space for the uncharted processes involved in navigating a global pandemic requires compassion for how educators treat themselves and their students. Through meditation and mindfulness, we allow for an enormous amount of compassion for ourselves and others. The very act of tuning into the present moment allows us to witness personal stresses and burdens without experiencing the weight of reacting to them. This allows us to feel self-compassion as well as compassion for others. In a 2013 research study, Condon et al. sought to find a relationship between meditation and its effects of compassionate responses. They created scenarios where the participants demonstrated compassion in a setting unbeknownst to them where they could offer their seat to someone who was experiencing discomfort. The researchers found that meditators offered their seats to the sufferer more frequently than did the non-meditators. It's also interesting to find that of the meditators in the study, there was no notable difference between the meditators who studied compassion meditation vs the meditators who studied mindfulness meditation. This supports the idea that it's not the "type" of meditation that is provided, but rather that participants are participating in meditation and mindfulness to experience its global effects (Condon et al., 2013).

### ***Emotional regulation***

Mindfulness is a helpful tool to boost emotional regulation. Educators need to be skilled at managing their emotions as they hold the space for learning. Friese et al. (2012) found that a brief period of mindfulness meditation may serve as a quick and efficient strategy to foster self-control when resources are low. This particular study showed that participants who engaged in meditation had the least emotional response to the disgusting videos that were meant to elicit a

response, in comparison with others who had not participated in meditation, suggesting that meditation is a helpful tool in managing emotional regulation.

### ***Attention***

Mindfulness and meditation can also help cultivate attention. Research suggests a positive correlation between mindfulness meditation in reducing attention problems (Crescentini et al., 2016). This can help teachers become more mindful in how they interact with students. It can help them listen, not just to the words they hear in their minds, but the words that others are saying. Applying attention means becoming present. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2017) writes:

To be mindful means to be aware. It's the energy that knows what is happening in the present moment. Lifting our arms and knowing that we're lifting our arms - that's mindfulness, mindfulness of our action. When we breathe in and we know we're breathing in, that's mindfulness. When we make a step and we know that the steps are taking place, we are mindful of the steps. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. It's the energy that helps us be aware of what is happening right now and right here, in our body, in our feelings, in our perceptions, and around us. (p.17)

Through presence educators can become less likely to override each other in speaking, more patient in allowing each other time to say what they need to say. They become better in tune with the needs of those around them, as well as their own needs.

### ***Physiological Effects of Mindfulness and Meditation***

Meditation has been shown to affect not only the psychological and emotional responses, but physiological responses as well. Gregoski et al. (2011) found that meditation can create significant changes in systolic blood pressures, diastolic blood pressures, and heart rates. Barret et al. (2018) monitored people during a cold and flu season and found that the groups who either

meditated or who participated in regular exercise were globally less sick than the control group. These findings can be even more relevant during today's pandemic as teachers are considered frontline workers and have potential to be exposed to a number of viruses, including COVID-19.

### ***Applying Meditation and Mindfulness***

Meditation and mindfulness are attention and focus on the present moment. A good place to start is in noticing our own bodies (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). We can discover where stress may linger in our own bodies, where we experience pain or discomfort. We can pay attention and allow for wonder to the fact that we are in fact, breathing, alive, and that some process that exists beyond our mental awareness allows for this to be so. We can appreciate that even though stress and challenge exist in the world around us, our bodies carry with it the wisdom to breathe, to keep our hearts beating, to oxygenate our cells, and that we do not need to actively participate in the wonder of how this all works together even despite the stress and turmoil that may exist around us. We can allow ourselves to remember that even though our classroom normals have shifted tremendously due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and others around us and perhaps ourselves are hurting, we still can drop into the simplicity of our breath and our body awareness and appreciate that we are, in fact, okay in the present moment. We are free from stress in these moments of awareness, even though the outside world has not changed.

Meditation is meant to take a moment and drop in and create an awareness of how things are in our bodies, in our minds, or in our classrooms in the present moment. Through holding an awareness, we are not attempting to change, fix, or do anything at all, merely giving attention to the situation that exists around us. Through this awareness we can empower ourselves with the knowledge that we already have a tremendous amount of skill for whatever stressful situation comes our way. When we respond, instead of react, we can access the years of education and

personal wisdom yielded through experience and offer that in a mindful way to the situation at hand.

### *Equity*

Time and financial costs can be a concern for many, and if time and finances were important to the practice, it would not be considered an equitable intervention. However, a significant benefit to maintaining a mindfulness and meditation practice is that there doesn't need to be a financial investment, and the time investment can be as short or as long as is desired, but should be consistent. Ameli, et al. (2020) sought to find a relationship between a brief but consistent mindfulness-based program and stress levels. Their studies revealed that there were reduced levels of stress and anxiety in participants who carried out the mindfulness-based intervention, versus the participants who carried on with life as usual. This is valuable information for educators who want to incorporate mindfulness into their lives but do not have the financial means or the time.

There may be concerns about the religious contexts of meditation and mindfulness. Though care is often, and appropriately, taken to differentiate mindfulness from Buddhism, the fact remains that Buddhism had a direct impact on the development of leading clinical applications of mindfulness, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. This historical framework could be a point of alienation for certain religious groups or for people with preconceived ideas about religion.

Equity training within schools could benefit from incorporating mindfulness into their curriculum. Sanchez-Flores (2017) examined the effectiveness of equity training based on mindfulness, compassion, and an intersectional and complex identity. In her study she had two pilot groups; one group that was presented with mindfulness exercises in addition to equity

curriculum, and the other group was only presented with equity curriculum. Her findings revealed the group with the mindfulness exercises demonstrated enhanced and emotionally involved self-awareness.

### **Conclusion**

Meditation provides a number of positive effects. It helps reduce stress and it helps increase mindfulness in everyday living, apart from meditation. It is free to all and can be accessed at any time. The literature contains extensive research surrounding the effects of meditation and mindfulness when it is incorporated into a classroom setting, however this is little research about the effects of meditation on educators.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

Teaching is a stressful profession and many teachers experience daily stresses that can often lead to teacher burnout. When teachers are stressed, their ability to effectively teach and connect with students is diminished. This is further exacerbated by the fact that educators are teaching through the unprecedented times of COVID-19. Teachers across the country are being asked to flip their classrooms to online or hybrid learning as well as navigate the challenges of keeping themselves safe and healthy during a pandemic.

Mindfulness based meditation practices are meant to foster moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness through the act of paying attention. Meditators are invited to pay attention, including to their breath and body through body scanning while maintaining an open heart (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). There are numerous health benefits of meditation including reduced levels of stress and emotional regulation (Ameli et al., 2020), overall physical health and increased immunity (Barrett et al., 2018), and overall emotional wellness (Emerson et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that meditation has long acting benefits that can be employed later during times of stress (Desbordes et al., 2012).

#### **Research Questions**

There is a gap in the literature tracking the effect that a regular collegial (a group of teachers) meditation practice has on the inner life of an educator. This gap is further enhanced by the fact that at the time of this research we had been living through a pandemic and educators were experiencing higher levels of stress.

As educators navigate the stresses of teaching, particularly during the time of a pandemic, what are the effects of a consistent personal and group meditation practice on the inner world of today's educator?



## **Description and Rationale for Research Approach**

This is a mixed methods, phenomenological research project based in a constructivist worldview. It's mixed methods because it uses both qualitative data in the form of participant response and quantitative data in the form of likert scaling. It's phenomenological because the participants are drawing insights from their own direct experiences. Finally, it's constructivist worldview because each individual participant conveyed their experiences through their own lens, their own constructed worldviews.

The research was phenomenological in how participants were asked to describe their direct experiences of not only the act of meditation, but also how it affects their world and their relationship to it. They were given open ended questions and were not guided in their answers, but rather the data was collected through their own individual interpretations and experiences.

Meditation is meant to take a moment and drop in and create an awareness of how things are in our bodies, in our minds, or in our classrooms in the present moment. In doing so we are able to view the world in a detached way, and ideally, without emotion but rather with an acceptance for what is there. In this sense we can seek understanding of the world we live in, and our relationship to it. This worldview, where one develops meaning and understanding of the world in which they live, is referred to as social constructivism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.8). As a social constructivist researcher, I approached each participant with open ended questions and listened carefully to not only the participants' answers, but their nonverbal language, their body positioning (for instance, open or closed?), and listened for the way they described their experiences of meditation as it relates to their inner world and their world as an educator.

A mixed methods approach was chosen in order to yield not only the qualitative data made available through individual interviews and focus group sessions, but also to track individual trends through a likert scaling survey at the start of each meditation group session. To research the effects of meditation on the experiences of educators, I utilized a convergent mixed methods approach, which is described by Creswell (2018) as collecting both qualitative and quantitative data and then comparing the results to assess whether they support each other. (p. 219).

## **Research Design**

### ***Research Site and Entry into the Field***

Participants in this research study were secondary educators who worked at various locations. I was previously friends with two of the participants, while the others were work colleagues of my friends. Five out of eight participants worked together. Of the 15 teachers who were invited to participate, 8 teachers ultimately agreed.

Educators were recruited to participate utilizing single-stage sampling in which “the researcher has access to names in the population and can sample the people directly.” (Cresswell, 2018 p. 158). Each participant was contacted using email. The majority of the participants were teachers with whom other participants had working relationships and so there was some level of existing rapport among the group. Prior to the meditation group and participant interviews starting, educator participants provided signed consent to participate in the study through the form of email.

### ***Participants and Sampling Procedure***

All participants were employed and working as secondary education teachers at the time of the research. The purpose of recruiting teachers was to understand the effects meditation had

on their experiences of teaching, specifically during this peculiar and stressful pandemic of COVID-19. In all 15 secondary education teachers were invited to participate, with eight ultimately agreeing to participate in the study. Participants were introduced to the research, the purpose of the study, details on the design, and how the writing prompts and interview data were to be collected, used and protected.

The participants were all white educators who taught secondary education. All participants were between the ages of 35-45 except for one, who was 59. All participants were married (two were married to each other) or in relationships except for two, who lived alone. Two of the educators taught music. One taught secondary science. One was a long-term substitute. Two of the educators taught art. One educator taught a career technical education program. One educator taught English. All participants had previous experience with meditation to varying degrees. One had extensive experience while one had very little experience.

All interviews and group meditations were conducted through the online Zoom platform, so no specific locations needed to be procured. Each participant had access to a school issued laptop device as well as access to I.T. support should they need it.

## **Methods**

The key understanding in the data is that the qualitative data, which was primarily procured through interview and focus group questions, and the quantitative data, which was collected in the form of likert scale surveys, were both specifically centered around the lived experiences of each participant in relation to meditation. The qualitative data was appropriate because it helped illuminate the effects and meaning that meditation brought to each individual participant. The quantitative likert scaling was appropriate because it allowed for the tracking of trends to determine relationships between meditation and the lived experience of each

participant. The analysis and interpretation of the data were then converged to create a broader understanding of the research questions.

Prior to the group meditation sessions commencing, participants were interviewed individually through Zoom (See Appendix A for Initial Interview Questions). Each participant was asked to answer each of the following questions as honestly as possible. Participants agreed to be recorded and I later transcribed each interview.

Once all the participants were interviewed, we held six weekly group meditation sessions via Zoom where I presented a guided meditation between 10-20 minutes in length. Additionally, each participant was asked to meditate individually for at least five minutes a day, 3-5x/week independent of the group meditation.

At the start of each group meditation, I asked informal focus group questions to the group to invite casual reflective conversation (Samples questions included in Appendix B).

As the researcher I am also a registered nurse, a credentialed teacher, and I have maintained a personal meditation practice for the past 3 years. I conducted the group meditation using guided mindfulness-based meditation techniques, including body scanning and breath awareness. Each participant was asked to assume a comfortable location and to limit distractions.

Following each group meditation practice, I administered a short likert scale survey to each participant. Survey questions were given after each group meditation. Questions were submitted on a google form and were answered using the following likert scale rating (See Appendix C for Focus Group Likert Scale Survey). Results from the

Once the six weekly group meditation sessions concluded, I administered an exit interview for each participant via google form and followed up with voice interviews with various participants to follow-up or for further clarification. These interviews were performed

via zoom or over the phone, depending on the preference of the participant. Analytic memos were taken during the interview (See Appendix D for Exit Interview questions).

### ***Data Analysis***

The qualitative and quantitative data was gathered concurrently using a convergent mixed methods design approach. Qualitative data analysis methods were used to analyze the interviews and focus session discussions. All interviews and focus groups were video recorded and completely transcribed by me. I maintained analytic memos after each focus group to make note of observations about the interactions within the group. I also wrote analytic memos after each of the interviews to note nonverbal cues, body positioning, and other observations. Analytic memos were obtained directly after the group discussions to capture data about the interactions. Such memos were analyzed on the same day they were procured because “[data analysis is] like a fox pursuing a hare. The graph is the hare’s track, and I must stay close to that hare. I have to be able to react and change course frequently” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). The quantitative data from the participant interviews was inputted into a spreadsheet document, in addition to a written document with pie charts.

Transcribed interviews and transcribed focus groups were open coded by hand. Expected and unexpected codes emerged from the data. The text data was segmented through the identification of key words and phrases. Descriptions of participant experiences were developed through examining the common themes between the more significant statements made from each participant in the interviews. A description was developed based on their experiences. Additionally, the quantitative data was also open coded at first. The data was organized by assigning the codes into categories after concept mapping was utilized. Concept mapping was

performed with the intent of searching for connections or gaps in the data. Themes emerged through the analysis of the concept map and reflections on the findings.

### *Validity*

I have spent several years learning about meditation and performing daily meditations. I have personal experience and insight to the effects of meditation, and this affects my bias. Additionally, many of the participants are friends and colleagues, and this relationship had potential to affect the validity of the research.

Each participant was followed for eight weeks, through the pre and post interviews as well as the six weekly meditation sessions. This longer-term participant observation “provides more complete data about specific situations and events than any other method” (Becker, 1970, pp. 51-62). I was able to observe each participant as they participated in the group focus questions and the meditations themselves as they unfolded over the course of the study. This allowed for the observation of every day habits in regards to communication, stress, and meditation. However, it also allowed me an opportunity to view the exceptions to each participant's norms. For example, because of the long-term involvement I was able to observe whether a participant was conveying a heightened sense of stress, a bad mood, or perhaps a physical discomfort. These observations were recorded in the form of analytic memos.

These observations from the long-term involvement, coupled with the participant interviews, allowed for rich data, or rather “data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Becker, 1970, pp. 51-62). This data helped eliminate a potential tunnel vision in relation to my bias and attempted to offset the instinct to focus on data that supported my hypothesis. This rich data helped reveal the true experience of each participant and it helped me discover phenomena that were not predicted.

An effective way to rule out “the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do” (Maxwell, 2013, pg. 126) is to review the data and conclusions with the

participants through the process of respondent validation. This can be an important way to identify my own personal biases and misunderstandings. Respondent validation was obtained during the pre and post interviews with several participants.

Outlying data, or data that did not support my hypotheses about the effects of meditation, must still be integrated into the analysis. This discrepant evidence is an important means to support the validity of the research, and can or cannot be persuasive. The supporting data and the discrepant evidence was consolidated, and this created new, unpredicted findings. It was acknowledged to “assess whether it is more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion, being aware of all the pressures to ignore data that do not fit your conclusions” (Maxwell, 2013, pg. 126).

To further support the validity of the research, I utilized several different means of collecting data, a process known as triangulation. This included participant interviews, focus group discussions, analytic memos, likert scaling, and direct observations. Employing so many different sources of data “reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (Maxwell, 2013, pg. 128).

Since I used likert scaling I was easily able to integrate quantitative data into the research. However, since the research utilized intensive long-term involvement, it in turn provided an opportunity to monitor trends in participant stress levels. There is additional quantitative data that can be applied by utilizing “simple numerical results that can be readily derived from the data” (Maxwell, 2013, pg. 128). For example, participants feeling highly stressed and exhibiting nonverbal stress cues were assigned a number. Participants feeling relaxed, at ease, or exhibiting nonverbal cues of comfort and peace were assigned a different number. Through these simple



numerological comparisons, I was able to track trends. This is known as quasi-statistics according to Becker (1970).

## Chapter 4: Findings

As a graduate student, writing this thesis on meditation proved to be excruciatingly painful. I entered into this subject of meditation because it was something that meant a lot to me. I found that when meditating regularly, I am able to reset my emotions, find a sense of inner peace that I'm able to carry into the rest of my day, and value myself more. Consequently, my world as an educator improved. I was more patient, more kind, and I was better able to focus when I had a consistent meditation practice.

These were such profound findings for me I thought that surely these changes that I'm experiencing could be experienced by other educators. I knew that at the time of writing my thesis, we were in the middle of a global pandemic and teachers all over the world were being asked to completely redesign their classrooms and navigate a different style of teaching. I knew this was stressful. I knew that people were dealing with their own personal concerns about the risk of COVID-19.

So when it was time to write my master's thesis I decided to create a meditation group for educators where we could meet every week. And we did. We had a lovely time and there are some truly positive findings that came out of the sessions, most notably a beautiful community of educators coming together to connect with one another and with themselves.

However when the time came to convey my findings, I struggled immensely. Though I know the power of meditation is significant, it felt insignificant to talk about the subtle nuances of my interviews and observations in a way that made this group feel meaningful. But as I came to realize, it is through the subtle nuances that the effects of meditation can come to reside. It's the centering on the breath to find a quiet moment. It's the focus on the work when the mind

wants to escape elsewhere. It's keeping cool when in the presence of others who are heated and angry.

And really, it's the subtle nuances of meditation that not only brought us to the space of shared community, but that kept us coming back to it, even after the research had ended. We successfully created a space where we carved out time to spend towards inner reflection and reflection as a group. We were living through a time of forced isolation and online learning, and it became clear that one of the most significant takeaways from this group was that everyone was lonely, in their own way. We looked at, reflected upon, and addressed the negative self-talk that can occur with a meditation practice, as well as some of the reasons why these educators do not meditate on their own. Finally, we saw that through this meditation group, the community offered a sense of hope. It was a vehicle for creating an opportunity to carve out time for oneself, and that carried with it opportunities to deepen our individual self-care practices.

### **Feeling lonely—Seeking Community**

This meditation group finds educators in a particularly interesting time in the world. One of the biggest side effects of existing during this global pandemic was the isolation, and the loneliness this brought with it. This meditation group allowed us a chance to connect with each other and form a community. It became an enjoyable experience to interact with each other through this online meditation group platform, and it carved out time for each person individually to connect with themselves in a way they may not have otherwise.

Prior to the group meditations themselves I had an opportunity to interview all of the participants individually. Some I had never met. Of the eight participants some had experience with mediation, while one participant (Jan, whom you will meet later) had none. But with the

interviews it became very clear that everyone had opted to participate in the research because of one overarching point: they were lonely, and they were seeking community.

One participant said that her primary stress relief came through social interaction, which of course was significantly thwarted with the pandemic. Jan acknowledged that the work demands have been significantly heightened since the pandemic and that she finds her stress relief has been through “just decompressing at the end of the day and talking to my boyfriend.” She said she needs to interact with others to feel balanced and this is usually obtained through scheduling activities with friends, and hosting parties. She lamented the fact that they had scheduled a party in the upcoming weeks that they were forced to cancel because of COVID-19.

Another participant, Jill, said “I spend so much time with my kids, helping them with homeschooling, or my [work] kids on zoom. Sometimes I can go all day without adult interaction until [my partner] Kevin gets home and even then we don’t always talk right away.”

Participant John said in his interview, “I guess there are existing friendships [in the group], and for some of the folks in the group, it's more of a, you know, I'm friends with anybody, you know, but I guess it's more of a acquaintanceship with some people, but well not really knowing them or not knowing them, you know, it's nice just to have other people around.

As the researcher I had concerns with hosting the meditation form on zoom. I wondered if the spirit of community would be able to exist in the limited space of our individual computers. But just many educators have come to learn that a classroom community can be formed online through zoom, the same could be said for us. We shared vulnerable thoughts, friendly banter, advice and even jokes. As John said in his post group interview, “it [the meditation group] felt like a group of friends. That felt good.”

### *Finding balance during the pandemic*

We were nearly one year into a global pandemic when the meditation group started. As could be expected, expectations related to the role of the educator changed significantly during this time. Teachers were required to alter their curriculum and classrooms to meet the needs of students through online learning. Many teachers experienced great discomfort from doing this and felt an additional burden of stress with meeting these new needs. One participant said, “Teaching is a stressful position in and of itself. And then you have this whole, like, not wanting to get this terrible disease on top of it.”

One educator described the struggles with hybrid teaching (teaching online in addition to in person) in addition to the already existing demands of the job:

With the hybrid learning we have so many problems in the trenches trying to reach kids, and make sure that we're in touch with them and we connect with them. A whole lot more steps are involved with the forms we have to fill out which is crazy, but you know reaching out to kids, making calls home, and documenting and making the call home isn't nearly as bad as the documenting process afterwards.

Another teacher said:

Yeah, I think just before our February vacation, you know, the kids were acting weird. Everybody's stressed out, it was just I was reminding myself, it's like this this time of year. Sometimes this stuff happens anyway. But it was compounded with COVID-19. So the things that we experienced probably this time last year, it's just kind of off the charts with the pandemic.

With significant changes and forced isolation, stress levels were high during this school year. Many struggled to meet the demands of the job. One participant stated “I just never feel like I

can relax. There is always something I need to do [at school].” This change to previously established curriculum and daily routines within the classroom brought with it a new layer of stress and responsibility.

### ***Carving Out Time and Sneaking in Mindful Moments***

As I interviewed each educator in the meditation group individually, it soon became clear that the element that everyone was seeking to create more of in their lives was a sense of balance. Everyone admitted to feeling their own version of stress, and each had their own way of managing that. One teacher said “I’ve got a nice classical guitar and the soft strings so the nylon strings on that thing in a quiet, comfortable house with a cat nearby. That’s almost a form of meditative prayer for me.” Another teacher admitted that her balance is more sought in “just decompressing, just unwinding, just sitting and being like with my, my boyfriend my spouse, you know, that just having to be able to talk outside of work and getting together with friends.” Another educator lamented that though she misses the social losses of COVID-19, “I’m still able to get out in nature.” Jan wrote that:

The only time I have, and it's not even like downtime, but it's driving. Yeah, and that's not like, you know, you have to be aware of your surroundings and everything but it is my quiet time without sometimes just without the radio, just I just quiet, and it isn't my car.

Jan stated that, “because I’m always thinking about the next class and the students and what they need are answering emails. So there’s like never really any just stop and downtime. Yeah, if I do then I just want to close my eyes and go to sleep.”

The concept of carving out time to focus on meditation, mindfulness, or even self-care, was a struggle noted by the study participants. All participants agreed that meditation would

benefit their lives, and all participated voluntarily. The group carved out the time for meditation for them.

### ***Really fun***

As a facilitator of the meditation groups I started each session with asking questions about the week, about stress, and about mindfulness, and letting the conversation organically unfold. Most everybody was quite engaged with the process and some stated they were happy to be there. This became evident in the dialogue that occurred before each meditation session. There were many active participants who appeared to be fully engaged in the questions presented, offering their own insights and experiences. In the likert scale questions that were presented at the start of each session, there was a place for comments, and one participant wrote “I’m really enjoying these [meditation sessions].” During the more guided meditations especially, participants would make comments about how they felt the meditation went. “This was a beautiful meditation tonight,” and, “I really liked that one.”

### **Self-Criticism and "Worried About Doing It Wrong"**

When the meditation sessions began, I did not know Jan. She was a friend of a friend and we had never met. When I interviewed Jan, she was very polite. She held her body stiffly and would sometimes laugh nervously however she was forthcoming in her answers to my interview questions.

Jan was a little different to others in the group in that not only did she not have experience with meditation, she didn't express a true desire to learn it either. “I never really understood what the big deal with meditation is. I just know it’s hard for me to quiet my mind.” When interviewed prior to the experience of group meditations, Jan expressed reservations about group meditation. She said if group meditations were a:

Matter of like going to a yoga class where you're being told to kind of close your eyes and breathe and whatever then sure, I'll do that, you know, and try to focus on me and not what everyone else is doing....Sometimes it's hard to just focus on myself and what I need, because if I'm in a room all of a sudden I want to help others. I definitely am not a control person or want to take over. But I want to be the person who helps all the time. So it's hard to immediately take time out for myself.

This discomfort that Jan notes in the meditation process came to light several times during her interview as well as throughout the actual meditations. Jan often made references to herself meditating incorrectly. “I keep opening my eyes to see what everyone else is doing” and “I’m not good at this.”

Jen remained engaged during the meditation sessions but could often be seen opening her eyes during the meditations or fidgeting. She stated during one of the sessions that “I just don’t know what to do with myself.”

The last group session was a reflection on self-love. Jen was quiet during this session and did not readily offer up conversation during the pre-meditation check in. When the meditation was over and she had logged off she wrote to me via text saying, “Thank you Summer for the sessions. I’m not good at expressing self-love or taking time for myself. My quiet time is taking a nap and still my mind doesn’t rest.” When I reached out to Jen the next day to schedule the post meditation sessions interview, she did not return my messages and I was not able to interview her.

Without the benefit of follow-up interviewing, I’m not sure what exactly Jan’s experience was like during our sessions, but I do know that she showed up for every session. Though she expressed her own discomforts with meditating and her self-evaluation of how she does it, she



was often found smiling and engaged during our group discussions. I'll admit that I was surprised that she did not respond to my post-interview request, because she had been so reliable during our sessions.

I was appreciative of Jan's insight in the meditation group because meditating was so unfamiliar to her. It really seemed to take her out of her comfort zone. Her comments that were critical about her meditation style were not isolated to just her. Participant Kendall wrote, "I like meditating, but I don't usually do it on my own. I'm not very good at shutting down my thoughts." Participant Kim said "I don't think I understand how to do meditation enough to do it with my students."

### ***Can't Do It On My Own***

As I interviewed everyone it became clear that meditation was understood to be a helpful tool to aid in stress reduction. However through interviews and the meditations themselves some experienced discomfort with what they viewed as their own inability to properly meditate. The members of our online community were, for the most part, new to meditation. They needed guidance and support to feel like they were properly meditating. There were sessions with eyes frequently opening and fidgeting, and this was generally mitigated with providing highly guided meditations. One participant stated in their interview, "To be honest, I don't think I've ever meditated correctly. I just can't turn off my brain."

### ***Needing Guidance & Guided Meditation***

Each meditation session consisted of playing a YouTube video with a ten minute guided meditation. However, in one of our sessions, the guided imagery was sparse with direction at the front of the video but the majority of the video being the sound of a crackling fire. After this meditation session ended and a dialogue ensued, it became clear that there were struggles with

not having a more guided meditation. One participant said, “Tonight was a bit of a struggle, I’m not sure I got there tonight. I’ve got some aches and pains tonight that I wasn’t able to really let go and like, relax.” Another participant said in this same session:

I think I do like the guided, because with a quiet [meditation], things are coming to my mind, and then my eyes pop open. My eyes just kept popping open because it was so quiet and I was like, you know, not that I was going to sleep or anything but it was almost like that, you know that total stillness was like, What do I do, what do I do?

This was valuable feedback for me as the facilitator. This meditation experience that was devoid of much mental imagery proved to be a challenge for some. The self-criticism seemed to be more pervasive. As Jan said, “I just didn’t know what to do with my thoughts.” All the participants agreed that they preferred more guided meditations. This scaffolded means to meditation was an easy tool to incorporate into the sessions and provided a valuable lesson in ways to maximize the group experience through guided meditations.

### **"Piggyback onto going for a hike"**

John is a 60-year-old man who has been a high school art teacher for the past 30 years. He lives in Maine, as he has his whole life. John is a large, overweight man. He has a very kind face and can often be seen softly, almost sadly, smiling when speaking to him. When I interviewed John, I had not met him before, but we had known each other through friends. He was very quick to open up. We quickly got into a space within the interview where he told me about his overall frustrations with his life and the stresses of his job. It was easy to settle into a quiet banter between the two of us. John appeared eager to participate, never hesitating, when asked a question and giving very thoughtful answers. In our interview he disclosed:

I'm single, not by choice, but just by circumstance, and reaching a certain age. I'm turning 60 in a month. And it's not old, but there are a lot of things... a lot of things I'm sort of juggling in my head these days and I'm trying to come to terms with the fact that the family wasn't meant to be for me, and some various other things. So you know I get home and I try to deal with these bigger issues.

John's insightful answers seemed to carry a pervasive sadness that came out as he spoke about his life and where he was. He spoke poorly of himself in his decision to not exercise and not take better care of himself:

I haven't been dealing with stress as healthily as I should. I tend to put stress sometimes in some of the wrong foods. I need to lose weight, and getting out and exercising and doing all this stuff would be great for it but I find myself in these really awkward cycles that don't really take care of my overall health.

But he remained hopeful. He wanted to make better decisions. And he wanted to be happier

I hope it [the group meditations] reduces the stress I described. I hope that they could be a healthy form of contending with the stress, and maybe even from there I can, you know, piggyback on to throw my boots on and go for a hike. I think it's a good starting point. I feel like the fact that this came up now... I'm really grateful you asked because this, this is really well timed for me.

The idea that beginning a meditation practice could help motivate other healthy decisions beyond the actual meditation itself is one that I support. For myself personally, I was fully engaged in the meditation process with everyone else, and found that holding the space for these meditations created in me that desire to maintain health that exceeded our sessions. I ate healthier around the meditation times. I was more in tune with my own stress levels and consciously centered myself

prior to each session. But most notably I walked away from the meditations, and even more so the dialogue as a group, energized to do better and be better in my life.

One participant, Kim, told the group that, “after last week’s session I turned my phone off and enjoyed a night of being disconnected.” Participant Jill said that she enjoyed being out in nature and that, since doing the meditations: “I was much more calm when I helped [my son] Sam with his homework the next day.” These two examples demonstrate two participants making choices within their lives that better served them since doing the meditations, one in disconnecting from her phone, the other in being more patient with her son. It appeared as though the effects of the meditation lingered past the meditation practice itself and seeped into the routines of their own lives.

### ***Effects of Meditation***

The theme of meditation creating continued positive changes in the lives of the participants was noted in the likert scale assessments that were given out at the start of each session. When asked “After the meditation last week I felt more calm”, 72.7% agreed that they did, while 18.2% strongly agreed. (See Appendix E: Results from question “After the meditation last week I felt more calm.” This finding suggests that there are positive effects that occur after the meditation session has occurred. For participant John who wanted our sessions to help him “piggyback onto going for a hike”, this data suggests he would be better supported in that endeavor with a meditation practice.

For the statement “I noticed I was able to redirect my emotions during time of stress” 81.8% of the participants agreed, while 9.1% strongly agreed. (See Appendix E: Results from question “I was able to redirect my emotions.”). For the statement “I was able to quiet my mind

during the meditation.” 18.2% strongly agreed, 63.6% agreed, and 18.2% were undecided. (See Appendix E: Results from question “I was able to quiet my mind.”)

These numbers hold the positive mindsets of the participants within the group. Though there are a number of ways the research could be improved (more time, more participants, etc.), we are still left with the understanding that the meditations helped to improve the overall quality of the participants’ lives.

### ***Going to Keep Doing It***

When the allotted time for the research concluded at six weeks, the overall consensus with the participants and myself was that we had created a community that we really enjoyed. One participant said, “I like how we are able to talk like we have all known each other for a long time.” Another shared that, “This has become a really beautiful part of my week.” In her closing interview Jill said, “Thank you for doing these, Summer. You did a really good job of creating a cool community. I hope you keep doing these!”

The group does continue to meet at the time of this writing. We have included a few new members, and we have had some valuable dialogues. It has become a place of comfort and peace. Though my personal research for this endeavor has completed, it is delicious to enjoy the rewards of this mindful gathering of educators, all of whom I now call my friends.

### **Conclusion**

What are the effects of meditation on the inner life of today’s educator? The findings of this study indicate that while there is an overall consensus that meditation can bring positive results to daily life, the struggle often lies in carving out the time to meditate. We learned that there is an overarching desire for community and connection with each other. The findings also indicate that there is a strong inner critic that can become present when sitting in the quiet

moments of meditation. Finally, it became clear that meditation was looked at as not only a positive adjunct to healthy living, but also as a launching point for other health-giving self-care measures.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The meditation group brought about some key understandings. We learned that everyone was experiencing elements of loneliness, and that through our meditation group we were able to form a small community. This community helped briefly restore a sense of balance that many had admitted to be struggling with during the pandemic when social distancing was required. We also learned that there is a lot of self-criticism with meditation, and though the participants were aware of the positive benefits of meditation, several were quite critical of their abilities to properly meditate. The majority needed to experience meditations that were guided, because the meditations of sitting in silence brought about a strong inner critic. Finally we explored the idea of meditation being a stepping stone to bring about positive changes in other aspects of living. One participant talked about his desire that meditation would be something that he could piggyback off of to make other healthier choices in his life, like better eating, and hiking more often. The participants agreed that meditation was an adjunct to healthy living that they wanted to experience, and that the meditation group was a place of community that supported the healthy decisions they wanted to make in their own lives.

Educators experience a high amount of stress as it relates to the demands of their jobs, and this stress has been further compounded by the global pandemic of COVID-19. Significant research has been conducted surrounding the phenomenon of teacher burnout. According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout, occurring in individuals who do “people work,” exhibit emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal success. Participant John is a good window into how this could play out. He told me:

I definitely experienced times where I just don't want to be there [in the classroom]. I need to retreat away from stuff. That's because I haven't, I probably haven't put the right

boundaries in place for a period of time or something. Things get to you. When I'm feeling stressed physically, because I feel like I begin to sort of like, slouch off. I don't take care of myself like I should.

John has been an educator for 25 years, and said "My heart just isn't in it like it used to be. There are too many things they need us to do." This lack of motivation and enthusiasm that he exhibits is supported in the literature review. It should also be noted, however, that John was incredibly appreciative of the meditation group and went to every session except one, which he missed accidentally when he fell asleep.

Meditation is the act of tuning into the present moment and this can be more readily achieved through the act of meditation. Kabat-Zinn (2013) suggests that new practitioners to meditation and mindfulness utilize guided meditation as they begin their practice:

Almost everybody finds it easier, when embarking for the first time on a daily meditation practice, to listen to an instructor-guided audio program and let it "carry them along" in the early stages, until they get the hang of it from the inside, rather than attempting to follow instructions from a book, however clear and detailed they may be. (p lxiv).

This premise of utilizing guided meditations became quite clear when, instead of our usual guided meditations, I had used a meditation that was mostly just the act of listening to a crackling fire. This lack of guidance made several of the study participants feel uncomfortable, and question their own ability to meditate that day. "I just didn't get there today," one participant admitted.

The idea of being self-critical and lacking confidence in meditation was a notable finding in this study, however the concepts of self-criticism being a barrier to meditation was not a phenomenon that I had found in the literature. For participant Jan, her self-criticism eventually



resulted in her leaving the study and not becoming available to a follow up interview. Jan had little to no experience with meditation, and though she participated in all of the sessions, she demonstrated a level of discomfort with her words, her nonverbal cues, and ultimately with her self-removal. Exploring the discomfort that educators have with meditation could be valuable research for administrators who seek to incorporate mindfulness practice with their educators and students.

### **Implications for the Literature**

Mindfulness is a helpful tool to boost emotional regulation self-awareness (Tang et al. 2015). As an educator, to be skilled at managing your emotions through self-control as you hold the space for learning is important. There can be considerable benefit to utilizing small, no cost breaks in the day to reset emotions, a major benefit being to serve as a quick and efficient strategy to foster self-awareness (Friesse, et al., 2012). With mindfulness and meditation being free and readily available at any time, they have potential to be powerful change agents in fostering mental health in today's educators.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

#### ***Carving Out Time***

The beauty of a meditation practice, and group meditations, are that they are essentially free and available any time. Meditation and mindfulness create tools that are available to us as individuals, and as communities, that can be employed simply by returning to the present moment.

One of the barriers to meditation, as became apparent within this study, was that educators do not tend to create the time for meditation. Stress can be a pervasive component to teaching in the current world climate, and excuses can be readily made for teachers to avoid

meditation. However a small amount of time can nearly always be carved out of even the busiest day. Any smart phone owner can admit to the temptations of “wasting time” on social media and playing games. If teachers and administrators could instead carve out time to dedicate to centering themselves and becoming present through meditation or mindfulness, even for a few minutes a day, this could yield results that would greatly benefit any classroom, any department, or a school as a whole.

One way to overcome this barrier of time could be to have school policies around dedicated time for meditation. This could include five minutes at the end of a class period or five minutes at the start. It could look like five minutes carved into the day just prior to lunch. At one high at which I work, there are five minutes carved into every 5th period class, twice a week to watch school announcements. If a similar time was carved out for teachers, administrators, and students to stop and re-center (meditate), this would increase the likelihood of meditation occurring for more people.

With a policy in place for carving out dedicated time for meditation, it would provide a uniform time and purpose for all educators. This would create a familiarity and mutually agreed upon use of the time allotted. This could be implemented within the classroom, and with teachers leading the way, students would benefit from the time available to reset their emotions, and the guidance to do so.

Dedicated time like this would only be effective if the tenants of meditations were understood, and the benefits espoused by the teachers and administrators, as they led their classrooms. This would require some professional development. Bringing in either professionals or staff trained in meditation and mindfulness could create a uniform platform of understanding.

Providing educators, administrators, and students with tools for meditation could also be a helpful adjunct to a more wellness-based mindset. There are apps available that provide guided meditations and mindfulness techniques. An example of one of these apps is the app, CALM. This app provides small, bite-sized meditations that meditation leaders could use. Additionally any student, teacher, or administrator would benefit from utilizing an app like CALM outside of the carved out time. Providing them with the tools for a guided meditation would likely increase the desire to meditate on their own.

### *Teacher Led Communities*

In addition to a carve out of time, administrators could encourage teachers and students to form their own meditation communities. If administrators could create a physical environment where students and/or educators could congregate for the purpose of meditation, it would increase the likelihood that group meditations would occur. The beauty of group meditations are the support that individuals can provide each other. But also, as found within this study, the group dynamic helps its members feel supported and can be a powerful force for creating desirable changes.

Administrators could help encourage teacher (or student!) led meditation groups by providing a physical space for staff and or students to meditate. Again, this would be better achieved with professional development espousing the importance of self-care and the tenants of meditation and mindfulness, which would help to gather momentum and desire.

Through teacher led meditation communities, staff and/or students are also receiving the benefits of being a part of a community of like-minded individuals who also seek greater self-care and awareness through meditation. These communities could help foster our innate desires

to belong, and could bring professionals closer together through group organization and organic friendships that are formed.

### ***Curbing the Negative Self Talk***

A barrier to meditation is the negative self-talk that occurs in regards to individual practice. This would be more prevalent with individuals with little to no experience with meditation. Administrators with a desire to support meditation at schools could help support this negative self-talk with greater education and with practice. Administrators who adopt meditation and mindfulness practices, who can speak confidently to their own experiences, will help empower teachers who may be nervous about implementing mediation within the classroom. Professional development will help administrators and staff with empowerment through knowledge, but the spirit of desiring meditation should be conveyed at the top. It would be easy for a school to create a carve out time policy for meditation, only to have it be not enforced and thereby not supported and lacking motivation. Administrators should have a “do as I do” approach in order for a system of built in meditation time to be effective.

Just as it’s critical for an educator to embody values and regulation of emotions when teaching social emotional learning with their students, it will be critical for administrators and teacher leaders to embody the understanding and ideally, practice, of meditation through their own lived experience. Teacher led communities would help in this endeavor as well, but it is important for a sense of normalizing and demystifying meditation to be pervasive within the school community, so that those with negative self-talk around meditation are more inclined to work through that and towards a meditation practice that they can then espouse to their own students.

Curbing negative self-talk would be another motivation to provide educators (and students) with an app-based system of guided meditations. This would help empower those who want to create a space in their lives for meditation, but do not feel confident in doing so. The app-based system would also provide a uniform experience for staff and students, one that they could discuss and expand on together.

### ***Implications of Meditation Within Schools***

Through school policies carving out time for meditation, and support through guided meditations, professional development, and teacher led communities, one can expect to find trickle down effects of meditation within schools. With a successful implementation of a meditation practice embedded into the school bell schedule, schools are able to benefit from the positive effects of meditation. Teachers and administrators alike will have the opportunity each day to divorce themselves from their busy days and reset their emotions through meditation. This emotional regulation will serve educators when they are asked to adapt and change to the onslaught of changes that can come quickly within schools. They will be better able to handle the stresses of their job through the simple yet powerful reset of daily meditation.

Administrators will also benefit from teacher led meditation communities. With teachers finding and creating communities to be involved in, this will likely increase their job satisfaction and therefore staff retention. These communities will foster friendships, and can thereby create means to offer support to educators as they adjust to the demands of the job and the changes that they are frequently presented with throughout the school year.

### ***Implications of meditation within classrooms***

With administrators and faculty engaging in meditation practice, and all of the aforementioned by products of this engagement, teachers will be able to develop confidence in

their own abilities to lead meditation practices, and this could be embedded into their own classrooms. Teachers would have the opportunity to not only embody emotional regulation through their practice, but they could teach it to their students as well. Through a well-supported classroom environment in which the teacher confidently leads and espouses the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, the rewards of meditation could be perceived at the student level. As any middle or high school teacher could attest to, it is hard to be a teenager, and providing these students with skill sets to navigate the struggles of school and life have the potential to be life changing.

### ***Equity***

The beauty of a well-coordinated, properly supported policy surrounding support of educator meditation practices, is that the skill sets of meditation and mindfulness can be provided to all students. All students can participate without fear of financial or domestic resources. This makes meditation a highly equitable practice.

Providing meditation within the classroom, if done well, will help students identify their own emotions and give them an opportunity to reset. This ability to reclaim their emotional space and their focus could extend well beyond the classroom and into their home lives as well. As all teachers know, students do not come from level playing fields. Some are afforded many more opportunities than others. Some are forced to learn to navigate emotionally taxing situations at home through situational need. This skill of meditation and mindfulness, of re-centering their attention on themselves, and resetting their emotions, is a skill set that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. Meditation could be the gift that allows students from emotionally challenging home environments to decompress from their high emotions and focus on school and on wellbeing.

## **Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

Creating a meditation practice within a school community will come with a variety of nuances that would need to be addressed. This study is but a small measure of support for such a policy change, but it should be noted that if undertaken, could be recreated for more robust results.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

This study only utilized eight educators, and therefore only provided a limited amount of information. The participants of the study were not diverse. All were white men and women and between the ages of 35-60. No administrators were asked to be a part of this study. The study itself consisted of six weeks of weekly meditation, and all sessions took place via zoom. Each meditation session was only ten minutes long and with a weekly meeting, did not allow for an extended period of time for the habit of meditation to develop.

A mixed methods approach to data collection was used in this study, but the likert scale questions were the only pieces of evidence that provided quantitative data, and that data was extremely limiting, including only six questions that were answered at the start of each session. The qualitative data limitations were that one participant declined to be interviewed for the end of study interview. The interview questions could have been more compelling, more inquisitive into the nature of how meditation was affecting their lives. Zoom meditation sessions limited the visible nonverbal cues.

### ***Future Research***

For more robust information, future research could obtain much more compelling and comprehensive data. A more diverse and expanded participant pool would yield a much deeper pool of data. Based on the school community, the research might want to be expanded to include

educators who teach at the middle or elementary school level. Administrators should definitely be included in future data, especially as their participation and enthusiasm would be strong predictors of success for school policies surrounding meditation within the school and classroom.

Though zoom allows for participants to be free of the limitations of transportation, a zoom community is an entirely different experience than an in-person community. There is so much that is not conveyed through zoom. Sounds and body positioning cannot always be noted. More importantly participants will likely not feel as though they are a part of a community as deeply as they may should they be in person, engaging in the small interpersonal interactions that occur in the real world settings.

There are so many quantitative pieces of information that could make this data more compelling. Measuring heart rates, pupil dilation, even sweat, could be pieces of data that help us understand the physiological effects of meditation and mindfulness. If the resources allowed, providing electroencephalogram images and data strips would present a whole host of brain data that could add much to our knowledge of meditation, specifically in how it relates to the components of the school community and their response to stress.

## **Conclusion**

Meditation is a skill set. It takes practice and understanding. It could benefit from coaching and support. But the research surrounding the benefits of meditation is strong. If we want to build school communities that have tools to withstand and even thrive under the stresses of an ever changing world, meditation would be a valuable tool to integrate.

Meditation provides the gift of being truly present. Meditation knows no bounds. It requires no money or resources. It requires no permission and is always available. It can benefit all members of a community, no matter the road that brought them there. Meditation is the gift of



teaching people to show up for themselves. As a researcher, as an educator, as a nurse, as a mom, and as a human, I can truly think of no greater gift.

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## **Appendix A: Initial Interview Questions**

Pre-Interview questions

1. Do you consider yourself stressed? What are the most stressful parts of your job?
2. How do you cope with the stress in these situations?
3. In your opinion, what is meditation?
4. Do you have any experience with meditation?
5. What do you hope to gain from meditating regularly?
6. What are the most stressful parts of your job? How do you cope with the stress in these situations?
7. What concerns do you have about meditation or about attending group meditation sessions?

## **Appendix B: Sample Focus Group Questions**

- Did you have any observations about last week's meditation that you care to share? For example, did you enjoy it? Was it too long or too short? Did you have a hard time hearing it?
- Did last week's meditation bring up any emotions or trigger any responses that you would feel comfortable to share?
- How did you feel during the meditation? For example, did you feel frustrated, peaceful, agitated, sleepy, etc.
- Did you feel last week's meditation was "successful"? Why or why not?

## **Appendix C: Sample Focus Group Likert Scale Survey**

Survey questions given after each group meditation. Questions will be submitted on a google form and will be answered using the following likert scale rating.

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Undecided
- (4) Agree
- (5) Strongly Agree

During the meditation last week I was able to quiet my mind.

After the meditation last week I felt more calm.

After the meditation last week I felt more agitated.

I noticed that I felt happy more often last week.

I noticed that I was able to redirect my emotions during times of stress.

I was able to meditate independently for at least 5 minutes for at least 3 days last week.

**Appendix D: Exit Interview Questions**



- You identified elements of your job in our pre-interview that you found stressful. Did you notice any changes in your reactions or feelings towards these elements since beginning the meditation practice?
- What concerns came up for you while participating in group or independent meditations?
- Were you able to consistently meditate on your own throughout this research? Why or why not?
- Do you have any observations you'd like to share about your overall emotional wellness while participating in our group meditations or your individual meditations?

## **Appendix E: Results from Survey Questions**



Figure 1 Results from "After meditation last week I felt more calm"

This week I noticed that I was able to redirect my emotions during times of stress

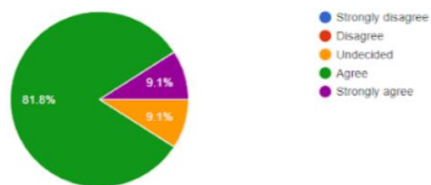


Figure 2 Results from "This week I noticed I was able to redirect my emotions during times of stress"

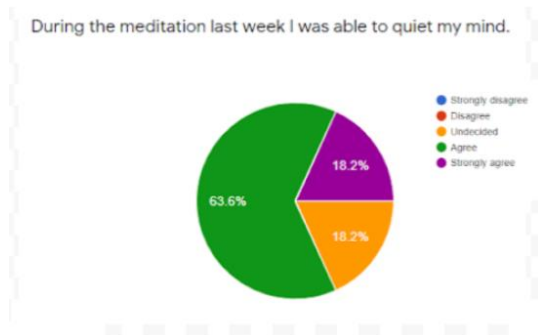


Figure 3 Results from "During the meditation I was able to quiet my mind"