

Considering the Prospect of Cultivating Mindfulness in Teacher Education

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The teaching profession suffers from significantly high rates of attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Lindqvist, Nordänger, & Carlsson, 2014), in part, because teaching is stressful work (Kokkinos, 2007; Kyriacou, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). In an attempt to identify the characteristics of teachers who are able to withstand teaching's concomitant stress, scholars of teaching and teacher education have turned towards examining the constructs of teacher resilience (Gu & Day, 2007; Hong, 2012; Le Cornu, 2013; Tait, 2008) and teacher wellbeing (Chang, 2009; Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Appreciating the importance of teacher resilience and teacher wellbeing is especially timely within the current climate of educational policy. Neoliberal paradigms of accountability for teaching and teacher education emphasize performance on standardized measures such as test scores (Bullough, 2014; Cochran-Smith, Piazza, & Power, 2013; Schwarz, 2015), eclipsing the significant role that teachers' personal wellbeing plays in shaping teachers' resilience in the face of professional stress (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; S. J. Ball, 2003; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009).

In this article, I argue that mindfulness—a metacognitive strategy used to regulate thoughts and emotions—is a powerful tool that can

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improve novice teacher resilience in the face of the stress, tension, and vulnerability that accompanies the endeavor of learning to teach. In particular, I will advance two theses: First, mindfulness cultivates in-the-moment awareness, an ability that helps novice teachers to navigate the complexity of the classroom. Second, mindfulness invites novice teachers to exercise nonjudgmental acceptance of their own thoughts and feelings. I will argue that while the former aim (in-the-moment awareness) aligns with current frameworks of teacher education, the latter aim (nonjudgmental acceptance) present current frameworks of teacher education with a challenge. Cultivating both components of mindfulness, however, can be considered to be promising approaches towards strengthening novice teachers' expertise and resilience.

The Framework of Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 144). In other words, mindfulness entails being keenly aware of what we are experiencing in the present moment and being nonjudgmentally accepting of what we observe. Critically, the intention of mindfulness is not to deny or reject unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or sensations, but, rather, to cultivate a clear and open receptiveness to our lived experience (Bishop et al., 2004; Cullen & Brito, 2014).

It is worth highlighting the fact that being unconditionally non-judgmental of our thoughts and emotions is challenging. The goal of mindfulness, however, is not to achieve a perpetual state of equanimity; rather, the goal of mindfulness is to be aware of when we are experiencing negative affect and/or when we are being judgmental of our own inner experience (Mikulas, 2011). Said differently,

All individuals continually judge their inner experiences... Mindfulness misinterpreted as the capacity to accept all psychological experience without judgement can easily remain perceived as just another good idea or an unattainable ideal to impose upon oneself. However, in essence, mindfulness entails an invitation to metacognitively observe one's habitual judgement non-judgmentally and acknowledge and provide space for a lack of acceptance and inner struggle, when present. (Solhaug et al., 2016, p. 847)

Research has shown that making room for inner struggle has many salutary effects. In particular, when individuals try to push away their negative emotions (for example, in the case of depression or anxiety), individuals often exacerbate these unwanted emotions (Hayes, Follette,

& Linehan, 2004; Orsillo & Roemer, 2011; Roemer & Orsillo, 2009). When individuals attempt to force their inner experiences into conformity with notions of what these experiences “should” be, feelings of frustration and inflexibility may result (Rogers, 1995; Weiss, 2011). In other words, rejecting, denying, or condemning our unwanted thoughts or emotions serve only to augment these thoughts and feelings, creating a vicious cycle (e.g., We feel bad that we are feeling bad). Conversely, being aware of our inner experience (e.g., identifying when we are feeling anxious) and adopting a nonjudgmental attitude towards this experience (e.g., not trying to push this anxiety away) has been shown to help reduce the body’s physiological stress response (Erisman & Roemer, 2010; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011) and decrease our emotional reactivity (D. M. Davis & Hayes, 2011; Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014; Solhaug et al., 2016). The practice of mindfulness, in this way has, across a variety of contexts, been shown to reduce emotional distress and to improve quality of life (K. W. Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Greeson, 2009; Virgili, 2015).

In the context of teaching, being mindful of thoughts and emotions in the classroom empowers teachers to be more sensitive and responsive to their students’ intellectual and emotional needs (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Garcia & Lewis, 2014; Jennings, 2015; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Macdonald & Shirley, 2009; Rodgers, 2002; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Srinivasan, 2014; Tremmel, 1993). Furthermore, being trained in the practice of mindfulness has been shown to improve the emotional regulation and the professional wellbeing of practicing teachers (Benn, Akiva, Arel, & Roeser, 2012; Emerson et al., 2017; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Frank, Reibel, Broderick, Cantrell, & Metz, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016; Sharp & Jennings, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). The benefits (and challenges) of mindfulness, however, have not yet been fully explored within the context of teacher education. In the remainder of this article, I will explore two fundamental dimensions of mindfulness—in-the-moment awareness and nonjudgemental acceptance—and discuss their relevance for the professional development and wellbeing of novice teachers.

Novice Teachers and In-the-Moment Awareness

In order for a teacher to determine what the most tactful and pragmatic course of action might be in any given situation, the teacher must first be able to assess the situation accurately (Rodgers, 2002). Thus, there are a number of components to teaching that require keen in-the-moment awareness: navigating the multidimensionality of the

classroom; noticing and responding to student thinking and feeling; and, being aware of the filtering effect of one's own beliefs.

First, one of the foremost challenges of teaching is navigating the complexity of the classroom (Berliner, 2001; Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986). All teachers must negotiate between a robust set of simultaneous practical intentions as they teach (Kennedy, 2005; Zimmerman, 2015), and, this process of negotiation can be confusing and cognitively overloading for novice teachers (Feldon, 2007; Moos & Pitton, 2013). Novice teachers, therefore, must learn to recognize the multiple goals and concerns that emerge from one moment to the next (Gholami & Husu, 2010; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Mason, 1998, 2002). If novice teachers are keenly aware of what is unfolding in the classroom from moment-to-moment, they can resist being overwhelmed by the classroom's complexity.

Second, novice teachers must learn to notice, interpret, and respond to their students' thoughts and feelings (Kennedy, 2016; Rodgers, 2002; van Manen, 1991). Teachers must learn how to analyze evidence of student learning (Hiebert, Morris, Berk, & Jansen, 2007), how to build on emerging student understandings (Lampert et al., 2013), and how to develop meaningful relationships with their students (M. McDonald, Bowman, & Brayko, 2013). While some of this work is intellectual (e.g., the acquiring of content knowledge), the interpersonal and quasi-improvisational work of teaching (Sawyer, 2004) can only be mastered within authentic teaching contexts (D. L. Ball & Cohen, 1999; M. McDonald et al., 2014) and through practicing the art of being aware, moment-to-moment, of what is unfolding within and between students (Garcia & Lewis, 2014; Lampert, 2001). The more novice teachers are able to be attuned to what students say and do, the more novice teachers will be able to craft sophisticated and ambitious pedagogical responses in real time (Kazemi, Franke, & Lampert, 2009).

Third, in order to become professional teachers, novices must become aware of how their own subjectivity might be shaping their patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in the classroom (Larrivee, 2000). Preservice teachers enter into their professional preparation with a robust set of beliefs about teaching and learning rooted in their own past experiences (Britzman, 1986; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Hollingsworth, 1989). For example, a mathematics teacher might believe that lecturing is sufficient to catalyze student learning; furthermore, the teacher might believe that if one of her students does not master the given material, then it must be the case that the student simply did not work hard enough (Holt-Reynolds, 1992). Or, a novice teacher may refrain from exercising authoritative classroom management strategies because the novice desperately aspires to mirror his mental image of

his own favorite teacher (Korthagen, 2010). These schema of teaching and learning are, of course, reductive and potentially problematic, and, therefore, one of the aims of teacher education is to provide novice teachers with new experiences and new evidence that complicate these preexisting beliefs (Ambrose, 2004; Bird, Anderson, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Additionally, teacher education must help novice teachers to become aware of when these preexisting beliefs become activated while teaching, or else a novice teacher's curricular and instructional approaches may be reflexive and reactive, rather than rooted in professional knowledge and pedagogical tact (Korthagen, 2010; Larrivee, 2000; Mason, 2002; van Manen, 1991).

For these three reasons, in-the-moment awareness—one of the key components of mindfulness—is a critical habit of mind for novice teachers to develop.

Novice Teachers and Nonjudgmental Acceptance

I argue that novice teachers also benefit from the nonjudgmental acceptance of their own thoughts and feelings. Much research illustrates that the endeavor of learning to teach is a turbulent journey characterized by tension, doubt, and vulnerability (Beach & Pearson, 1998; Britzman, 2003; Meijer, de Graaf, & Meirink, 2011; Pillen, den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013; Poulou, 2007). Novice teachers often feel split between seemingly contradictory teacher identities, which can lead to frustrating, stressful, and demoralizing emotional states (T. Brown, 2006; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1992; Dugas, 2016; Friedman, 2006).

Smagorinsky and colleagues (2011), for example, present the case of a novice English teacher who quickly began enacting the traditional, teacher-centered approaches to instruction that she had decried only a few months earlier. Although this teacher had entered the profession with the intention of teaching literature with an emphasis on her students' interests and creativity, her classroom, relatively quickly, became focused on grammar and procedural approaches to essay writing. This teacher acknowledged, with great regret, that the teacher she saw herself becoming was "not me" (p. 279). Brown (2006), similarly, chronicles his interaction with a novice teacher who tearfully admitted "that she hated the person she had become" (p. 676). This sense of splitting within one's self is also exemplified by Hoover (1994), who shares the journal of a novice teacher who consistently compared "the ideal vision of herself that she had imagined versus the tense, boring, and incompetent persona she felt she had become" (p. 91). Indeed, self-deprecating reflections from novice teachers are legion within educational research, including, "I am

doing what I don't believe" (Bullough et al., 1992, p. 83), "It seems like this person [I'm becoming] is very unlike me" (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1996, p. 73), and, "I am the teacher that I never wanted to be and it hurts to say that" (Cooper & He, 2012, p. 98).

In part, these self-deprecating assessments may be linked to the fact that these novice teachers have not yet come to terms with the fact that teaching is an inherently paradoxical craft characterized by tension and uncertainty (Elbow, 1983; Helsing, 2007; J. P. McDonald, 1992; Palmer, 1998). Although all teachers hold multiple (sometimes conflicting) practical intentions (Kennedy, 2005), the tensions between these practical intentions may be especially pronounced (and uncomfortable) for novice teachers (Kennedy, 2016). For example, a novice teacher may worry about how to be compassionate towards off-task students while still enforcing rules consistently (Martin, 2004; Weinstein, 1998) or how to afford students the opportunity to explore ideas on their own while still ensuring that students learn accurate knowledge (Cuban, 2007; Hammer, 1997).

The tension between any two practical intentions may create a "knot" in the teacher's thinking (Wagner, 1987), leaving the teacher trapped between two equally desirable (but seemingly mutually exclusive) options. For example, Wiggins and Clift (1995) examined the reflective journals of student teachers and were able to identify "oppositional pairs" of conflicting beliefs. One teacher struggled between seeing herself as the nurturer of students' ideas and seeing herself as the authoritative (and potentially punitive) evaluator of those ideas. This conflict caused the teacher significant frustration and stymied her professional development as, over the course of months, the teacher remained unable to revise her practice productively.

Given that tension appears to be characteristic of the endeavor of learning to teach, and, given that novice teachers have the proclivity to be frustrated and stymied by this tension, I argue that cultivating the ability to nonjudgmentally accept one's own thoughts and feelings may help to increase novice teacher's resilience. Specifically, as novice teachers make room for tensions within their thinking and feeling, novice teachers may improve their ability to acknowledge and reconcile these tensions without feeling cognitively and emotionally overwhelmed (cf. T. Brown, 2006; Pines, 2002).

The Prospect of Integrating Mindfulness into Teacher Education

I have, thus far, argued that the cultivation of mindfulness in teacher education has the potential to improve the wellbeing of novice teachers. In this section, I will discuss the opportunities and the challenges related

to the prospect of integrating mindfulness into the curriculum of teacher education. In framing this discussion, I will treat the two components of mindfulness—in-the-moment awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance—separately.

First, there are already efforts in teacher education to cultivate novice teachers' in-the-moment awareness in the classroom. For example, the prominent contemporary framework of practice-based teacher education (Grossman et al., 2009; M. McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013; M. McDonald et al., 2014) underscores how novice teachers must learn to teach in and from practice. Being immersed in authentic situations is, indeed, essential if novice teachers are to cultivate their ability to attune themselves to unfolding classroom events. Second, deliberate professional development efforts have been designed to help teachers improve their ability to notice pertinent elements of the classroom. Sherin and van Es, for example, have developed an extensive research agenda involving the use of teacher video-clubs to develop teachers' ability to notice salient moments of students' mathematical thinking (Sherin & van Es, 2009; van Es & Sherin, 2008). These video-clubs focus teachers' reflective attention onto what students are saying and doing in order to cultivate teachers' ability to identify and professionally interpret student thinking as it unfolds in the classroom in real time (see also Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen, & Terpstra, 2008). Hence, we can consider both practice-based teacher education and video-based professional development as efforts that have been designed to cultivate novice teachers' in-the-moment classroom awareness.

The component of nonjudgmental acceptance, however, may be more difficult to integrate into current paradigms of teacher education. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the neoliberal accountability systems that currently govern programs of teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013) are less concerned with novice teachers' wellbeing and more concerned with their performance on standardized measures (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). This technocratic regime of high-stakes accountability is not concerned with whether or not novice teachers nonjudgmentally accept their own vulnerabilities. The message that performance on high-stakes assessment is all that counts can serve to exacerbate novice teachers' experience of stress and vulnerability (S. J. Ball, 2003; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2009).

Second, because current paradigms of teacher education seek to frame teaching as a profession, novice teachers are taught that there are, indeed, definitive ways of thinking and acting as a professional teacher (D. L. Ball & Forzani, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Grossman & McDonald, 2008). It is posited that all professional

teachers share certain professional knowledge, professional practices, and professional dispositions and, furthermore, that developing these professional ways of being requires extensive professional preparation (D. L. Ball & Forzani, 2009; Dottin, 2009; Kennedy, 1997; Murray, 2008). Novice teachers must learn how to “see what matters” in the classroom (E. A. Davis, 2006, p. 21; Moore-Russo & Wilsey, 2014; Seidel & Stürmer, 2014). This complicates the prospect of nonjudgmental acceptance, because, if teacher educators consistently highlight that there is a “correct” way of thinking and feeling in the classroom, then it may be difficult for novice teachers to nonjudgmentally accept their thoughts and feelings given that novice teachers know that their thoughts and feelings are perpetually being evaluated by their professors and supervisors (see Greenwalt, 2008; Toshalis, 2010).

Some Considerations

In this article, I have presented the cultivation of mindfulness as a potential method of strengthening novice teachers’ resilience in the face of the stress, tension, and vulnerability that often characterizes the journey of learning to teach. While mindfulness has been shown to be an effective way for practicing teachers to strengthen their resilience (Benn et al., 2012; Emerson et al., 2017; Flook et al., 2013; Frank et al., 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schussler et al., 2016; Sharp & Jennings, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016), the application of mindfulness in the context of teacher education requires further experimentation. I will close with three final thoughts.

First, notwithstanding the challenges that I have described in this paper, there is a plethora of evidence that mindfulness is a valuable habit of mind for practicing teachers to exercise. Therefore, it seems prudent for future researchers to experiment with the implementation of mindfulness training in the curriculum of teacher education. Throughout a teacher’s career, teaching can be expected to remain emotional and stressful work (Hargreaves, 1998; Kottler, Zehm, & Kottler, 2005; Lampert, 1985; Palmer, 1998). Given that mindfulness has been shown to be a beneficial metacognitive strategy for practicing teachers, novice teachers will likely benefit from beginning their careers equipped with the habits of mind of mindfulness. Furthermore, the in-the-moment awareness that mindfulness advocates is already argued to be an important component of teacher education (e.g., Rosaen et al., 2008). Thus, incorporating mindfulness training into the curriculum of teacher education seems to be a natural extension of the work already taking place in teacher education.

Second, despite common cultural misconceptions, the work of teaching is not second nature (Labaree, 2000; Murray, 2008). In order to teach in a way that affords all students with an opportunity to engage in meaningful learning, teachers require professional knowledge and ambitious practices (D. L. Ball & Forzani, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Therefore, the nonjudgmental acceptance implicated in the practice of mindfulness cannot replace the professionalism of teaching. Equipping preservice teachers with the knowledge and practices required for ambitious, professional teaching should remain the primary goal of teacher education. Nonjudgmental acceptance and teaching professionalism are not mutually exclusive; rather, I argue that the nonjudgmental acceptance of one's inner experience can and should be considered as a way to support novice teachers along their journey of learning to teach, not as a replacement for the primacy of teaching's professionalization.

This leads to my third and final point. Because novice teachers have so much to learn and so many practices to master and so many seemingly contradictory roles to assume, the endeavor of learning to teach is often characterized by stress, vulnerability, and tension (Beach & Pearson, 1998; T. Brown, 2006; Bullough et al., 1992; Pillen et al., 2013). I argue that the nonjudgmental acceptance of this tension may increase the resilience of novice teachers. The practice of mindfulness is uniquely powerful in its ability to make room for the experience of tension: "mindfulness entails an invitation to metacognitively observe one's habitual judgement non-judgmentally and acknowledge and provide space for a lack of acceptance and inner struggle, when present" (Solhaug et al., 2016, p. 847). Since tension and vulnerability are almost inevitable elements of a novice teacher's experience, the practice of mindfulness—the invitation to be nonjudgmental of judgmental thoughts—may increase novice teachers' resilience, improve their wellbeing, and strengthen their resolve to continue along the path of professional development, thus buffering them against emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Conclusion

In part, the power of mindfulness rests in the fact that, as humans, we cannot always control what our lived experience is. Of course, if we could unfailingly control our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, then we would never experience any tension or vulnerability. Individuals suffering from anxiety, for example, would simply tell themselves to stop feeling anxious feelings, to stop thinking anxious thoughts, and to stop experiencing butterflies in their stomach. In reality, however, attempts to control our lived experience often backfire and serve only to

exacerbate our discomfort (Hayes et al., 2004; Orsillo & Roemer, 2011; Rogers, 1995; Weiss, 2011).

The most productive recourse in any stressful situation, therefore, is to become mindfully aware of what we are experiencing and to nonjudgmentally accept our experience. Paradoxically, it is the acceptance that we offer to ourselves that empowers us to change. Similarly, perhaps as novice teachers embark on the journey of becoming professional teachers, teacher educators should encourage novices to be nonjudgmental of their inner struggles. The acknowledgement and acceptance of tension and vulnerability may be the most powerful way in which the practice of mindfulness can strengthen the resiliency of novice teachers.

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