Teachers' Experiences with Mindfulness: A Narrative Inquiry

by

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Abstract

In the midst of the rapidly changing landscapes of schools, philosophical and ideological debates around education reform and the importance of social and emotional learning have become commonplace. To recognize the mental health needs of youth, teachers are asked to create safe and nurturing learning environments where students are able to negotiate the multiplicities and complexities of their lives (Johnson, 2008). But teachers have mental health needs of their own, and teaching has become more socially and emotionally demanding than it has been in the past (Jennings, 2011).

The practice of mindfulness meditation has emerged as one of the ways of addressing the social and emotional needs of both students and teachers in school settings. This study is an inquiry into how the practice of mindfulness meditation shapes the lives of teachers, in and out of school landscapes. Drawing upon narrative inquiry as a methodology that recognizes teachers as knowledge carriers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and on the works of psychologist Carl Rogers, who is known as the founder of the humanistic psychology movement, for this study I designed a narrative inquiry where I engaged in research conversations with two classroom teachers and one school administrator over the course of two years.

This narrative inquiry illuminates teacher practices and norms that are inherited as part of the dominant narrative, and how resulting tensions and areas of friction shape and continue to shape teacher identities. My time with the teacher participants has revealed problems and opportunities in the collective story of teachers who are moving towards authenticity while being committed to practicing and sharing mindfulness in schools.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Michelle Johnston. The research project of which this thesis is a part received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Project Name: "Teachers' Experiences with Mindfulness: A Narrative Inquiry," No. Pro00053283, 1/26/2015.

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This is teaching
This is mindfulness

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Buddhist Roots

Historically, mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhists appreciate mindfulness as one of the seven factors of awakening, the backbone of a practice that leads to the end of suffering. Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield (1987), Americans who brought Buddhism to the West after studying with teachers in Burma and Thailand, describe a comprehensive path of cultivating wisdom and compassion that is facilitated by the restful and balanced energy of mindfulness. Although mindfulness is central to Buddhist teachings, it is not a religious practice. Bhante Henepola Gunaratana (2002), a Buddhist monk and scholar, describes mindfulness practice as having a "flavour intensely clinical, much more akin to what we call psychology than to what we would usually call religion. . . . [Mindfulness practice] is an on-going investigation of reality, a microscopic examination of the very process of perception" (p. 2). This quality of noticing, "without choosing, without preference" (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 23), is equally appealing to people interested in secular self-improvement and those seeking spiritual enlightenment.

The wide appeal of mindfulness is evident. The contemporary secularized version of mindfulness is a course developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn over thirty years ago in a clinical setting for those who were suffering from chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is but one of the Western models of the Buddhist practice that is available (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). In recent years, interest in mindfulness has exploded, fuelled by a thirst for ease and stillness. People are searching for an antidote to the increasing busyness and complexity of their lives and see mindfulness practices as a means of alleviating stress and anxiety. The goals that are shared between MBSR and Buddhist practices are: "reduced

suffering, enhancing positive emotions and improving quality of life" (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Yet despite its appeal, mindfulness is not something that can be purchased or acquired; it is a quality of consciousness that is not easily defined.

Defining Mindfulness

To date, there is no consensus within the scientific community as to the definition of mindfulness. Psychological research is often focused on the outcomes of mindfulness-based interventions rather than "the meaning and expression of mindfulness itself" (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Matthew Brensilver (2016) states that "no one group has the authority to define mindfulness," but now that mindfulness has entered the cultural zeitgeist and its impact is being felt in classrooms and in clinical settings, it is essential to encourage open and ongoing discussion among scientists, scholars, and practitioners in order to reach more of a consensus on definition (Brensilver, 2016). This discussion is important, yet due to the phenomenological nature of mindfulness, reaching a true consensus of definition is perhaps impossible, as individual experience influences the understanding. In an attempt to bring some shape to the concept of mindfulness, I will provide a working definition influenced by my own studies and lived experiences within communities of practice.

Mindfulness is both a meditation practice and a way of being, most commonly described as a quality of attention that notices without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). This present-oriented consciousness is characterized by feelings of being embodied, steady, and non-judgemental. Thich Nhat Hanh (2013a), a well-known Zen master and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, explains that "mindfulness requires letting go of judgement, returning to an awareness of the breath and the body, and bringing your full attention to what is in you and around you" (p. 5). Mindful attention and suspension of judgement is considered an

inherent capacity of the human organism (Brown et al., 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 1990), but as Vago and Silbersweig (2012) note, it can also be developed like a muscle. The process of building this mindfulness muscle points to the fact that mindfulness is a state, a trait, a process, and an intervention (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Mindfulness as Practice

As a particular type of lucid awareness, mindfulness is developed through a body of practices. When practicing mindfulness, attention is applied to an anchor of attention: body, breath, or any quality of the present-moment experience. For example, when practicing walking meditation, attention is generally anchored on the feeling of the feet lifting, moving, and being placed on the ground, but attention can also be opened up to include the warmth of the sun or other sensory perceptions of the present moment. Researchers describe this differentiation between practices as "focused-attention" vs. "open-monitoring" (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). In practice communities, open-monitoring practice is more commonly referred to as choice-less awareness. Over time, focused-attention practices such as breath awareness or slow, attentive walking generate a quality of attention that is kind, concentrated, and non-judgemental (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Typically, choice-less awareness is not introduced until one's attention has been steadied (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). This variation of practice can provide a challenge for researchers studying mindfulness, but regardless of the type of practice, the aim of mindfulness is to illuminate the inner workings of the mind.

It is a common misconception that a goal of meditation is to stop thinking. Mindfulness is not antithetical to thought; through mindfulness practice, one learns to have a new relationship with thought (Brown et al., 2007). As Brensilver (2016) describes, "we know that we are knowing." Recognizing mind states as they arise is the practice (Baer, Smith, Hopkins,

Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006). Because every part of the human experience is included in the meditation, there is an opportunity to witness the ways that we are either preoccupied by thought or avoiding and denying our thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Tara Brach, a teacher, psychologist, and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, D.C., describes the process of noticing thoughts without becoming engaged in them as "attending and befriending" (Brach, 2012). Calmly witnessing thoughts and emotions as they rise and pass is essential to the development of mindfulness.

Mindfulness Studies in Psychology and Neuroscience

A growing interest in mindfulness studies is being supported by findings in the field of neuroscience, where the complexity of neurocognitive processes during mindfulness practices is studied (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Some of these findings lend scientific credibility to psychological perspectives held by Buddhist thinkers. In the past few decades, cognitive psychology has made considerable progress due to the availability of neuroimaging technology, which reveals brain activity during cognitive tasks (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2013). As a result, psychologists and neuroscientists are making inroads into discovering how specific cognitive processes such as executive function are controlled and regulated (Olson & Hergenhahn, 2013).

Research on neural function has shown that cognition and emotion are interrelated as parts of a holistic psychological experience. Richard J. Davidson and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin have conducted studies that suggest the intentional cultivation of qualities such as kindness and empathy may attune individuals to noticing positive experience, resulting in psychological benefit (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013). Other studies show that regular mindfulness practice may act as a master self-regulatory mechanism

"with the power to transform maladaptive trajectories into more positive adaptive trajectories" (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Because mindfulness works with present-moment awareness, it is also helpful in therapy with people who are suffering from rumination (thoughts of the past) or anxiety (fear about the future) (Epstein, 1995; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Studies show that practitioners who undertake the systematic mental training that is mindfulness practice can develop the ability to self-regulate (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Instead of combating stress or negative thinking head-on and replacing it with positive affirmations like in cognitive re-framing, mindfulness works from the inside out through a shift in perception that can be precipitated by noticing without reacting (Flook et al., 2013). By not interfering and just letting emotions and thoughts be, the practitioner creates space to respond rather than react.

Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, and Davidson (2008) have shown in studies that mindfulness training is also associated with increased activity in cortical areas responsible for empathy and compassion. The process of becoming aware of emotional mind states and reducing attachments to worry and anxiety can lead to greater understanding of others, and as a result, increased pro-social behaviour (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). It follows that when one understands oneself, one is better able to understand others. This particular skill set is invaluable to teachers, and has led to the implementation of many mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) for both students and teachers. For this study I am more concerned with the effects of mindfulness on teachers, and will be discussing the literature that pertains to that.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions in the Classroom

Mindfulness in the classroom is being recognized as a legitimately beneficial practice to enhance executive functioning and build self-regulation. Pedagogies based on mindfulness point

inward to a way of authentic and meaningful learning that has the power to transform dispositions, and in turn, lives. Thich Nhat Hanh (2013b) suggests that the most authentic and enduring way to build a culture of mindfulness in a school is for the teachers to have a practice. A teacher practicing mindfulness is going to be an effective teacher in a myriad of ways. First of all, teachers who practice mindfulness are more apt to create a harmonious learning environment for their students, guided by emphasis on self-reflection, compassion, and personal responsibility within a supportive community (Hanh, 2013b). Ultimately, a teacher who is looking after their own wellbeing will be able to demonstrate "cognitive flexibility" (Benn et al., 2012) during times of stress, offering a model for students to emulate.

It is this understanding that a teacher's wellbeing has a profound effect on the classroom climate that has inspired several studies on the effects of mindfulness-based interventions. If teachers become mindfulness practitioners, will their interactions with students in the classroom be affected? One example of a self-reporting study on an MBI is a 2012 study by Benn, Akiva, Arel, and Roeser from the University of Michigan. Researchers used the Five-Facet Mindfulness Scale (Baer et al., 2006) to assess mindfulness capacities in teachers and parents of special needs students after they completed a five-week mindfulness training (Benn, Akiva, Arel, & Roeser, 2012). The findings suggested that teachers who practiced experienced increased awareness, less judgemental attitude, and had reduction in stress. The researchers explained that future work based on their findings might

> be an assessment of how and when mindfulness training affects *observable* behavior in family and classroom settings and what effects, if any, such changes have on children's academic, social, and emotional development. Positive outcomes from this line of

> research would have significant implications for a new generation of mindfulness based, school-delivered programs to support parents and teachers. (Benn et al., 2012)

Typically, participants are asked to self-report after an MBI. The flaw with self-reporting any kind of contemplative practice is that participants are likely to answer with more clarity following the intervention. Before the MBI, participants may report that they have many moments of concentration and awareness in their lives. Following an introduction to mindfulness, participants may have more clarity around how much of their life they are actually on autopilot or distracted.

Lisa Flook and colleagues from the University of Wisconsin used an observable measure as part of a multiple methods study on MBIs for teachers (Flook et al., 2013). First, the teachers completed a mindfulness course adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR model. Flook et al. then used the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (LaParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004) to measure teacher interactions with students. Research assistants were trained to observe and code video of classroom interactions including categories of emotional support, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. The results suggest that teachers who completed the MBI improved their classroom interactions. Interestingly, one of the results from the Flook et al. study that showed the most significant change after the MBI was self-compassion as measured using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) (Neff, 2003). In summary, the researchers explained that although initial results were promising,

> attention to fostering sustainability of practices beyond the formal intervention period may be necessary to optimize outcomes. Just as physical health is bolstered by regular exercise, the benefits of mindfulness for mental health are likely to grow from consistent practice. (Flook et al., 2013)

Just as there is a need for supports that encourage teachers to develop and sustain a mindfulness practice of their own, there is also a need for more research that recognizes and values the experiences and perceptions of teachers as they apply mindfulness in their classrooms. Self-report and observational studies are somewhat useful, but most MBI studies are concerned with "training up" the teacher so that they can share mindfulness with the students. My study is a qualitative exploration that explores the inner terrain of teachers by empowering them to tell their own stories using their own words. The work of narrative inquiry respects and recognizes teachers as knowledge holders who have insight into their own process as teachers and learners, as well as into their students. By inviting teachers to share their experiences, my study will add a rich and meaningful dimension to the existing research that informs mindfulness in schools. The narrative style of my research lends itself to reaching wider audiences, and should be compelling to teachers and administrators who are looking to understand mindfulness in a useful and practical way.

Background of Narrative Inquiry

The research methodology I have chosen is narrative inquiry, as developed by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly. Over the years, Clandinin and Connelly have worked to develop narrative understandings of life in schools. Their work began with conceptualizations of teachers' personal practical knowledge, that is, the experiential, moral, emotional, embodied knowledge teachers hold and express in their classroom practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

Narrative inquiry is based on a relational onotology, and is informed by cultural contexts and understandings of self and other. Narrative inquirers use the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space that I will describe in detail in Chapter 3 of this study. The philosophical

underpinnings of narrative inquiry are informed by the writings of John Dewey, which will be elaborated on in Chapter 3.

A Rogerian Approach to Narrative Inquiry

The psychological nature of this study called for a different kind of framing. I was called to the writings of humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, who is best known for revolutionizing the client-therapist relationship. Rogers' writings and theories lend a more psychological framework to the study of narrative inquiry.

Within clinical settings, Rogers pioneered a relationship-based approach that was driven by his belief and trust in human potential. He described his evolving relationship with clients, where he followed their lead during the therapy sessions, trusting the client's ability to point the therapy in the direction of the healing they needed: "I have come to trust the capacity of persons to explore and understand themselves and their troubles, and to resolve those problems" (Rogers, 1980, p. 38). Rogers (1980) saw his role in the therapeutic process as one of "providing a climate of real warmth and understanding" (p. 38). Although he never used the term "mindfulness," Rogers adopted a clinical approach that recognized that the movement toward present-oriented consciousness aided in full, authentic functioning (Brown et al., 2007).

Rogers' client-centred approach to therapy informed his student-centred approach to education. He wrote,

> I was finding that this new-found trust [derived from therapeutic relationships] . . . reached out uncomfortably in other areas. If I trusted my clients, why didn't I trust my students? . . . I found that I had embarked not on a new *method* of therapy, but a sharply different *philosophy* of living and relationships. (Rogers, 1980, pp. 37–38)

Accordingly, Rogers' 1969 book *Freedom to Learn*, which at the time was considered provocative, outlines pragmatics of student-centred learning, project-based learning, encouraging reflection, and instructional and evaluative feedback from the students.

Informed by findings in psychotherapy, Rogers (1969) applied a relational philosophy to the essential qualities for teachers or "facilitators of learning": 1) realness in the facilitator of learning, 2) prizing acceptance and trust, and 3) empathic understanding. Out of these, he emphasized that realness is the most essential quality. In *A Way of Being*, Rogers (1980) described realness in this way:

> I find it very satisfying when I can be real, when I can be close to whatever it is that is going on within me. I am convinced, however, that it is a lifelong task and that none of us ever is totally able to be comfortably close to all that is going on within our experience. (p. 14)

Rogers (1980) used the term "congruence" to describe the feeling of alignment that arises when one is in present-moment awareness. It is a feeling of full integration, which is akin to mindfulness—body and mind together as one (Rogers, 1980, p. 15).

Appreciation for embodied knowing is a thread that connects narrative inquiry with the Rogerian approach. Rogers (1980) explained,

> Knowledge *about* is not the most important thing in the behavioural sciences today. There is a decided surge or experiential knowing, or knowing at a gut level, which has to do with the human being. . . . [Understanding is] something more experiential, something having to do with the whole person, visceral reactions and feelings as well as thoughts and words. (p. 6)

Mindfulness Is about Revolutionizing Relationships

Research points to the presence of a caring and supportive adult as perhaps the single most important protective factor in determining resilience and success in youth (Johnson, 2008). Johnson (2008) reminds us that one way that inner resilience and emotional regulation is learned is from mentor modelling. It is imperative that youth at-promise can talk to adults they trust, who will not judge them (Lantieri, 2008). Patricia Jennings (2011), who developed a mindfulness education program for teachers, wrote, "When a teacher recognizes and understands students' emotions and the roles they play in the students' behaviour, the teacher can more effectively respond to the students' needs and instil trust and respect" (p. 135). When teachers are better able to listen to students in a way that includes an understanding of their own internal reactions to the dialogue, it improves their ability to defuse anger or frustration and respond with greater skill and compassion (Benn et al., 2012).

According to Shafir (2000), "most listening classes stress only the *mechanics* of good listening and give tips on how to behave like a good listener" (p. 4). The technique of active listening depends on a set of behaviours that can come across as fake and mechanical when applied without sincerity. Mindfulness is a practice that is based on the here and now; going over a list of dos and don'ts during the process is inauthentic. Authentic listening comes from a clear open mind—one that has been cleared of distractions and internal noise (Shafir, 2000). Mindfulness is a practice of looking deeply into ourselves to understand our own anger, judgements, and suffering so we can see clearly the barriers that keep us from appreciating the meaning and simplicity of the present moment (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Rogers (1980) describes it this way:

> I like it when I can listen to myself. To really know what I am experiencing in the moment is by no means an easy thing, but I feel encouraged because I think that over the years I am improving at it. (p. 6)

Authentic relating can only be accomplished in the present moment, and mindfulness practice is the way to quiet the mind so that we are truly available for others.

Narrative Inquiry Is about Relationships

One of the guiding principles of narrative inquiry is a deep respect for the relationship that develops between researcher and participants. The research recognizes the vulnerability of participants and honours them as knowledge carriers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). There is a need for more research that explores the lived-experiences of mindfulness practice on teachers (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). Many of the studies discussed in this chapter approach mindfulness as something that can be separated into distinct elements that are studied independently. But if mindfulness is relational and phenomenological, then it makes more sense to study its effect on lives lived. In my study, I attended to teachers' experiences as they storied their lives in the landscapes of schools and in relation to their students. I attended to the stories of teachers' reimagining their teacher lives and reorienting themselves through present-moment awareness. An inward orientation fostered through mindfulness practice illuminated classroom interactions for my participants. These are stories of teachers coming into congruency as they renegotiate themselves within the wider context of the school board, the curriculum, and other institutional narratives.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Why I Chose this Method

The methodology of narrative inquiry is a particularly good fit for this study of teachers' lived experiences with mindfulness. Narrative inquiry as developed by Michael Connolly and Jean Clandinin is both a methodology and a way of looking at experience that developed in part as a way to honour the experiential knowledge of teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Based in part on Dewey's (1938) concept of the continuity of experience, which holds that growth and learning arise not only from experience but also from "reconstruction or reorganization of experience" and subsequent meaning making, narrative inquiry explores the stories of research participants from a place of honouring the power of experience in human development. It recognizes that being human involves continually interacting both socially and relationally. The focus is "not only on individuals' experience but also on the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42).

This broad-based approach to the social and situational dimensions of experience is well-calibrated with my own research interests. These were shaped by my own experiences as a teacher and practitioner of mindfulness who was attempting to integrate mindfulness into my junior high classroom. My experiences with mindfulness practice were affecting not only the way that I related to my students; my experiences also impacted the way I storied myself in the role of "teacher." In order to engage critically with these experiences, I had individual research conversations with three teachers over the course of a year. These teachers were practicing mindfulness meditation in their lives as well as attempting to integrate it into their classrooms. Through attending to the stories of my participants, I shed light on my own experiences. In this

way, my participants and I were co-creating meaning for our experiences as mindful educators. In this chapter I will outline the steps of the research design, including descriptions of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, how I found my participants, and the conversations conducted. The final section of this chapter will include ethical considerations, which are embedded throughout the relational process.

The Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space

Mindfulness is most commonly described as an awareness that holds the experience of what is happening in the present moment. Because that experience is understood to be both context-bound and contingent, the concept is consonant with John Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, which is frequently cited as the philosophical underpinning of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Dewey's theories evolved out of a concern for humane and democratic methods of learning. He recognized education as something that is at once experienced and impactful upon future experiences. Experiences that are unpleasant or harsh can cut one off from a natural curiosity and block sensitivity, while favourable experiences may inspire growth, increased sensitivity, and responsiveness. Maturity brings insight into experience along with the recognition that we are continually shaped by our environment and our relationships.

Inspired by Dewey's recognition of experience as both socially embedded and relational, Clandinin and Connelly developed the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. This metaphorical space has dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. Each of the dimensions is crucial to the success of narrative inquiry, both as a means of engaging with experience and as relational methodology.

To put it succinctly: The dimension of temporality describes the context in which we are placed in any moment. Sociality is the dimension that brings awareness of the complex ways that participants relate to and make meaning of interactions with friends, families, and institutions. Place is the dimension that recognizes the landscapes and environments in which participants live their stories and experiences.

Having awareness of all the dimensions at once is imperative to the unique process that is narrative inquiry. In narrative inquiry, researchers are invited over and over again to be attentive within the three-dimensional space. This insight was central to my exploration of mindfulness in this study and proved to be my greatest challenge. The invitation was to place myself in context with my participants, holding space for them emotionally while thinking in multiple dimensions as I attended to their stories and experiences. As I held space for their unfolding stories over time, I realized that the way I saw myself in relation to my participants was constantly shifting, and my research questions or "research puzzle" (as it is often referred to in narrative inquiry) was shifting as well. Connelly and Clandinin use the term "wakefulness" to describe the quality of awareness that allows for the process of inquiry within the three-dimensional space to unfold and for truths to emerge. During times of internal shifting, vulnerability, and doubt I found it helpful to trust in the process of the method, and that over time insights would emerge.

The good fit between mindfulness and narrative inquiry thus extends beyond the relational realm and into the psychology of self-reflection. Like wakefulness, mindfulness is an enduring trait, a dispositional pattern of cognition, emotion, or behavioural tendency (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Mindfulness must be applied to an object of attention—body, breath, emotions, or states of mind—and must be cultivated and practiced in order to be authentic and enduring. Through practice, mindfulness meditators become engaged in their own self-

experiment, learning to see for themselves the consequences of their own actions, thoughts, and habits of mind. As a student of mindfulness meditation, in order to situate myself back in present-moment awareness when my mind is lost in confusion, planning for the future, or ruminating about the past, I will ask myself, "What is true for me in this moment?" Often the truth of the moment that grounds me in the present is simply the feeling of breath within the body.

Students of narrative inquiry recognize their own transformation in the research process by asking themselves, "Who am I in the midst of this inquiry?" While practicing either mindfulness meditation or narrative inquiry, there is a simple awareness of the unfolding truths; the truth of experience begins and ends in the landscapes of where we are in each moment.

I use the term "students" intentionally because in the process of mindfulness, much like in the process of narrative inquiry, there are no experts. As we learn to think narratively, we learn to puzzle and we become students of the methodology. We are never truly experts because, to reference Jean Clandinin, the process is fluid—not fixed and frozen. We cannot look at a particle under a microscope and understand it fully because the sheer act of observation changes the particle. Similarly, when narrative inquirers enter into relationship with our participants, we should not be wearing the "hat" of expert researchers; curiosity and openness are essential to the process. When meeting with participants I was careful not to interview them by asking a set of specific questions, instead letting them guide the research conversation toward stories of mindfulness that held meaning for them.

Finding My Participants

Because mindfulness is a way of being that can be cultivated through a body of practices, it was imperative that all of my participants demonstrated a history of (as well as a current

commitment to) mindfulness meditation practice. Research participants were chosen based on their background in mindfulness meditation (all participants had experienced a silent meditation retreat in some form) and willingness and desire to integrate mindfulness into their classrooms, schools, and communities. All of my participants were people that I had previously met either through practicing mindfulness in the community or through educational initiatives involving contemplative education. The participants varied in age, gender, and in terms of the communities and student populations in which they taught. I was aware of the process of securing a contract with a school board and wanted my participants to be free of that pressure, therefore I chose only schoolteachers on continuous contract within a school board in the province of Alberta.

Narrative Inquiry with My Participants

In meeting with these teachers I used the following method to assist in the unfolding and unpacking of their stories (Clandinin, 2013). During the process of my research I met formally with each of my participants three times for research conversations. Initial meetings were scheduled at a time and place that was convenient for participants; I travelled to their homes or met them in their classrooms or administration offices. On more than one occasion we met at coffee shops and shared coffee or tea. During the first research conversation, participants were invited to share their definition of mindfulness. This starting point was imperative partially due to the popularity and mainstreaming of mindfulness in the culture, and the lack of consensus among practitioners, scholars, and teachers about a standardized definition. The practice of mindfulness meditation is by nature internal and personal, and I allowed space for an understanding of each participant's experience of mindfulness to emerge from my evolving discussions with them. Another area that was intentionally explored in the first conversation was beginning and introductory experiences with mindfulness and meditation. I was especially

interested in attending to the contextual places and the relationships invoked in early explorations of mindfulness. I attended to the specifics of where the stories took place with an understanding that teacher lives are lived in multiple landscapes, not just in classrooms. Apart from these initial semi-structured interview questions, which served to place the participants and myself in a mutual and evolving context, the meetings took on a conversational tone guided by the participants' storytelling.

In subsequent meetings, questions were explored that had arisen from the previous interviews; sometimes these questions were related to answers that were not fully understood, and sometimes these were invitations to just talk a bit more about a topic. As I listened to the audio recordings of my conversations with participants, I would take notes being particularly mindful to any instances of tension that may have emerged in the conversation. For the second research conversation, participants were invited to bring a mindfulness object that might invite a conversation as to why the object held significance for them; I also inquired deeper into perceived tensions at this time. Between the second and final research conversation, I shared tentative annals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) or timelines, which were visual depictions of the teachers' experiences with mindfulness that I created based on our conversations. The annals sparked further conversation about imagined future stories, which were discussed in our final research conversation.

For each participant, I composed a narrative account (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I was mindful that shifts in the narrative might have occurred in the re-telling when I presented each participant with a first-draft copy of their narrative account. Participants were then given the opportunity to re-negotiate their story, this reflects a commitment to an ongoing conversation and relationship with participants which is part of the relational ethics of narrative inquiry.

Ethics

Completing the ethics review process for the University of Alberta was not the beginning and the end of the ethics procedure for this study. The scope of ethical responsibility extends far beyond data security; ethics are embedded in the process of narrative inquiry. Two of the guiding principles of narrative inquiry are deep respect for the stories that emerge, and the relationship that develops between researcher and participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As the researcher, I recognized the vulnerability of participants not only in sharing their stories but also in inquiring into those stories. Due to the nature of this particular study inquiring into my own psychology, I was aware of the necessity to create a non-judgemental space for the unfolding.

This study has spanned through years in the lives of my participants and myself. At the very beginning of this study, I felt tension around the responsibility of honouring the methodology of narrative inquiry and therefore the stories of my participants. This tension led to a firm inner commitment that never waned, and somehow it seemed that the more I was able to consciously release the tension and trust my own commitment, the greater the ease and trust that emerged. The more I was able to trust the process of unfolding into and attending to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space in myself, the more I was able to attend to my participants. Narrative inquiry demands a certain kind of mindfulness and I approached this research as a moving target, but also one that was expansive. Looking back now, I can see that I was on a journey with a rough idea of a destination but without a map. As my participants' stories were unfolding, my story was being shaped alongside. In this way we were in the midst of an unfolding. (Clandinin, 2013). This unfolding was not just my graduate research project but of our professional and personal lives as I puzzled with my own autobiographical questions alongside of the multiple and layered stories that connected me to my participants.

Chapter 4: Ed's Story

I initially met Ed through a mutual friend at a house party in 2011. Ed appeared to be well-travelled and was an interesting conversationalist. Both he and his wife possessed the lean physique of people who are active and like to run. I remember my first meeting and conversation with him well because Ed was introduced to me as both a school administrator and a practitioner of mindfulness. Although he was not sharing his practice with students at that time, he has since become a leader in his school district in the growing field of mindfulness in schools. After that initial meeting, Ed and I would regularly cross paths at community mindfulness events and within the teaching world, where we have worked alongside one another to introduce the benefits of mindfulness to the wider school district and province. Ed was a natural choice to be a participant in this project because we were both in the midst of negotiating a professional landscape that was just at the beginning stages of understanding mindfulness. I was aware that my existing relationship with him would present complexities because of his role as principal, however I was also excited at the opportunity to be alongside him and learn with and from him in the unfolding of this narrative inquiry. I was pleased when he accepted my invitation to join me in a research conversation.

Over the period of time when Ed and I were engaged in research conversations, he left the small academic school where he initially pioneered mindfulness initiatives as principal, and was reassigned to a newer, bigger school in a growing suburban neighbourhood. He also completed his yearlong certification training with Mindful Schools. During this time I also began facilitating mindfulness classes for adults in the community, and started teaching third grade after time away from the classroom. Each time I met with Ed, there were many conversations happening at once. While catching up with the latest news from the mindfulness community or

discussing professional concerns, he mostly spoke confidently and with passion, though at times his responses were measured. Ed tended to be philosophical and used generalizations and descriptions from his classroom to comment on his relationship with mindfulness. During our conversations, he discussed the beginnings of his explorations in mindfulness, and described for me his own personal practice and how he was inspired to begin sharing mindfulness with teachers and students. He also expressed tensions arising between his role as principal and his new role as an advocate for the benefits of mindfulness for school children.

Beginning Explorations of Mindfulness

Ed and I began our conversation at the beginning, with an inquiry into his early days of discovering meditation. He spoke about his interest in meditation having been something that was just on his radar, that he would "like to learn more about someday." After picking up a book titled *Awakening the Buddha Within* that had been sitting on his shelf for years, Ed was inspired to begin exploring Buddhism more deeply, and joined the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition.

> Well, I started practicing in Tibetan traditions and the meditations are very different. Shamata and mindfulness practice are a part of Tibetan traditions, but they're more—what's the word I'm looking for?—analytical meditations. Where you're contemplating a thought or a concept. Or there are also fairly complex visualizations that you would do, to cultivate compassion for example. So when I started learning about Buddhism and about meditation, that was what meditation was for me.

Ed's interest in Buddhism and his adventurous spirit eventually landed him in India, where he volunteered as a principal at a school in the city of Bodh Gaya, in the province of Bihar. Bodh Gaya is known as the place where the Buddha achieved enlightenment under the

Bodhi tree. There is an actual tree growing there, which is said to be from the seed of the original, and it is a pilgrimage site for Buddhists.

> People say, "Wow, you gave up your job? You gave up your salary? You went to India to teach these kids?" Because the school was for the Dalit kids—the most impoverished kids. But I recognize that I did it for me. I wanted a change. And I wanted to learn more about Buddhism in the holiest place in the Buddhist world. I wanted to experience something new. So I just took a year leave of absence and off I went.

Honouring Spiritual Traditions

It was in this environment that Ed was exposed to a way of teaching that recognizes spirituality without being religious.

> The philosophy of the school was teaching the "good heart." And meditation was a part of that, and yoga was a part of that. So we would start every day with a little meditation and a little teaching, and we do some singing or chanting and some days we do a Hindu prayer, some days a Muslim prayer, some days a Buddhist prayer, some days a Christian prayer, but it would always start the day with a prayer. There's respect of spirituality and although the school was run by a Buddhist organization, but we did not teach Buddhism. We did talk about interdependence. We talked about impermanence. We talked about compassion, loving-kindness.

Ed's exposure to other ways of practicing meditation broadened his perspective.

> I had gone there because in Bodh Gaya, this holiest of places in the Buddhist world, I thought there'd be lots of opportunities, which there were, so I got into practice a little bit deeper there. My practice has sort of waxed and waned over the years, and it evolved, and it was always just a very personal practice.

When I asked Ed to share with me his current definition of mindfulness, he referenced Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program and pioneer of the secular mindfulness movement. Kabat-Zinn teaches a secularized and adapted version of *vipassana*,[1] otherwise known as insight meditation, based on seeing things clearly as they arise. Much of the research in the field of mindfulness is based on adaptations of Kabat-Zinn's MBSR. In further discussions about his practice, Ed used the secular language of MBSR. "I hate to go back to John Kabat-Zinn, but that's the one. I start with that. It's paying attention in the present without judgement and on purpose. That's John Kabat-Zinn's definition—the one I use."

What Happens when Your Eyes Are Closed: Personal Practice

> In sitting practice I'm not always doing the same thing. Sometimes I'm watching my breath and trying to just increase my capacity to pay attention. I'm just focusing and practicing paying attention, and this is the way I present it to the kids. I call it "practice" with the kids. I say we're practicing for the real world just like a basketball player goes to the gym, an empty gym, and shoots hundreds of hoops in an afternoon, not so he can get better at shooting hoops in the afternoon, but so that he can get better, be ready for game day. So we practice being mindful so that we can be mindful out there in the real world when we need to draw on it.
>
> So my own practice—sometimes it's watching my breath and just trying to hone my attention. Other times, I'm just watching my thoughts and I'm just sitting back. I find this more difficult. Just to be an objective bystander with one small part of my mind and

[1] The Pali word for insight meditation is *vipassana*. It means seeing in a special way with clarity and precision (Gunaratana, 2002). *Vipassana* retreats inspired by S. N. Goenka are offered for free worldwide. Goenka's approach to learning *vipassana* has meditators follow a strict code of discipline while meditating for long hours in silence (Vipassana Meditation, n.d.).

watch what my thoughts are doing. I try to bring a non-judgemental attitude, which is difficult when they're your own thoughts.

And if you can get to that point where you are able to put a little bit of space between your emotion and your response or your action to that emotion, it changes your relationships with people. The practice of mindfulness has changed my relationship with the kids. So we practice together; I don't stand there and read a script and lecture them and say, "Okay, start practicing." I sit with them—I have to—and it's the only way to do it. And we do it together, so we have a better relationship because of that. And I've got a better relationship with myself because I feel that what I'm doing is so worthwhile, it does give me a greater sense of purpose.

Professionally and personally, I've noticed that wax and wane with my practice. And if I've been practicing really well every day for an extended period, my relationships and my conversations with people are really effective and really positive. If I go off the practice even for a few days, I notice that my conversations are not as effective, my relationships are not as positive.

Relationships

I wondered about what helped sustain Ed's interest in and commitment to this practice of stopping and being. This radical practice of stopping and paying attention can seem to be at odds with Western cultural ideas about productivity and multitasking. I asked Ed where he drew his support for continued inspiration.

The only thing that makes a difference for me in my personal practice, and the only reason I keep practicing, is because I recognize it makes a difference to me. It's nice to have groups I can practice with occasionally. It's great that my wife practices it as well.

We sit and meditate together, almost daily. And at school I get reinforcement from the kids. When I see them meditating, it's mind-blowing. It couldn't be more inspiring. So that encourages me to keep practicing and keep supporting the kids in their practice. I get positive comments from parents, positive comments from teachers about the mindfulness we're doing in school, and that really helps as well.

The Inspiration to Share and Cautious Beginnings

About three years ago, I went to a conference in Vancouver at the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education about mindfulness in education. This was on the cusp of the mindfulness movement. I became totally inspired, and thought, "Wow! I know what this does for me, and we can actually do this with kids!" I'm a teacher and so I've got to put the two together, and I decided at that moment that this was my mission for the remaining years of my career. I'm going to bring mindfulness to kids.

Ed went on to explain how he used caution and courage in moving forward with his mindfulness initiatives.

Prior to starting mindfulness initiatives, I had done some lead-up. I had done about five months of sales pitch to the staff and to the parents. Maybe I was more cautious than I needed to be. My concern was parents and staff, that they would be thinking, "Okay, what's he doing now?" And a lot of the staff I think know that I have a Buddhist background and I didn't want anybody to think I was bringing a religious program into the school. And there's the hippie thing. We are an academic school, and kids write entrance exams and are interviewed to get into the school. They're not there for touchy-feely hippie stuff. The students are there to learn so they can get into the right high school, so they can get into Harvard.

I've done some presentations and we've talked about how we brought this program to the school. I hate to call it a program, don't want to call it a program, but we came up with the three Cs: It took Courage, and Creativity, and Caution. So we were very cautious at the beginning to make sure that we had everything in place, and everybody was on-side. And it did take some courage. It would have been much easier to just say, "No, we're not doing this. This is an academic school and we're just going to stick to the academics." And we also offered some creative ways of presenting it.

So I laid a lot of groundwork before starting this. A lot. Because it's risky territory, and I suppose for a principal that really doesn't understand it and doesn't have a passion for it, they couldn't be bothered doing all that work, 'cause it's a lot of work. But again, for a lot of parents, once they see it, once they see what the kids are actually doing and engage in conversations with the kids about the practice and how it's benefited them, then they get it.

Mindful Schools

I knew that Ed was asking his teachers to engage in mindful practices and Mindful Schools. I asked Ed how he came upon that resource.

I think I probably just stumbled upon them, I don't know, surfing the net or looking for some resources. I discovered that they were a nonprofit organization. I read some of the testimonial, did a little bit of research into it. And I think I went with it because it appeared to me that it wasn't about the money. It wasn't mindfulness for money, dharma for dollars. Their motivation was pure. Their motivation was to get mindful practice into schools to help kids.

I saw that Mindful Schools had a seven-week online program for reasonable cost. And I had committed to the teachers—actually, no, the teachers had committed to me, that they were willing to do either an online course or an in-person course. And you did a course for a few of the teachers but most of them chose the online.

Every teacher was committed to doing it. But once they got into that online program and realized it would take them three or four hours a week to do everything that was required, there were a couple of teachers who said, "Whoa, this is way too much. I wasn't expecting this and I'd rather take my dog for a walk—that's my mindfulness practice." And my response was, "Well I'd like you to do it. We've all committed to it. Do your best with it." I know that there's some teachers that probably watched the videos and engaged with others in the forums and did the readings, but couldn't be bothered to do the sitting meditation practice. And those teachers wouldn't have benefited from it. They'd derive a superficial understanding of what mindfulness is, but they wouldn't really get it unless they are practicing.

Identifying Leaders

I knew we needed a core group of teachers here that would be leading this because not everybody would want to be teaching mindfulness to the kids, would feel they had enough background, and I didn't feel many of them did have enough background. There were a couple of key people that I thought could teach this to all of the kids, and I really wanted to get them excited about it. So rather than doing the online curriculum program, we went to California to do in-person curriculum training.

The curriculum training was really good. It's all based on Jon Kabat-Zinn—it's mindful eating, it's mindfulness of emotions, it's mindful walking, it's an MBSR

> program for schools, but they've got it, presented it in a real kid-friendly fashion, and they've got a great attitude about it. They say, "We want you to use this curriculum as it is written, once. After that, you adapt it, you modify it, you adjust it, you make it fit you, you make it fit your kids, but try it as it is, once."

After returning from California, the teacher-leaders that Ed had identified began to teach mindfulness to students in their division. Ed and his assistant principal would cover their classes to make this possible. In addition to his administrative duties, Ed began teaching mindfulness to the junior high students. Around this time, he also started sharing presentations in and around his school district and hosting other principals, senior administrators, and interested University researchers at his school. I came to Ed's school and watched him present a mindfulness lesson to a group of eighth graders. Other colleagues at the University also visited him. He was even interviewed by the CBC. Suddenly, he was being thrust into a new role as an advocate for the benefits of mindfulness in public schools.

A Champion for Mindfulness

> I've done presentations at other catchments. I've done presentations at PD days, district PDs and schools, and teachers' convention, and there's a lot of interest. I did a presentation for teachers a few months ago about teacher wellness. I presented the teaching of mindfulness as the best job and best wellness you could have because it brings meaning to your job. I've always felt that as a teacher, I'm doing something pretty worthwhile. But I've never felt more of a sense of purpose or felt that my work was more meaningful than this year, teaching mindfulness to kids. I believe I'm giving them a skill that is going to stay with many of them, not all, for their entire lives, or maybe I'm just planting some seeds that will germinate 20 years from now, 30 years from now, who

knows, but I feel more than ever that I'm doing something so meaningful for my students, so beneficial. It's amazing for me personally as well. It's given me purpose. It's made my job meaningful.

The Importance of Secularism

The two things I tell people—I said if you wanna establish a practice or establish a program in your school, the number one thing is that it is completely secular. Completely. If you have a bowl that has Tibetan mantras on it, leave it at home; if you have a yoga teacher with an OM on her shirt or who does OM to end the practice in a school. This is critical because it could just implode, as it has in other jurisdictions, and just collapse. You know the teaching of mindfulness in schools is illegal in the state of Ohio? Probably, the Christian fundamentalists said, "This is a Buddhist practice. We can't do this." Teaching of yoga is banned in certain jurisdictions because that's a Hindu practice according to some. But anyways, it has to be secular, number one, and number two it can only be—and I don't even like to use the word taught—but taught by people that have their own practice. They have to have their own foundation; you can't just pass out the curriculum and ask people to teach it.

So I would not use a quote from the Dalai Lama, from Thich Nhat Hanh, from anybody associated with Buddhism. The CBC article I was interviewed for—you should read the comments to that. The responses from the general public were mostly, "Yeah, this is covert Buddhism." The responses to the Education Week blog—so these are educators—was basically the same thing. There weren't a lot of responses, but there were I think three out of four that said we shouldn't be doing this.

Getting It Right

I don't feel any ownership—I have a lot of energy invested in this, but I don't feel that mindfulness belongs to Everest Heights School, or me. It belongs to anybody who's willing to take the time and put in the effort to become more mindful and to practice mindfulness.

I worry about these people trying to commodify it. I worry because I see the potential for kids, and I think this can be absolutely huge, and I think it has staying power. I don't believe it's a fad, but I don't wanna be looking back in ten years, saying, "Yeah, mindfulness was a fad that had no effect on kids." And if people are going into schools to make a quick buck, and passing out the mindfulness scripts, that is what is going to happen. If we get it right, it's here forever.

I just am trying really hard to do it right here at Everest Heights School, and I'm very open to sharing it with others, and I'll go out of my way to help others implement something at their own schools—steer them in the right direction. And the other piece of that is to do it right. It's a big commitment and I know there's these three-hour mindfulness kit programs. The principals don't mind sending their teachers to that, that's easy. It's a three hour PD—"Go do this and you can do it in your classroom." It's not effective. It's going to be harmful in that it's gonna devalue real mindfulness practice. People are going to do it, and say, "Well, what's the point? It's not benefiting anybody." And then it'll just die—that's my worry.

It's so important that it's something we have to start at the ground level, and we have to start small, and that's why I'm doing it here. I'm not trying to start a Mindful Schools Canada or anything, I'm just starting locally and hoping it will spread. And it is

spreading. And there's interest, and most people, I think, I hope, understand that it needs to be done slowly and deliberately and by people that have a foundation in it.

Tensions

Being a principal is kind of an interesting job. It's kind of a stupid job. It's way different [from being a classroom teacher] and being a principal is way different from being an assistant principal. I remember when I was an assistant principal watching my principal, thinking, "I can do a better job than him." That was my motivation to become a principal, and then when I became a principal, I thought, "Okay, now I get it." Because everything stops there, and you are ultimately responsible for everything that goes on, and whether you have any ability to control things that the parents are going to hold you accountable for—everything that goes on in the classroom—so if you have an ineffective teacher or a teacher that says something dumb, the kids have a conflict, it always comes back to the principal, and, "Why aren't you doing something about it?"

Mindfulness practice, my own practice, of course, helps me with that because I'm probably not well-suited to the job, because I try to please people, and I'm not happy unless everybody else is happy. It's just like being a politician. You've got to accept that half the people are gonna be unhappy. My own personal mindfulness practice has helped me to recognize that this is just my own projection, and I shouldn't take it upon myself to make sure that everybody else is happy.

When you practice, you just become more aware and just more engaged. It's so clear in my personal practice that when I'm practicing regularly, things work better than when I fall off the practice. Then I get stressed and I'm rushed, and things fall apart. And my emotions make me do things that I don't want to do. But when you're practicing

regularly, supplemented by 12 times a week with kids, you recognize those emotions and they're still there, but you don't let them make you do those things that you later regret. Like a conversation with a parent when, well, you know, if you say something you may regret. Out of anger, or frustration.

A Conversation about Implementation

I asked Ed about time constraints and pressure to get the curriculum done.

I hear that a lot. I hear that a lot and I say, "Come and talk to me, bring your principal. Have your principal phone me." In the perspective of the principal, it's number one, a time issue of "Where are we going to fit this in?" And I got to counter to that—that's a no-brainer. It's going buy you time in the long run! There's hard data to show that mindfulness practice improves attention and it improves the ability to self-regulate, so imagine if your kids had a longer attention span and were able to self-regulate. As a teacher you would be spending a lot less time with discipline and classroom management. It would buy you time!

But, I think from a principal's perspective, they're also worried about perception of the community. They're still thinking, "This is something flaky. This is something religious. This is something hippie, and yeah, it might have *some* value, but I got more important things and I don't want to risk putting my neck out on this." But yeah, I'm always encouraging people to have their principals call me. You have to see it. Once they see it! And I can talk to teachers, I can talk to principals, and they say, "Yeah, yeah" (dismissive tone). But when they come out and they see 30 Grade Eight kids on a Friday afternoon after Phys. Ed. class sitting, meditating, they go, "Whoa. This is unbelievable! I gotta do this at my school!"

A Conversation about Spaces

I asked Ed about creating spaces, community places where teachers from the district can come together to practice mindfulness. He replied, "You mean, to practice mindfulness or to learn about the teaching of mindfulness?" I reminded Ed that some teachers are teaching in environments where it is not safe to practice and talk about mindfulness. He paused for a moment.

> Well, maybe we need a little support group—a network of interested people to help us get this going. Maybe it's just a group that gets together fairly informally, just to talk about their experiences, share their experiences, and support each other. Maybe there's a need for that. Also, Mindful Schools has a Facebook page for program graduates and teachers of mindfulness, and there's some really, really rich dialogue on there, and people express their frustrations and their challenges and their setbacks, and they're given advice by people who are in the same situation, who have been through it, and it's a really, really high-quality dialogue. So I suppose anybody who has gone through that program can become a part of that, and that would be great support. But as this grows in the district, we probably do need to create something.

Moving Schools, Moving Forward

My final research conversation with Ed happened at his new school. This K-9 school was a much larger, newer school in a neighbourhood on the far outskirts of the city. He offered me a cup of coffee and a tour of the impressive new building, and then we sat down to chat in his modern new office.

Ed had recently published a small article through the Mindful Schools blog that had come across my Facebook newsfeed. He told me that I could use it for this project if I liked.

I just submitted another blog to Mindful Schools, but they've chopped up and edited it, and it's still my voice, I think. And it still works, but there might be some other pieces in there that you can just copy, paste.

Ed continued to describe tension around presenting mindfulness to schools in a way that is completely secular while telling me about a presentation he collaborated on with a woman from another school district.

We were putting together this presentation. We used some of our slides, and it was a Thich Nhat Hanh quote. I said, "We can't use it. I've got about 20 of his books and I respect him so much but we can't use it in a school. We have to take that slide out." We replaced it with a Jon Kabat-Zinn quote. And this is one of the things I've learned, that we really need to be careful in public school. There's just so much at stake here and we can do such tremendous things with mindfulness. We just have to make so certain that we're not giving, you know, those that would—would claim this is covert Buddhism. We have to make sure we're not giving them any—anything they can throw back at us.

I've got lots of counters to these people, but I'd rather talk about the benefits of it and what it looks like, and—and tell them, "This is what we're doing here, because of, you know, this is what it's going to do for the—the community and the kids, and it's—it's good for all these reasons." Because I was very, very careful at Everest Heights when we did this. And we got a lot of groundwork, and I had parent meetings, and I—I ensured they understood what we were doing and what we were not doing, and that it is not religion in any way, shape, or form. And I didn't have problems.

Misconceptions

Ed expressed some frustration with people in the school district who still didn't "get" mindfulness.

> I had a conversation with a school principal the other day, and she was saying to me, "I know that some schools are thinking that mindfulness requires that you meditate, you sit and watch your breath. But we know that mindfulness is really not that. It's much bigger than that." And yes, it is much bigger than that, and you can talk about mindful conversations or just mindful being. But her impression was that this is *not* a part of what should be happening in schools—sitting and meditating. That meditating is too "out there" and that mindfulness is just doing everything mindfully and with awareness. And yes, that is true. But practice that! Practice, practice, practice!
>
> The misconception is if we tell kids to be mindful of their actions and their speech, and their thoughts, they'll be mindful, no? I think this is sort of what's out there. Probably most people you would talk to really couldn't give you a good definition of what mindfulness is, or what mindfulness practice would look like, or what mindfulness in schools should look like.
>
> I think people are starting to feel that it's something we should be doing, because we see it at every turn now. Mindfulness is out there, but people don't know what it is yet! They haven't experienced it. We've got a long way to go. And I've got the energy and I've got the patience, and you've got the energy and you have the patience to make this happen—properly, whether it takes a year or five years. It's going to happen. It's going to be what we do in schools, but we have to get it right and we have to move slowly.

Ed went on to describe how mindfulness resonates deeply with teachers.

Yeah it's—it's quite something. I had people with tears in their eyes while in PD here. When I came here, I had no intention of doing mindfulness right away, and in fact that's what I said in that blog: Learn the school culture, develop some trust, develop some relationships. Then on my first day here when we had a Professional Development day and teachers asked me to do some [mindfulness], I said okay. Because some people asked me to do it. And I know it's out there, and it might help teachers to engage in some conversations around it, or at least to understand what the conversations are about. So I did an hour. I had 20 people sign up for the mindful fundamentals program [Mindful Schools]. 20! We have a staff of 60. Isn't that something? And I started doing the program with the Grade Sixes two weeks ago, because the Grade Six teachers asked me to do it. And now the Grade Five teachers are asking. And this is how it spreads; it's coming from them. It's not coming from me. This is way better.

The discussion turned to district wellness initiatives and documents that are circulated to teachers that identify wellness as a priority. I expressed my frustration that the idea was not coming to fruition.

Ed responded quickly, "So one of those documents that nobody reads."

"But it was talked about and it was one of the priorities. It was on the list."

"It is a priority," Ed replied.

"But what does that *mean*, 'It's a priority?'" I countered.

"I don't know what it means. I don't know. We say a lot and we write a lot." Ed paused and then sighed heavily before adding, "It's coming. It'll come."

Future Stories

If teachers are going to teach mindfully—everything, not just teaching mindfulness mindfully, but teaching science, math, language arts mindfully—that would revolutionize schools, would change everything! Or if the teachers understood the kids and—and could recognize and respond to the kids' needs, and the kids can feel that the teachers really cared about them and knew them, how much more engaged would they be in everything? And how much of the stuff that we do would we end up throwing out? 'Cause we'd realize that's it's not useful. Well, it would be up to Alberta Ed., wouldn't it? We're so, so entrenched in what we've done for decades, centuries. We're doing a lot of things wrong in education. I'd like to think that in a decade or two we wouldn't have any common assessments or government-mandated exams. I don't know where it's going. I don't know.

I've got a few years left. But I want to continue with this work, and then beyond this—this work as a principal, if there's still a place for me to continue some work around mindfulness in—in the kids and schooling, I'll continue to do that. Come back next November and we'll have a thousand kids meditating. That's my goal.

Chapter 5: Rachel's Story

I first met Rachel through her husband Troy. He and I had participated in a yoga teacher training at the same time, about ten years ago. I knew Troy and Rachel to be interested in mindfulness initiatives in schools because they had attended a talk at the Alberta Teachers' Association on that topic in 2012. When I heard anecdotally through a colleague that Rachel had taken Mindful Schools online training, I sent her an e-mail and told her about my study. Would she be interested in having a conversation with me? It took a while for her to respond to my e-mail but I was delighted when she agreed, and a bit nervous for our first interview, which marked the beginning of this project.

Rachel teaches at a school that is known for its special needs population. For our first conversation, after entering the general office, I was guided to Rachel's classroom. The harsh fluorescent overhead lights were off and sunlight streamed in from the windows. Instead of desks, Rachel's classroom was set up for students to sit together at round tables. There were several healthy-looking plants in the room and the classroom felt tidy and spacious. Rachel greeted me warmly and we sat at a table together. Before beginning, she informed me that she was selling organic eggs out of her classroom on behalf of her uncle who had backyard chickens, and that during the interview some teacher colleagues might stop in to buy eggs. The overall effect of the plants, the eggs, and Rachel's warm demeanor created a sense that this was a special classroom, a community.

Explorations of Mindfulness

After I explained a bit about narrative inquiry and the journey that we were about to embark on together, Rachel began to tell me her story, opening up about her first awareness of Zen alongside her high school boyfriend, attending yoga classes, and *vipassana* or insight

meditation retreats. Through our conversation Rachel revealed herself to be a sincere practitioner of mindfulness. It became evident that she had been cultivating mindful awareness and compassion in her life for decades.

> I think it probably was Star Wars to be honest, and Yoda, and the Jedi—they used to practice meditation. So I remember being curious about that as a kid. The first personal experience I had with it—a boyfriend that I had, he was given a book from his Dad, and it was called *Everyday Zen*, and it was just these little stories about Zen monks and people who practice Zen, and then all of these meditation techniques. I remember one of them: "When your eyes open in the morning, don't close them again. Jump out of bed and meditate!" We tried some of them just for fun. We had no previous experience with meditation or anything, we were just following the book.
>
> I must have been 16 or 17 years old. . . . Around that time I watched *Kundun*, the movie about the Dalai Lama, so that got me interested in Tibetan Buddhism, and then into Buddhism in general. So those would be my first experiences with mindfulness and meditation. Despite this early exploration, I didn't really understand what the point was. I guess there's just so many different ideas and so many different writings about what it is, and what its purpose is. Originally I thought it was about concentration, right? You focus your mind on one thing and you don't think. That was where I was coming from at first. Of course, over time I realized that that's not the best way of going about it.
>
> So those were my common early experiences as well, but it didn't stop me. I've explored all sorts of ways. And then yoga was the next in, and then after that it was *vipassana* meditation, so my exploration has gone in all different ways. I was near the

end of my time at university and hadn't started teaching yet when I did my first *vipassana* retreat.

Rachel lit up as she began to recall with passionate intensity the memories of her first *vipassana* retreat.

It's totally boot camp. It's crazy, it's hardcore, but great! It's hard, so hard. . . . Made me cry, brought up all of those intense, fiery emotions. But it just gives a platform for them. You just have to work through them—that it is what it is. Here we are, we're gonna meditate for nine hours a day. It was a great experience for sure. By the time I did my second nine-day silent *vipassana* retreat, I was teaching.

Rachel was nearing the end of her Bachelor of Education degree and was now practiced in exploring her own inner landscapes through mindfulness meditation. The process of how to work with or find a platform for difficult emotions is not something that is not commonly taught in teacher development programs. I was curious as to how learning these practices of mindfulness had informed Rachel's teaching.

Classroom Intentions Formed from Personal Practice

I think probably the biggest way [my teaching practice was informed by mindfulness] was that any time when you're practicing mindfulness in a deep way, naturally what comes up is compassion—compassion for yourself, compassion for others, compassion for the human condition. So I'd say that's probably the thing that's influenced my teaching the most, because I really care for my students and I want each of them to be successful. I want to ensure that they feel safe and supported in the classroom so they can grow. And I think that my practice and my previous experiences have led me to have that intention for them. So I'd say that's probably the biggest thing.

I also have a real value for space, and like I said, comfort and safety in the classroom. Space where people can be themselves and feel safe and supported. I'd say that my practice has informed that as well—we all need that space. I find that pretty much everybody nowdays is just zipping around like—I don't know—like little atoms bouncing into each other and being very distracted by a great number of things. And my students come into my classroom in that way a lot of the time. They've things happening in their lives and they bring a lot of that into the classroom so their heads and hearts are kind of crammed sometimes. And its hard to even engage in a lesson on a story that we are doing because there are so many other things that are happening, so I find that if I can help them find even a few moments of spaciousness, it helps us get a lot more [Rachel makes finger quotes in the air] quote, end quote—"done."

[Creating this spaciousness] allows us to engage with the material we are trying to learn in a deeper way because they are not full up with other stuff. Do you know what I mean? I feel that the behaviour issues go down too. Conflicts are reduced. Space is really important. Space where people feel connected and supported and safe.

Rachel glanced around what I thought was a very tidy room.

My classroom looks messy right now. It's been a crazy week and things look messy. I like things to be ordered and I do not like cluttered and chaotic spaces. Kids love this room. They say, "We love this room. We love the plants in here. Thank you for not turning the lights on." They love to sit near the plants, the light. I scoped out this room. It was a foods lab and then an all-purpose room. It was a lot of the times empty. I was in a room with few windows—it was one north-facing window. Not good for plants. I teach science and it is nice to have the counter space and space to move. I do have a child who

needs his own space because he has some more severe behaviours I guess, and he needs some space of his own sometimes too.

Rachel went on to describe how she herself needed that space, and how her mindfulness practice helped her to recognize a way to deal with that need.

Most definitely, there is a connection between my practice and what I am teaching at school. I'm not sure if I didn't have a personal practice if I would see the value in it, but I know it—it's a visceral experience. I know that it's benefitted me in a big way, to have even a small ability to just step back and have that space, that pause between my action and reaction. So I know it's beneficial myself personally, and I also know that—especially my students—they're a kinda special group. And a lot of them have pretty tumultuous home lives. Lots of kids in group homes, lots of kids who live in single-parent families, or just a lot of dysfunction, drug use, a bunch of different situations that they're dealing with. Yeah, I definitely think that it's helped me be a better teacher. I'm not as reactive. I still do have those moments of course, because sometimes there are 30 things coming at you all at once, 15 of which are kids wanting your attention, and it can be totally overwhelming. So my comment—and the kids will know this—I'm like, "Okay, back up. Three deep breaths. Okay."

As she explained this, Rachel held her hands up, palms facing forward, and made a "back up" motion.

And they know that I need that, 'cause I'm way better once I take those three deep breaths, but it's really good for them too. And so finding ways of getting unhooked from that, where you're building up and building off of each other and power struggles, definitely just connecting with my breath has helped. And having at least my health

students, and even my homeroom students, having that language of breath, just connecting with the breath, taking three deep breaths, taking a moment—they've heard me say these words and we practice them in class, and so they recognize that when I say that. That's definitely helped. I don't always do that. I still fly off the handle sometimes, but yeah, I don't even remember the last time I really yelled.

So I wouldn't say that I feel—like, I do feel slight trepidation about presenting to my staff just because I'm, like, way more comfortable in front of kids than in front of adults. I don't know. My peers are scary. [Laughs.] They're not, though! They're the most wonderful people. I work with really amazing people and I'm sure it would be well-received, even if it wasn't something that people were into. But it's more that I just have a lot on my plate here with the outdoor classroom project.

Creating a Space: Outdoor Classroom Project

Rachel lit up as she discussed her outdoor classroom project.

To me it's kind of this tangential way into mindfulness, because one of the reasons why I wanted to create that space was so we had a place that was more reflective—a place we could bring the students that was beautiful and peaceful, and so creating those environments where being more conscious and aware, and mindful, is sort of a natural process. So that project's first for me. And then, when that's in the ground, when it's sort of complete and then we just have to refine, I'll be ready to move on to other things. So that [mindfulness] would be my next mission.

I asked Rachel if the outdoor classroom project was informed by her experiences with mindfulness.

Yes, definitely! Some of the times where I've felt the most grounded and most awake have been in natural environments. And knowing that so many of our kids are just incredibly urbanized—they don't really have connection. I mean, let alone to their food but any sort of natural environment whatsoever. Umm, it's very limited for them and so to be able to provide a space for that where they could even have some glimmer of that "Wow!"—that space inside—that just—awe. I'm elated to have the opportunity to bring that to the school, even in some small way.

We have some kids who are—well, they have challenges. I mean, all our students have challenges here, but a couple kids stand out for me. Definitely one who has some behaviour issues. He's sort of a tough guy and, you know, if you're doing something in class that he doesn't like he'll shut down and be quite belligerent at times. And he has really underhanded ways of bullying the other students, but he's pretty smart and sly and so teachers don't catch on to it. He's got some—some of those social challenges, and—and sort of, I guess you'd say, a bit of a bad reputation around the school. He doesn't work much in class. I think I know why. He's really intelligent in many ways, but he can't read and he really struggles with writing. And so I think it just—having to do that [reading and writing], it sort of brings that up to him that he's got this "deficiency," quote, end quote. And that's hard for him to deal with. Anyways, there's so many layers. It's so much easier in a way to be defiant than admit that he is struggling to do the work.

So anyways, so that's sort of the like snapshot of him in the school environment. And every time that he's come out to work in the outdoor classroom, he is one of the hardest-working, happiest, most engaged leader-kids out in that space! He teaches the kids to shovel properly so they don't hurt their back. He's like, "Let me help you with

that wheelbarrow"—he is directing kids. And it's—he's a different kid out there. It's crazy. Like, you know, I just stand back and like, "Wow. Okay, great."

And then we have this other boy who—he's autistic and very stubborn, so stubborn about a great many things. And one of his favourite things to say is "No! No, no, no, no!" And he'll just cross his arms and he just refuses. He shuts down a lot. And same thing—we brought him out to the garden for one of our work bees and he had this huge smile on this face. He's working hard, he's shovelling. He came up to his teacher, he was like, "This is so much fun!"

Rachel's face lit up as she recalled these success stories with her outdoor classroom project.

So much teamwork happening. But you know, it's not everybody. I don't want to paint a totally rosy picture, because we still have some kids who—it is not their thing, right? But it's creating an option.

Freedom and Flexibility: Enabling Contexts and Barriers

Rachel acknowledged the tensions that exist for her between doing what she feels is best for kids and other responsibilities of her career.

All these curricular needs and all of these assessments I need to do, and the bureaucracy of the school, and there's just—there's so many facets to it. Our main focus in this school is literacy, numeracy, and independence. And so that needs to be a focus in the class, but how we *get to it* is in many different ways. And so I just have a lot more flexibility with how I can approach things, because [in most cases] I'm not pegged to a particular curriculum.

It is interesting how I ended up here. I was teaching at a Waldorf School. And I really wanted to teach biology or science—that's what I went to school for. So they [the

human resource people] were looking for something, but there was nothing. Then I got this call from my K. L. Hastings School. I'm like, "K. L. Hasting School?!" I had very little special needs experience. I went into the interview and—and I said, "I'm just curious why you called me," you know? I'm not a special needs teacher. They chose me because of my experience with Waldorf, because I taught some special needs at Frances McGill School, and lots of experience with kids before I taught as well. They said, "I think you're great for this job." I'm like, "I don't think I'm great for this job, I don't know anything!" I thought to myself, "Please don't hire me, please don't hire me" [laughs]. But they did, and it was my permanent contract, right? So it's not like I'm going to say no.

I only had a day to decide whether or not I wanted to do this. And it was a leap of faith for sure, 'cause it was really outside my comfort zone, or what I thought was my comfort zone. But then after my first two weeks of being here, it was like, "I love it here." I love the freedom and the flexibility. There's so much ability to connect with kids one-on-one as well, because I have small classes. And so, you know, I only have nine kids in my homeroom, and most of my classes are no more than 14 kids. And so there's so much ability to really get to know them. Plus the staff is super supportive. It's a great place to work. So I think it chose me! And in the end I was like, "Yes, I love you!" And I'm really happy it worked out this way.

Mindfulness in the Classroom

At that point, the conversation began to shift to the beautiful brass bell that Rachel had placed in front of her on the table.

> You asked me about a mindfulness object. I just have my singing bowl here. Yeah, so I use this on a regular basis in class. Kids love it. One of them told me that they wished that it was the school bell [laughs]. And why can't it be, you know? I don't know. So I use this in class to start the day, transition between activities, do mindfulness activities, whenever we're beginning them. And any time I just feel that things are getting too—chaotic. They know it right away.

Rachel rang the bell and we enjoyed the sound of the bell together.

> Yeah, it's a really good one. It sings really nice. Sometimes [the students ring the bell]—it depends on the day, 'cause sometimes I have kids who are like, "I want to do it! I want to do it! I want to do it!" And that's not exactly [laughs] the kind of energy I'd like to encourage. So if they're calm—sometimes. Sometimes we do—like, we'll do sound meditation in—in health where we'll either listen for, you know, all the sounds that we can hear in the classroom, or we'll listen to a piece of music and pay attention to our feelings. Or we'll go out to the outdoor classroom and listen to the birds sing. Sometimes we use the singing bowl as well, so I'll ring it and then we have to slowly put their hand up when they can't hear it anymore. And so, sometimes when we do that I'll invite a student to come up, or when we're doing something a little more quiet. They really like it and they love to try and make it sing.

Rachel rang the bell for me and we enjoyed a moment of listening to the sound together. "Yeah, so I like having that in class. Definitely."

Future Stories

The next time I met Rachel, she was excited to share with me about an inspirational professional development session she had attended.

> Actually, since I saw you last, I went to this really amazing PD. It was a woman from Winnipeg who—she has a son who's autistic and she's a—a counsellor, psychologist. And she is also an amazing autism consultant. She works with school boards, with families.

I asked Rachel if she had students with autism in her class.

> Oh yeah, several autistic students. . . . We have kids on that end of the spectrum and we also have kids who have severe medical challenges. Like, I have a boy in my class who suffers from multiple seizures, daily sometimes, and so his cognitive capacity is quite limited. He has seizures several times a day. They're mostly petit mals, the little ones, but I'd say every two weeks or so he has a grand mal. It has been a very new—new situation for me.
>
> So this specialist in autism—she also works with self-regulation, which is something I'm really interested in, which also came out of mindfulness. After spending a couple of days with her doing PD, I kind of want to do what she does. I'd really like that. I'd love to go back to school. I'd love to do something around helping schools and organizations build their capacity for self-regulation programs and mindfulness programs, and work as somebody who can help people [teachers] be more accommodating to people with special needs as well—centred around self-regulation and mindfulness. I think it applies everywhere across the board, like, everybody in our society could benefit from that. It's good for everybody.

Timeline Discussion: Looking Forward, Looking Back

For my final research conversation with Rachel, we met in a busy café on a Saturday morning. It was in the first few weeks of the school year, and the busyness had made it difficult

to choose a time to meet. To complicate matters further, Rachel had been sick and missed some school, even missing one of our appointments. After greeting each other with hugs and ordering coffees and cinnamon buns, we sat down for our conversation. I had brought along a timeline that I had created, outlining some of the major events from Rachel's lived experiences that had been discussed in our previous conversations. It was my wish that the timeline would spark further discussion.

"So in the beginning you were thinking concentration and mindfulness were the same?" I inquired. Rachel nodded, "Mmm-hmm."

> And then through your experiences in nature and through yoga, and your *vipassana* experiences, you deepened your understanding of mindfulness and these experiences influenced you to teach by compassion—teach with compassion. And they influenced your teaching philosophy.
>
> "Definitely, yeah."
>
> You became concerned with creating spaciousness, both internal and within the classroom. Physically, to create comfort and safety for your students. And then over time you developed a way to create a space for yourself, personally and professionally, so that you could do your best work.

Rachel laughed at this simplified version of her story, which holds much deeper complexity. "Still trying! That's a work in progress. It's still necessary for me to push the pause button."

> I asked Rachel to share a bit about her Mindful Schools training.
>
> So I took their fundamentals program about a year and a half ago. And I just completed the curriculum training over the summer, which was a very well-put-together program. I

really have a lot of respect for those guys. I did the online program—it's six weeks. You have coursework every week, and really the program was—the intention is to give you ways of communicating what mindfulness is, and what mindfulness is in an educational setting to multiple stakeholders, and also being able to facilitate it in a classroom, in a more thorough way.

And they give you these wonderful curriculum guides with lessons for each grade level, workbooks, tons of wonderful videos as well, that either explore the individual lessons—you'll see they recorded some of the teachers giving lessons in classrooms—but also videos of people talking to various stakeholders, like how would you engage with, let's say, your principal or your administrators—people who have never had any exposure to mindfulness before? For example, how would you talk to parents? How would you do this? And so there's some really good experience with that. Yeah, I just think it's a wonderful course. They set it up really well.

I'd like to meet Vinny [Mindful Schools instructor]. He's my favourite of all the videos 'cause he's, you know, he's totally a dharma punk! And actually, when I read his bio, I actually cried, because he was a crack addict. He was literally a crack addict. And had kind of a super wreck of a home, like, his dad was in jail all the time, and he grew up sort of feral, you know. And he had just come out of jail and he was in detox, and he had this revelation—"I have to do something else. This isn't working. I'm going to end up dead." And so somehow he came across mindfulness, I think it was, in detox therapy.

That guy [Vinny] is a light. I loved his videos the most because I just found that his ability to relate—he has a big understanding of the resistance that you get from a lot of teenagers. Especially teenagers at risk, because he *was* that teenager. And so he can

> totally speak their language, but authentically, and understands their experience, but can bring them right back to the centre. [Vinny describes] mindfulness as the only place where he actually felt like he was at home, and every time he returned to it he felt at home. And it was like, "Oh, I just love that feeling." And he—I just love the way that he would explain things, and he definitely has a very deep practice. It shines through his videos. I would love to meet him. I'd just be like, "Oh, you're my favourite!"

I made a comment that perhaps it was ironic that we were looking at forward-looking stories when the language of mindfulness is very focused on present-moment experience. Rachel became thoughtful, before saying,

> I think it—I think it's a bit, um, dangerous only to talk about the present moment, to be honest. But I think it's a bit of a misunderstanding. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. I could be totally wrong, but it seems like a real part of human strength to be able to look into the future and understand, or at least have some understanding of how your actions now will affect things in the future, and be able to guide your life down the trajectory. And I think if you're practicing mindfulness, you have much better chances of, you know, like, setting your intention and your trajectory in a place that will take you where you want to go. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I find a lot of the new age kind of rhetoric around mindfulness [that states], "Just be in the present moment"—I actually find that a little bit nauseating [laughs]. Because there's just—we have to stay present now, but what's the point of staying present now if we're just sort of, like, staying present now and just staying right here? There's no trajectory.
>
> So I actually think what my trajectory in the future is sort of like a twofold experience. One—one that led me to what I think I'm going to do in the next few years.

> One was—I've been working with special needs kids for four years now and I had no idea that—that I would be a special needs teacher. You know, I'm a biology teacher and I just—that was the job I got. So I'm, like, "Okay, well I guess I'll try this for a little while. I'm scared, but I'll do it." And I actually loved it, absolutely love it. It is so challenging and so rewarding, and there's a lot of freedom and flexibility.

Rachel again mentioned the autism workshop she had discussed in detail during our last interview.

> The woman who led the workshop was just super-inspiring. She works with counsellors, with educators, with organizations that support kids with special needs, to help them integrate self-regulation techniques and strategies, to incorporate mindfulness into their programs—an advisor for how those organizations can support kids better. I was fascinated by her research and what she does.
>
> And so, I think I might like to do something like that, coupled with the fact that I just think that there's so many kids who are suffering trauma, and who are at risk in many different ways. Not just drugs and alcohol, but neglect and, like, overstimulus, and media saturation. There are so many things that could lead people away from themselves, and I just think I'd like to work in that area, in some way, shape, or form. So I think I want to go back and take my Masters—something to do with self-regulation and how to be, I don't know, of service to larger bodies than just my classroom.
>
> So schools, or the school board, or organizations, or something—I don't exactly know yet, but that's definitely the trajectory. You know, kids with autism benefit from having a very consciously created environment. But so does everybody else. [For instance] if you're in a classroom setting, the lighting makes a big difference. The amount

of clutter, or no clutter, makes a big difference. And the presence of the teacher makes a massive difference. All of these pieces help kids with autism regulate themselves a lot better, but it's the same for everybody else. It's just not as apparent. These are things that everybody can benefit from.

Having been in Rachel's beautiful classroom, I said to her, "That's all stuff you're already doing."

I know! I'm on the right track! Good. [Laughs.] It was very interesting. It was at more like an affirming experience. And I was—'cause I went to it being, like, I don't know how to help kids with autism. I don't know exactly what I should be doing. But many of the things I already do are very supportive. So that was really wonderful.

Rachel took a sip of her coffee and became thoughtful for a moment. "Mmm-hmm. So yeah, I think I'll go back to school in the next two or three years. I might wait 'til my son is out of high school. I'm not sure."

Before it was time to end the interview, Rachel had one more thing to share.

I just want to say is that I in absolutely no way, shape, or form feel even, like—very, very far away from—masterful, but not even competent, necessarily, with incorporating mindfulness in the classroom, or in my own life. I really don't, because times like this happen where it's the beginning of school and I feel quite overwhelmed. It's very difficult to find balance. I don't think that that's an uncommon experience, but I do need to honour it.

I recognized that many teachers feel overwhelmed a lot of the time and don't talk about it. Rachel agreed.

We need to talk more, period. Teachers are very, like, segregated group of people. But what I do recognize with that is that I very much need to stay committed to my own training and experience. So I'm going to go back to *vipassana*, hopefully over Christmas break, just to serve at a retreat, but then in July I'm going to go for a full retreat, because I need to take my medicine, so to speak, so I stay healthy.

So that would be the last point I want to make. It's a lifelong journey. I don't know if I'll ever get to a point where I feel [masterful]. We've had tastes of it, but that doesn't mean that—I don't know, like, I—I think those times when we slip, it's also a really neat opportunity for talking about our humanness. You know, "Oh, this is something that we know is beneficial, but huh. It's not something that happens all the time." You know? What are the reasons behind that? So I just think it opens up a neat conversation, you know, and keeps people with their feet on the ground.

I find oftentimes, like, even teaching, even if I'm teaching—I don't know—whatever, like reading comprehension. I can do it—as a teacher we tend to kind of separate ourselves from our students, like, from our audience. And the same goes with yoga teachers, and with whatever kind of teacher. Right? There's this separation that happens, but it is really wonderful when we can remember that, like, we're actually all equal parties in this experience, so that nobody is perfect, and nobody is—has all the answers. I just find that very refreshing.

Chapter 6: Nina's Story

I first met Nina in 2010 at a mindfulness retreat in Edmonton. During the course of the weekend, small group meetings were scheduled with the teacher to discuss how our practice was going. At these meetings, we sat in a circle and introduced ourselves before sharing our questions and observations about our practice of mindfulness meditation. Nina was distinct in appearance from others, as she sported bright pink hair. While introducing herself, she quickly explained with warm and self-effacing humour that she was not a punk rocker, but that she had dyed her hair for a fundraiser at her junior high school. Being a junior high teacher who was also practicing mindfulness, I made a point to introduce myself to Nina following the retreat. Years later, when it came time to select participants for this study, she was the first person I contacted.

My research conversations with Nina took place at her home and at mine. We also met informally for coffee and pizza, Thai food, and just to chat on the phone. Over the course of this study, I bumped into her at mindfulness events, where I would be greeted with a bright smile and a warm hug.

Nina and I also expanded our connection by becoming friends on Facebook. Her posts were often about some aspect of mindfulness; she shared articles and quoted teachers. These informal interactions were not part of my formal research but enriched my understanding of her. I came to know Nina as a strong advocate for mindfulness in schools, a dedicated practitioner, and a hardworking teacher who cares deeply about students, supporting not just their intellectual lives but their emotional lives as well.

During our research conversations, Nina had a tendency to speak rapidly and sometimes repeated herself, but her willingness to be completely honest with me about her experiences was humbling. At times I was brought to tears, recognizing my own story in hers. As our

conversations progressed, I came to recognize that she valued our time and conversations together as a way to process her experiences. Her open sharing, which resembled a stream of consciousness, created a challenge for me in how I would share her story. I have chosen to reorganize Nina's words to create a more coherent narrative, omitting repetitions and placing her experiences in a chronology. In the midst of our conversations, moments of inherent clarity and compassion shone through. Her story is powerful. In much the same way that mindfulness practice cultivates clarity of thought, free verse poetry allowed me to create enough spaciousness around Nina's words so the clarity and meaning could take shape. In poetic form, her voice is maintained and her story shines. As I puzzled with Nina's words, I also came to recognize themes or threads: personal transformations, professional transformations, challenges with administration, and forward-looking stories.

Part One: Personal Transformations

What is mindfulness?

For me it's really about mind and body being in the same place at the same time.
I think that's a really important piece for me.
The other thing for me that I've really equated it with is noticing.
Noticing what's going on without judging it.
And also to find ways to start to steer your attention away from things that are not serving you.

Moments of stillness in youth

I grew up super-Catholic—going to mass every week
And there were these contemplative moments
Where something inside of me really spoke out
Usually at summer camp or something else.
It wasn't that I'd never felt this or never had these experiences before
Or really valued that time and stillness and silence.
This ignited something . . .

Early adulthood: Coping

I was also on a really shitty road when I started practicing.
I was on hardcore destruction land.

The whole depression and anxiety piece has been a part of my life forever really.
I wasn't officially diagnosed until I think 2004
And then running the gamut of on medication, off medication, in therapy, out of therapy.

I didn't really quite realize the connection between my mental health and my physical health at that time.
This led me into substance abuse problems as well
So all of that kind of painted not the greatest of pictures.
So there was one year, I think it was in 2009, where I was on medical leave basically after Easter for the end of the year.
I ended up taking a medical leave for the last two and a half months of the school year 'cause I had been just . . .
I was getting sick, and getting sick, and getting sick constantly
For pretty much . . .
Well, I had two years like that actually.
I ended up missing a lot of work.

Starting antidepressants again, starting therapy, doing different things.

Rock bottom

2010 was almost worse in a lot of ways than 2009.
That school year, it was rough.
And a few things happened to me that, yeah . . .
I *did* realize that I was on a path I didn't want to be on.
Actually that summer before I started meditating
I had had suicidal thoughts a lot . . .
But I was pretty close to actually doing something about it that summer
Like pretty darn close.

I kind of had a couple things that happened that I would like to define as sort of my personal rock bottom.
I hope I don't ever go further lower than that
But yeah, a few things happened.

But still I had this knowledge that I wanted to do something differently
But I didn't really have the skills or the knowledge.

Personal struggles at school

I [had] the reputation at my school and the school board as being somebody who just can't handle shit—it was because I took a medical leave.
When you have mental health problems that stem into physical health problems—
Well there was no support ever.

It was this big piece of shame the whole way through.

And I didn't feel I could be really open and honest about it.
I felt super-guilty.
I honestly couldn't work!
And then I'm feeling extra guilty about not being able to be there right?
It was a real mess for a long time.

No one knew what was going on with me.
No one from work even contacted me.

Something needs to shift

So I had that sort of revelation that something needed to shift that summer
Then that's when I did my first meditation retreat.
I do really credit that retreat with being the "lights on" moment.
I thought to myself—"Oh wow, okay, something different is possible."
It's just everything shifted at that point for example—
How I was taking care of myself.

So I got introduced to mindfulness in the fall of 2010.
I signed up for a weekend retreat.
I credit that retreat mainly with saving my life.
It gave me a lifeline.
I don't know it's almost indescribable.
I remember coming away from that weekend and just being like . . .
Wow.

Must go to spirit rock

After that retreat that was the "lights on" moment.
And because Howie [the teacher] was talking about Spirit Rock retreat centre
It was just like . . .
I must go to Spirit Rock.

I started looking into going.
I tried even to sit a retreat *that* Christmas!
That didn't end up working out, but then yeah, I went there for a day long in May [2011] and that absolutely cemented my desire to come for an actual retreat.
I was pretty ready to sign on for a weeklong retreat after the weekend retreat to be honest, I would have.

I decided yup—
I'm taking a personal day.
I'm just gonna go to San Francisco, I'm just gonna do this.

So I took a personal day and it was really great on a lot of levels.
I was doing something consciously very different for myself that was very positive.

It was awesome.
So different from a typical weekend.

Which might be drinking with people and whatever.

But definitely not meditating, and touring around cities by myself.

Seeing the patterns

Once I started meditating with any regularity
I realized I was overwhelmed so much of the time.
I didn't realize I had these negative thought patterns
Until I really started looking at it.
Once I started meditating, I realized—
There was a huge difference in the level of presence I had
And the level of my stress in general.
I was just more calm more of the time.
That's it.

And that was the short end of the deal.
And you can go on about all sorts of benefits here and there . . .
But it was just like, oh wait . . . this stuff works.

Part Two: Professional Transformations

A good thing for school

As I started to learn more . . .
I came back that summer [of 2011] and then when I came back from that first retreat, I bought a bunch of books.
I think the first book was *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide to Anyone who Teaches Anything.*

It seemed like it would be a good thing to bring into school.
I started doing mindfulness in my health class.

It seemed like a really great thing
Especially when it came to students and to staff.
Once I started to see my own patterns
I could see other patterns.

How many teachers I know who are overly stressed
Who are constantly in way overtaxed mode
Way overwhelmed
Myself included.

Just a bit of mindful breathing

The author had a lot of really basic things in there that you can do with kids.
And I thought, "I can be doing this with kids, like why not?"
It wasn't a big deal, but I taught them a little bit.

I started by doing a tiny bit of mindful breathing with them.
"Stop what you're doing, take one or more breaths
Observe what's actually going on."

That's the basic stuff that I started with.

I found out somewhere around that time that Spirit Rock was offering a mindfulness for educators retreat/training.
And I thought "I must go to that!"
So it was after I sat that training retreat that I did my first PD for staff.
I was still doing just a little bit of mindfulness in health class at this point.

I wanted to be teaching more mindfulness

When I started coming into mindfulness practice
It pretty much just cracked open my whole life layer by layer.
I wanted to be teaching more mindfulness.
I wanted to be teaching things that I felt better about more of the time
Like just more, growing dichotomy with the system.

There was a questioning.
"Do I wanna step out of this? Do I wanna do something else?"
I was wanting to do these other things: travel, take space for myself, do some healing, investigation . . .

So I had been thinking very seriously about taking a year off for a while.

Part Three: Challenges with Administration

A difficult conversation

I had decided *not* to take the year off last year
Because I had done the Mindful Schools training and expense had come up around that.

But then when I went in to go talk to my boss about being overwhelmed
And about how I would love my course load to change
And how I really would love
Didn't know how but . . .

Was there a way that we could be doing more mindfulness?

Because the kids were interested in it.
I was interested in it.

More so I just wanted my course load to change.
I didn't want to be teaching ten different subjects.
I was tired of doing that. It was not possible for me to self-sustain.
Not when you are actually someone who cares about kids.
It's not possible.

My request to the administration to teach more mindfulness turned into this really weird conversation.
My mental health kinda got brought up.

Shot down

That conversation that I had with my boss
She really was very dismissive towards me.
She said, "Well you know we can't—
I know you get overwhelmed sometimes but I can't do anything for you."

She didn't listen to anything that I was actually saying.
It was just like "Well that's the way it is."
And I was shot down.
My administrator said "You can't do mindfulness."
And my intuition told me "You are moving in the wrong direction. This is not what you want to be doing."

I want to be doing more mindfulness, not less.
So that was really the deciding moment.
Where I was like, I don't feel I can do this next year, not here, not this way.

I never talked to my principal about how that conversation impacted me.

Returning to school, facing problems

There has been really, really, significant problems that I think is shocking most of the middle school community.
There have been suicide attempts, a student was sexually assaulted over the summer.
Trauma stuff has been coming up with our students.

So now my boss's tune has completely changed
But she had to be shocked into that.
She said, "I really think there's more of a demand for this mindfulness. Maybe we can co-host, like maybe we can host a community session at the school and you can teach mindfulness to people."

It was weird. A big change.
So we've had a number of staff actually have been expressing . . .
This kid's in my classroom and I'm teaching him *math.*
You know, what am I doing?

I've had that epiphany a while back
That we're not doing enough. It bothers me a lot.

I just really wish we had a way of supporting students more at the school level . . . just kind of debunking some of the ideas about mental health
Because there still is a lot of stigma around it.

So I am doing this new program, we called it a Sacred Space.
And then with middle school kids, I weave it into my classroom in different ways without necessarily even using the word mindfulness.

Curriculum tensions

With this new program I felt the tension for sure—
I kept hearing from my administrator was "You better be able to show me what curricular outcomes."

As teachers there is always the tension with the "How do we fit this in?"
Until the Alberta government shifts the curriculum in a way that we could mandate certain aspects of social-emotional learning as quantifiable objectives it will be all about math and science, and social. About the stuff that we have to report back to the government and to the board.

We don't have to report back to the board about the social and emotional learning needs about our kids. Even though our board is now onboard with the positive mental health project, and they're *talking all the right language about it*.

It's a slow process.
I feel like my administrators are now asking "You're going to offer a mindfulness option, right? You're going to do that, right?"
Like they're like wanting this to go forward, but they don't really—
They're kind of feeling stuck I think.

Because I feel like there's just no time in the day to do this.
It's back to the fact that we need to have instructional minutes in each subject.
We really don't have any room to kind of fit things in.

I'm feeling that more and more gets heaped on teachers
Yet we also have less and less actual real ability to really initiate change.

Part Four: Forward-Looking Stories

Reimagining the teacher role

I think I would still self-identify as a teacher.
Teacher.
That's what I do.
But you know—I will also say I teach meditation and mindfulness.

Being a teacher certainly isn't the be-all end-all of everything.
And I think that the teacher label can change too, right?
I mean there's lots of people who teach all kinds of things.

I think about doing a Masters.
I would do one of those Masters in Ed. with a counselling focus.
I could see myself becoming a lead teacher of this.
Being somebody who had a board office position who was doing PD on mindfulness and social emotional learning stuff, and that kind of thing.
That I could see myself doing.

Energy and enthusiasm

I had been a mindfulness crusader
When I first got into practicing mindfulness—
I was like, "Oh my gosh!
This has helped me so much! Everyone should do this!"
And it was really coming from this wonderful place of recognizing that the results of the practice for me, which had been amazing.

But like on the same token you have to meet people where they're at, right?
I think I was expecting that mindfulness was going to just like instantly turn into this big thing, I was anticipating this giant flowering I guess.
The instant garden.

But it is not like that.
We can plant seeds, but it's really not up to us as to when they're all going to start to sprout and grow.

Planting seeds

And so with the mindfulness it is like I am planting seeds
Planting seeds, planting seeds, planting seeds—always.
And I've watched the way my kids are and the way that my staff is.
There's a lot of things that I am shifting just by being the way that I am right now and being able to hold—just that level of presence.

And wouldn't that be a nice story if that was just the end?
And forever Nina was content and never was anxious ever again.
And she never ever, ever had a negative thought again?
Yeah, no it doesn't work that way [laughter].
There are no storybook endings.

But the thing is what I'm actually doing is pretty cool.
I think that's kind of where I'm at right now.
I'm just enjoying doing what I'm doing right now.
And we'll see where it goes.

Chapter 7: Exploring Emerging Threads

After inquiring into each participant's complex narrative in the previous chapters, I now attend to common themes that have emerged as part of this study. Through co-composition of each narrative alongside the teacher participants, resonant threads or themes became apparent (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry, the research question is not usually clearly stated; it is seen as a moving target, or as Jean Clandinin elucidates it, is fluid and flexible, not fixed or frozen. This proved true in the case of my study. In the beginning, I was particularly curious about the ways that my participants may have bumped up or come into tension when confronted with dominant institutional stories around their place and role as teachers. Later, however, other wonders and questions emerged, nested within the story of teacher identity and connected to relationships and embodied knowing.

I have organized this chapter to follow the logic of four thematic threads, which emerged in the participants' stories. The threads themselves follow a narrative structure, one leading conceptually into the next. Initial conversations reflected how participants came to learn about mindfulness and the *yearnings and curiosities* that fuelled the deepening of their search. Further conversations illuminated how *practicing mindfulness shapes teacher lives* in and out of the classroom. The words of the participants reflected a flowering of wisdom and compassion as well as an awakening about what was not working in their teacher lives and in the educational system. Illuminating the constraints of the dominant narrative of a teacher's role is what led to the next thematic thread, *tensions.*

Although individual tensions differed depending on the contextual realities of their teaching situation, a commonality emerged. Clear seeing and embodied wisdom from mindfulness practice created a shift in the established educational narratives of what a teacher's

role should entail. The final thread I will explore is *future stories*. The teachers' future stories are informed by insights gained through the practice of mindfulness and experiences teaching mindfulness in the classroom. Teacher participants re-imagined themselves as change makers and disruptors, as leaders and innovators, within the growing field of mental wellness and mindfulness in education.

Thread 1: Lives Shaped by Discovering Mindfulness. Yearnings and Curiosities.

The reasons and motivations propelling people to learn meditation are as varied and diverse as the people who practice it. Many embrace mindfulness as a way to find freedom from mind states that create suffering. This was my own experience. In Buddhist texts, the three poisons of the mind are described as grasping, aversion, and confusion. Only by seeing these poisons clearly and understanding them deeply do we begin to loosen the grip they have on our minds. In my conversations with teacher participants, the stories about coming into the practice reflected lived experiences of suffering and confusion, as well as curiosity and a desire to learn.

Ed's early explorations were characterized by his desire to learn. One day, he pulled a Buddhist book off of his shelf that had been sitting unread. Ed's comment upon first reading Buddhist philosophy was that "It all made sense to me." A story that remains untold is what motivated him to pull the book off the shelf. What were the relationships and the contextual realities of his life at the time? Was he searching? Although the underlying reasons were not made clear, Ed was emboldened to join a group right away and found a structured path within the Tibetan tradition. He also had the passion and the means to travel to holy sites and volunteer with Buddhist organizations. His adventurous spirit was evident when he spoke of his love for retreats and his wish to travel and learn more about mindfulness upon retirement.

Ed was intensely private about his lifestyle practice of nourishing and renewing himself with meditation during the summer months. The spacious landscapes of summertime—devoid of teaching and administrative obligations—allowed him and his wife the freedom to explore Buddhist meditation, yoga, and personal wellness in many forms. Despite this commitment to open exploration and culturally rich experiences, Ed's school mindfulness program was kept secular, and he consciously sought out programs from which all references to Buddhism had been erased. Summertime Ed and School Administrator Ed were the same person with the same values around wellness, yet there was a conscious separation of the two so that he could protect the validity of his mindfulness programs. If Ed kept his personal practice and study of Buddhist meditation private, he believed he would be protected from potential scrutiny and judgement that he was attempting to advance his own belief system. During our conversations, he informed me that mindfulness in schools had been made illegal in some states in the U.S. In the beginning, this fear was very real for him. Yet, as our conversations continued and he received more praise for his efforts to help the staff and student population, his anxiety softened. I wondered about the Ed who taught school in another contextual reality, in India. I wondered about the congruency and authenticity that may have blossomed there, free from the confines and norms of the Western educational model that are staunchly secular.

In contrast to Ed's methodical approach to learning, Rachel's early explorations of mindfulness were experimental and fuelled by inquisitiveness. She situated herself as a teen in the beginning, describing her younger self as curious and "exploring in all sorts of ways." When Rachel spoke passionately about her first *vipassana* retreat, the depth of her feeling was evident. She described insight meditation as hardcore, difficult, and emotionally taxing. Nevertheless, learning insight meditation was a great experience for Rachel, and gave her a platform to work

through her emotions. She hinted at underlying complexities that may have led her to take up the disciplined practice of insight meditation. Her deep understanding and patience for her students, who are high-needs and require many special considerations, coupled with her unabashed admiration of Mindful Schools teacher Vinny Ferraro, make me wonder what untold stories exist in Rachel's adolescence. When she described with love and admiration Vinny's compassion for teenagers at risk, she explained that he relates to troubled teens "because he *was* that teenager. And so he can totally speak their language, but authentically. And understands their experience, but can bring them right back to the centre." In this passage, I feel that Rachel was also describing herself. I am left wondering about these unspoken stories of her teen years and what underlying motivations fuelled her curiosity about mindfulness.

While Ed's and Rachel's narratives of mindfulness beginnings left me with wonderings, Nina's openly shared intimate details of the internal struggles that led her to the practice created a narrative of a healing journey. Learning mindfulness practice was a self-described lifeline for her. The moments of ease and clarity that she experienced in the early days of learning the practice fuelled her desire to continue. Nina was aware that the life she was constructing, which was characterized by travelling throughout North America and Europe to attend various mindfulness retreats, was not a typical teacher's life. Her yearning to fully embrace a mindful lifestyle reached far beyond her own personal practice, and placed her into new landscapes and relationships.

Nina's stories told of multiple tensions caught within the plotlines of dominant narratives about teacher identity and what it means to be a mindful person. In time, as our conversations continued and Nina's practice deepened, she voiced that taking on the identity of "mindfulness crusader" was not serving her, and that she felt happier and more content to let go of that label

and all the plotlines that go with it. She was grateful to have found mindfulness, and although she was longing to share it with students and colleagues, she was able to let go of the outcome.

Thread 2: Teacher Lives Shaped by Practicing Mindfulness

As was stated in Chapter Two, Buddhists appreciate mindfulness as one of the seven factors of awakening, the backbone of a practice that leads to the end of suffering. According to contemplative traditions, clear seeing and a feeling of spaciousness develop with practice (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). Awakening need not be understood as an elusive spiritual state reserved exclusively for monks and nuns. Awakening is a gradual process of coming into clarity and seeing things as they truly are. Clarity of thought is one of the fruits of a dedicated mindfulness practice and we might expect that as one's inner life is developed, research participants with a dedicated practice would be able to detail their experiences with confidence and granular detail (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). It follows that each of my participants was able to describe with increased clarity the complexities of their teacher lives and how they were negotiating relationships in the professional realm. Each of my participants was also in negotiation with an inward orientation in a profession that emphasizes services and outward results. This reorienting and reexamining of their teacher lives opened participants up to new levels of understanding.

Conversations with Ed often revolved around the implementation of mindfulness programs rather than the benefits of his personal practice. He was challenging the traditional story of what is possible in schools while still tethered to cultural and institutional narratives regarding school leadership and what makes a good principal. Ed attempted to alleviate this tension by painting himself as a bit of a lone wolf, describing his mindfulness practice as very personal. He explained his mindfulness training in simple secular terms: "following the breath"

and "focusing a wandering mind." In his narrative account, he attempted to keep his appreciation for and past study of Buddhist teachings erased from the narrative threads that connected him to the role of principal.

Ed's motivation to deepen his practice was almost devoid of familial and relational narrative threads. When pressed to describe his relationships, he often continued to story himself as a lone individual with a curiosity about Buddhism, and was careful to keep that piece of the narrative separate from the professional realm.

Although Ed showed an attitude of independence in claiming that his main motivation to keep practicing was the recognition that it was making a difference for him, he also recognized that mindfulness practice was transforming his relationships. He described a better way of relating to himself, and softening his self-judgement, as he navigated the difficult role of school principal. Ed's mindfulness practice allowed him to witness directly how his desire to make others happy—teachers, parents—was a projection of his own mind and a habit he had developed in response to immense responsibility.

Ed observed that one of the fruits of his practice was acceptance of difficult situations and emotions. Knowing him personally added an interesting dimension to this disclosure. There was an element in Ed's personal life that I knew to be challenging. We spoke of this and he was never dismissive or abrupt with me when I broached the subject. He was brief. My wonderings came from a place of compassion, but were also fuelled by curiosity. How was Ed's practice helping him approach a situation beyond his control? Was it possible that his role demanded that he put on a mask and follow the rules of principal—"to wear the façade all day removing it only when he leaves school at night" (Rogers, 1969)? Ed had mentioned a close personal relationship with his assistant principal prior to changing schools. I wondered whom he could talk to about

personal issues within teacher professional landscapes at his new school. Did he have the freedom, as Carl Rogers describes, to be fully real? Was he allowed to feel the range of human emotion including being bored, frustrated, helpless, or confused? Although he stated that mindfulness had helped him to deal with difficulties, I was left wondering about exactly how his mindfulness had supported him through personal difficulties.

While the threads of Ed's narrative account are mainly woven on administrative landscapes, Rachel's story is more closely connected to classroom landscapes. She was motivated by true affection for her students and a desire for them to be successful in life. One of the ways that this manifested in her teaching practice was in her creation of a safe and supportive classroom environment.

Rachel's practice of recognizing and making space for difficult emotions within herself, honed at her mindfulness retreats, helped her to make space for her students. The way that she spoke about space is aligned with Carl Rogers' definition of freedom as an inner way of being that influences outer choices. As Rachel described intentionally creating a classroom environment that honours spaciousness, she showed insight into this way of being. She described creating space to engage her students more deeply with the curriculum and to connect it to their lives. She was able to describe eloquently and insightfully some of the many-layered challenges faced by her students, and in response to student challenges she has developed an alternative program in which they could take their learning outdoors. Rachel would light up with enthusiasm while discussing the students who benefitted from engaging in the outdoor classroom project.

Rachel's teaching philosophy, whether indoors or out, was informed by her own embodied understanding of mindfulness. During our time together, she radiated a calm connectedness. This connectedness was something she had consciously cultivated, as she was

cognizant of how her own mental wellbeing directly influences her relationships with students, and therefore her effectiveness as a teacher. When Rachel spoke about "compassion for yourself, compassion for others, compassion for the human condition," she placed herself first. Her mindfulness practice informed her larger vision of creating safe and caring spaces for students.

The concept of spaciousness is central to mindfulness. Within classroom landscapes, Rachel recognized her own need for space in a profession that is often emotionally demanding. At times when she felt overwhelmed by the needs of her students, she instructed them to take a step back from her, and she took three deep breaths. Her clarity in describing this self-care reminded me of a common analogy in mental health and self-care literature: putting on your own oxygen mask first before attempting to help others. A desire to cultivate spaciousness was echoed in Rachel's concerns about her students. She described her aspiration for the students to connect with a space outside, but also a space inside. Her enthusiasm for facilitating moments of spaciousness and joy for her students was palpable.

Within professional landscapes, Rachel had found belonging and purpose. At this school, which *chose her*, she discovered a place that allowed her the freedom and flexibility to explore creative ways to support her special population of students. Mindfulness was one of these ways. Rachel was sharing fundamentals of a mindfulness practice with her students, but more importantly, she was sharing of herself in a way that was real and authentic. In the moments that unfolded in her classroom, she offered her joy, enthusiasm, and love to her students.

While Rachel and Ed shared narratives that primarily reflected professional landscapes, Nina's narrative focused on her own practice. In her story, she found refuge in the practice of stillness as a way out of her psychological suffering and the shame associated with it. Her

mindfulness practice taught her the connection between mental health and physical health, and gave her the tools she needed to practice self-care and learn to be self-compassionate.

Nina's determination to re-compose her life as a *mindful* teacher despite a lack of relational support and understanding from familiar landscapes is something that I relate to. She described her life being cracked open layer by layer. I likened this metaphorical explanation to a re-storying of her life, or a letting go of ways of being that weren't benefitting her. Her realization that full-time teaching life could be overwhelming, and wasn't providing her with nourishing space, propelled her to spend more time travelling to unfamiliar landscapes to pursue professional and personal development in social and emotional wellness. The connections that Nina made during her professional training with Mindful Schools became treasured, enduring friendships. These friends offered her the relational support that she craved. In her own words, "I love doing retreats with like-minded educators . . . building community, learning, and practice. It's just an unbelievable experience." Nina's instincts were such that if she developed her own relational skills, she would be better able to teach relational skills. Of course, she wasn't able to do this in a vacuum. Her trips to California to connect with community became essential to her integration and application of her mindfulness practice. She was taking her practice "off the meditation cushion" and was connecting to the community that shared her passion of deepening into authenticity. Carl Rogers recognizes the psychological health and healing that comes from the courage to live a meaningful and authentic life. In his book *On Becoming a Person*, he explains the recipe for a good life: "It involves the stretching and growing of becoming more and more of one's potentialities. It involves the courage to be." (Rogers, 1961, p. 195–196).

In shifting her being-ness and her relationship to self, Nina also shifted her relationship to Alberta Education and to the school board that employed her. She began to question her role

within those institutions, as her attempts to share mindfulness with others were not always easily received by leadership within the system, which led to tensions.

Thread 3: Tensions

In his book *A Gradual Awakening*, Stephen Levine (1979) explains that often when one begins to practice meditation, there is a movement from being lost in a problem to being aware of it and realizing that one has to work with it. Mindfulness provides a way out of problems by nurturing a space to first see them clearly (Levine, 1979). Each of my participants had come to recognize what was not working for them. They expressed frustration with an education system and structure steeped in tradition and rigidity. While Nina largely storied herself outside of the system, Rachel and Ed positioned themselves within it. These two feared being misunderstood, albeit for different, even contradictory reasons.

As Nina deepened and cultivated her personal mindfulness practice, she awoke to the ways that people suffer, and in particular the way that those in the teaching profession are undervalued and overextended. In her words, "When I started practicing, I saw that I was overwhelmed, and I saw that other teachers are overwhelmed too." While there is increasing awareness of the importance of mental wellness, Nina expressed concern describing the school board directives on lightening teachers' loads and teacher wellness initiatives as a "talking about." She expressed frustration in response to the board office rolling out initiatives by hiring new lead teachers and *talking about* mental health directives instead of actually shifting their philosophy or creating spaces for programming. Nina did not place much faith in top-down initiatives, and suggested a total curriculum overhaul to create more space for social and emotional wellbeing.

Nina's decision to take time away from her profession resulted directly from her feeling unsupported in her endeavours to advance mindfulness initiatives at her school and district. Her overall teaching experience became less fulfilling as her attempts to teach mindfulness were denied and/or not recognized. In the beginning, administrators were hesitant to introduce mindfulness programs in classrooms. This manifested as a blocking of Nina's initiatives and ideas. She was at times silenced in her attempts to explain herself and the reasoning for her program. At one point, her own mental wellness was called into question. She was torn between a passion for sharing mindfulness and a feeling of being unacknowledged and pushed aside by her school's administration.

When Nina was finally granted permission to do some mindfulness programing at her school, other barriers emerged. There were difficulties in finding space and time, and differences of opinion on how her mindfulness offerings should be structured. This constant tension between Nina and her administrators around creating time and *space* for mindfulness left her with the impression that she was being appeased, and that mindfulness was not a real school priority. It was not until the administration was shocked by the attempted suicide of a student that addressing student mental wellness became an urgent priority. Quite suddenly, Nina's expertise in mindfulness was back on the table for another round of discussion and negotiation.

While Nina expressed frustration with the priorities of the school system, Rachel expressed gratitude for her supportive administration, and the opportunity to teach in an alternative environment that afforded her the freedom and flexibility she needed to be able to share her embodied knowledge of mindfulness. Rachel was very comfortable teaching mindfulness in the landscape of her own classroom environment, but expressed some hesitation over sharing her knowledge with colleagues. Over the period of time that I met with her, I saw

that tension soften somewhat. She began to share with her own staff and others in the wider district by presenting at a Professional Development day.

Despite having confidence and trust that her administration would support her, one tension that emerged for Rachel resulted from the over-commodification of mindfulness. She wondered whether teachers would take a brief introductory course but not really practice, and then become exuberant crusaders and spokespeople for a practice that they had not truly embodied or understood. She also wondered whether introducing widespread mindfulness practice in a school district could actually harm students. Rachel recognized the power of mindfulness to heal because she had felt this shift in her own life, yet she was also aware that teachers who did not carry the embodied knowledge of the practice were not qualified to be teaching it.

As an administrator, Ed expressed different tensions from my classroom teacher participants. His main concerns were the perceptions of parents and staff, and building momentum to create a shift in the system. As a principal, Ed had more power to initiate change and implement new programs. But he also had more scrutiny placed on him, and more to lose if his program failed. He mentioned more than once that he feared being labelled as a "hippie," or being accused of bringing forth some kind of religious program. Because his primary motivation was to make the practice accessible to student populations, not just in his school but also throughout his district and even the province, the risk was larger for him. To ease his anxiety, Ed moved forward with such caution that he later mused that perhaps he had overdone it.

After Ed acquired the buy-in that he needed from staff and parents, he began encouraging staff to do mindfulness training, which created other areas of tension for him. He was very careful to choose a program that he felt had a "pure motivation." In this way, Ed echoed Rachel's

concerns about commodification of the practice. As time went on and mindfulness became more popular, he also echoed Rachel's concern that sending teachers to do a crash course in mindfulness might do more harm than good. He wondered about the effectiveness of programs that were not done slowly and deliberately and based on teacher practice. He believed these crash courses could devalue the benefits that an intentional and embodied program would have for students. But despite these tensions, he persevered with his mindfulness program.

Thread 4: Future Stories. Reimagining the Teacher Role.

One of the tensions explored in the previous thread was, relationally, how do teachers balance a strong *inner* responsibility that often emerges as a fruit of mindfulness practice with provincially-mandated responsibilities that may or may not align? In his 1977 book *On Personal Power*, Carl Rogers writes about the courage that it takes to be a pioneer of change. He describes it as "anxiety-arousing for the teacher and threatening to colleagues" (Rogers, 1977, p. 79). In this context, the role of teacher identity is strong; it plays in our collective imaginations. But by holding a new awareness of the unfolding of our storied experiences as teachers and people, we open up the possibility of re-storying our lives in a way that is more meaningful and also more authentic, as Carl Rogers would describe. My participants described that as they deepened their practice, they began to experience not just the courage and inner freedom required to initiate change in their own classrooms and beyond, but the space and ability to reimagine their teacher lives. Whereas a teacher *role* is something that is more fixed, and part of a dominant institutional narrative, these teachers began to imagine *lives* where they could better serve students with the embodied knowledge of mindfulness. Interestingly, this often had them placing their energy outside of the classroom. Each of my participants' stories challenged their place in the school landscape.

Ed found meaning in his teacher life by connecting his personal embodied knowledge of mindfulness to his administrative role. He radiated a tireless energy as an advocate for mindfulness not only in his own school district but also throughout the province. As a school administrator, he was aware that his position allowed him freedom to create and roll out programs at a school level, but he did not stop there. Once he began to experience success with mindfulness at his own school, he began to talk to other administrators about the benefits of the practice for staff and students. As an effective administrator, Ed was able to clearly articulate how he had been instrumental in building a capacity for mindfulness in his district.

During our conversations, I often inquired about Ed's relationships, and learned that he tended to story himself outside of relational narratives. He spoke about being part of a group that has the vision and drive to deliver mindfulness to students and teachers. Although Ed praised his former assistant principal and his wife as trusted confidants and allies in the practice, our conversations never explored in depth the roles and contributions of other people in the mindfulness community. I was left wondering how his story might evolve over time and how he would work alongside other teachers and principals who would emerge as champions of mindfulness. Just prior to completing this thesis project, I learned that Ed had decided to retire from teaching, and that he and his wife would be moving away to a warmer climate to do more travelling and exploration. This announcement was surprising to many in the small mindfulness community of which he and I are both a part. However, I was not surprised. I knew that Summertime Ed was the truest and most authentic version of Ed. I imagined the freedom and personal power he must have felt stepping away from Teacher Ed after a lifetime of contributions. I felt happy for him in his new, reimagined future outside of his teacher identity.

Nina claimed that in her life, teacher identity was still strong, but also acknowledged that narratives that once had a powerful hold over us begin to lose their power when embraced by mindful awareness. Nina consciously sought out the company of like-minded people, and longed to recreate the kind of professional mindfulness community in Alberta that she had experienced in places like California. To facilitate this, she began offering meditation sessions out of her home.

Despite frustrations with the board office, Nina aspired to be a lead teacher. I wondered if, in her own way, she was searching for the same freedom and flexibility in her career that Rachel had described, and whether she would find these in a lead teacher position, which may be even more entrenched in provincially-mandated responsibility. In my most recent informal conversation with Nina, I learned that she was travelling to visit teacher colleagues from her Mindful Schools training in California, and she mused about opening a wellness centre. It seemed that she was taking her passion outside of the professional landscape of schools. She was continually striving for balance in a job that she found at times to be overwhelming. She was also experiencing bodily aches and pains, and wondered whether it was possible for her to teach full time while taking care of herself.

When I inquired into Rachel's future stories, she became philosophical. She mused that "a real part of human strength is to look into the future, and have some understanding of how your actions will affect the future." Although she had a calm and easygoing demeanour, she was also ambitious, and had the ability to thoughtfully describe what she called "her trajectory." As an empathic person, Rachel saw herself in the future being able widen her circle of influence and expand on what she was already doing to help students self-regulate. She imagined herself doing

a Masters degree or some other specialized training, and sharing knowledge with other educators. She was also thinking of applying for leadership roles in the district.

Like Nina, Rachel also used the word "overwhelmed" to describe what teachers experience much of the time. Along with this realization, she acknowledged the importance of mindfulness practice, with the caveat that perhaps the goal of being a master meditator was not a reasonable one. She admitted that her moments of awareness were fleeting, and instead imagined a future where she could describe herself as competent practitioner. She saw keeping both feet on the ground and staying committed to her personal practice as part of her trajectory, and in this vein she had two upcoming *vipassana* retreats planned. In Rachel's own words, "I need to take my medicine, so I stay healthy."

In one of my more recent conversations with Rachel, she expressed gratitude for her administration. She sent the following to me in a text message and gave me permission to use it:

> My school is paying for me to take the Mindful Schools year long certification! And they have given me the opportunity to teach a self-regulation and emotional well-being class twice a week to the grade sevens! I'm feeling super grateful. I guess I will stay put for awhile.

Rachel was advancing her career on her own terms, and had found a way to be authentic to herself, her practice, and her students.

Chapter 8: Discussion

This study represents years of shared inquiry between the participants and myself. In this chapter, I take a reflective turn to revisit my original research puzzle and justifications for the research, while recognizing shifts and new questions. In the beginning, I recognized participants as knowledge carriers as I attempted to understand the experiences of teachers in their classrooms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My initial wonderings circled around the teachers' relationships with students and how an inward orientation may have ameliorated their ability to connect with others. My study of narrative inquiry as a relational ontology cognizant of cultural contexts fuelled my curiosity regarding how teachers who practice mindfulness might renegotiate themselves within the grander narratives of the school board, the curriculum, and other institutional narratives.

In Narrative inquiry it is critical that we start with ourselves, thinking about our own lives while recognizing that stories are the way we organize our experiences. Narrative inquiry gave me a method for unpacking my own lived experiences as a teacher who practices mindfulness. In Chapter 1, I travelled back in order to narratively place myself not only in school landscapes but also within the landscapes of in-between places where the plotlines of my life were unclear and untethered. During challenging times, including episodes of mental illness and grief, practicing mindfulness has been a way for me to create a safe, kind container for (as Tara Brach describes) befriending and attending to painful thoughts and emotions. In the midst of this inquiry into teachers' experiences with mindfulness, factors emerged that opened up the possibility of my being transparent with past personal struggles. Nina shaped who I was becoming by her willingness to be frank about her own struggles. Also, years of practicing mindfulness increased my capacity to hold a compassionate, non-judgemental stance towards my own suffering and that

of others. Through my research discussions with Nina, I learned that we share the hope that mental wellness discussions will become less stigmatized in school landscapes, and that teachers will receive the supports they need. Mindfulness is one of these supports.

I also described in Chapter 1 how my attempts to share mindfulness with colleagues were met with varying degrees of success, and at times left me feeling alienated from them. Like Nina, I had lived experiences of feeling alienated from the dominant narrative teacher's role as a curriculum planner, and thirsted for more realness and authenticity as described by Carl Rogers (1969). Mindful awareness precipitated my realization of how difficult it can be to build meaningful relationships and be an authentic person while meeting all the curriculum objectives and expectations of the teacher role, and my participants shared these sentiments. The yearning I had to create more meaning in my career path led me to the University of Alberta to pursue further studies, and each of my participants found their own way to negotiate their yearnings for meaning and authenticity. These parallel threads illustrate that there are multiple interwoven dimensions to my participants' stories, and to mine. My time with the teacher participants revealed both problems and opportunities in the collective story of teachers who are committed to practicing and sharing mindfulness in schools.

Problem: Bumping up against Dominant Narratives

Within their professional landscapes, teachers bump up against dominant narrative stories about what a teacher's *role* should be. My participants' narratives revealed a bumping up against this status quo or dominant narrative of a teacher's role in ways that were both profound and complex. As teachers, we are hired to teach mandated curriculum and we have an obligation to teach it well. Everything outside the borders of provincially-mandated curriculum is open for scrutiny. Questions abound: What is the justification for the program? Is this the best approach

for students? Is this the best use of our time as teachers? My wonderings began to take shape around this issue: How did teachers story themselves in the midst of these lingering questions, which represent the dominant narrative? Were they able to impart and act upon the embodied knowledge that they carried? How did teachers balance a mindful way of being with the pressure to produce high-quality days of productive learning in their classrooms? My teacher participants and I continue to negotiate these questions.

The institutional narrative created complexities and opportunities that carried over from my existing relationships into my inquiry. In particular, my relationship with Ed reflected this tension. Ed and I were friends, but we were also part of an institutional narrative in which he was a principal—a leader given an opportunity to present new ideas to his staff and students—and I was a teacher—hired to teach a mandated curriculum. During a portion of this study, I was not assigned to any school, having chosen to take time away from teaching to pursue my studies. This placed me in an uncomfortable in-between space, making me more acutely aware of the power differential between Ed and I. He was within the system, providing opportunities for students and teachers to practice mindfulness. I was outside the system, seeking a school community that would recognize and appreciate my embodied knowing of mindfulness. Ed and I were both composing lives informed by our experiences with mindfulness, which created a congruency, but we had differing experiences within school landscapes. One issue that he was negotiating revolved around his anxieties that he would be branded as a hippie, or that his mindfulness practice would be dismissed as religious. Within the dominant narrative, spiritual contents are generally mistrusted, and I sometimes wondered if Ed trusted me. This tension led to silences in my research conversations with him. Narrative inquiry invites us to see tension as

an area to illuminate, not to be avoided. It would not be beneficial to my study to ignore or gloss over the tensions that were created by the hierarchical realities of the educational system.

Within school landscapes, administrative *talk* regarding the mental health of students is common during staff meetings, where adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and self-regulation are addressed as need-to-know topics. My participants appreciated the importance of this, but were frustrated by the lack of implementation of meaningful programs and the creation of time and space for that programming. The message that Nina received from her administration was that if time was going to be set aside for mindfulness, "you better be able to show me curriculum objectives." Although the *talk* pointed to a prioritizing of wellness, in Ed's words, "We say a lot and we write a lot . . . documents that nobody reads." In classrooms, days and minutes are carefully managed and accounted for. Time in the classroom is a precious and finite commodity, and curriculum objectives are the priority. Perhaps it seems time-efficient to disseminate documents at staff meetings, but teachers are more apt to understand and respond to their students' complex needs when they have an understanding of their own internal lives, an opportunity that mindfulness practice could provide (Benn et al., 2012).

In addition to time, finding space to implement mindfulness programs was also an issue. Some of my participants pointed out that their classroom spaces were often crowded and not noise resistant. The students often did not have space to lie down for deep relaxation, which is one of the best ways to teach beginners to connect to breath and body. Nina was teaching mindfulness to several classes amalgamated together in a cold and cavernous room so that her colleagues could have more preparation time. She found it challenging to connect students with the intimacy and stillness of the practice in this environment. Rachel's response to issues of

physical space in the classroom is worth mentioning again: She opened up her students to outdoor environments to create more spaciousness.

Teachers generally want to make a positive difference in the lives of their students; it is one of the reasons people become teachers in the first place. The increasing complexity of students' lives has created stressful environments that can lead to situations of overwhelm for teachers (Hanh, 2013a). Overall, the main problem is that the system fails to create inner and outer space needed for real mindfulness. There is simply not enough time in the teaching schedule. When shaped to be palatable for educational uses, mindfulness can end up being superficial and unsatisfactory. When faced with this quandary, both Ed and Nina suggested changing the provincially mandated curriculum to allow more time to address social and emotional learning outcomes.

Despite all of these challenges, the teachers in my study reflected back to me my own conviction, which I had reached through years of practice, that bringing mindfulness to schools is a worthwhile endeavour. The next section explores opportunities and a new way of being in a school community, informed by mindfulness.

Opportunities: Moving from Teacher Role to an Authentic Teacher Life

In his book *On Personal Power*, Carl Rogers (1977) described how a teacher's commitment to the creation of a facilitative learning climate assists in the development of the whole person. The quality of listening, the realness of the teacher, and the general atmosphere of caring are what set a child-centred approach apart from traditional schooling (Rogers, 1977). Each of my participants was committed not only to child-centred teaching but to *realness* or what Rogers described as the process of becoming.

Carl Rogers influenced my questions around how mindfulness practice may precipitate what he described as a coming into congruency for teachers. My initial wonderings shifted to include the following question: In what ways were the participants attempting to come into realness? The first of these steps, finding authenticity, is crucial. Teachers who practice mindfulness are accepting an invitation to wake up and live an authentic life in each moment. Mindfulness is radical in that it points inward to the source of power and authority, and those who practice it sincerely are taking personal responsibility for their lives. In this way mindfulness can facilitate a coming into congruency. As teachers feel more empowered to express themselves authentically, they can enter into the teaching role without façade (Rogers, 1979). The stories told reflect a movement away from a traditional and rigid teacher's *role* and toward wholeness that recognizes the complexity and wisdom of teacher *lives*. One question that lingers: What is the relationship between embodied knowing and authenticity?

Teachers who have nurtured an authentic relationship to themselves and others have a natural inclination towards advocacy. Rogers (1979) wrote of the need for a dispositional stance for educational change. Each of my participants has embraced educational transformation because they were able to embody and understand a different way of *being* though mindfulness meditation that is not often witnessed in traditional educational landscapes. Rogers wrote these words in 1979 and they remain relevant to this day, perhaps now more that ever: "In the coming world the capacity to face the new appropriately is more important than the ability to know and repeat the old" (p. 304).

Over the course of this study, all of my participants embraced the new and became advocates for educational reform and in particular mindfulness in schools. In my own life, I wondered at times whether it would be easier to leave the teaching profession and focus on

bringing mindfulness into receptive communities at yoga studios and in community leagues. Eventually, I decided to stay in the profession with full knowledge that there would likely be uncomfortable meetings and areas of friction in my future stories. There would be conversations with principals and other administrators who did not understand mindfulness, and along with these, the risk of unpleasant feelings of alienation and being misunderstood.

Despite these tensions, in the beginning of this study I was deeply committed to opening little cracks in the system and being a voice for mindfulness in schools. But over time, I became less committed. My own wellbeing took precedence over being a spokesperson for others. What precipitated this shift is that I started to story myself as a community- and relationship-maker, and not simply as someone who delivered curriculum or advocated for mindfulness in schools. I transitioned to teaching part-time, while increasing my volunteer time outside of school communities and teaching beginner meditation classes to adults. Currently, I have been initiating fewer conversations about mindfulness within school landscapes, but remain committed to my personal practice and trust that I will naturally transmit it in my classroom (Hanh, 2013a).

Contemplating Old Questions: Restructuring to Support Mindfulness

To deepen my own embodied understanding, I have attended several mindfulness retreats. In the summer of 2017, I attended a retreat with Guy and Sally Armstong in Cochrane, Alberta. At the end of retreat time, students feel tender and sensitive. We have been silent and contemplative for days, resting in awareness but also looking directly at our wandering minds and all the ways that we distract ourselves. To close the retreat, teachers speak with students about how to take mindfulness practice home and integrate it. In this particular retreat, Guy Armstrong challenged us to not think of mindfulness practice as something we have to try to fit into our busy schedule. Instead, he asked us to restructure our lives in a way to support and

nourish our mindfulness. If we feel too busy to practice, maybe this is an area for mindful investigation. Does the way we live create tension? What are the difficulties and barriers that keep us from practice?

Attention to these teacher narratives serves as a reminder of busyness and stresses that weigh on teachers and affect the classroom climate. This highlights the need for more spaciousness in the teacher timetable so a more facilitative and supportive environment can emerge. Change can no longer be ethically implemented through a top-down approach; understanding the lived experiences of those who are affected by change is imperative. The lived experiences of the participants in my study point to the need for a Rogerian person-centred approach that allows the teacher to trust their own instincts. Rogers (1980) explained, "Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding that can be tapped into in the right facilitative environment" (p 115).

The right facilitative environment means one where teachers' needs are supported and there is deep listening. Listening and mindfulness practice are congruent because both are kind, accepting, and receptive. Rogers (1980) described the experience of being on the receiving end of sensitive, empathic, concentrated listening in this way: "When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to reperceive my world in a new way and to go on" (p. 12). Deep listening and spaciousness are interwoven, creating opportunities for solutions in teachers' lives that will impact student wellness.

Moving Forward: Reflections

As this study wraps up, there are evolving questions that remain. What will the future bring for mindfulness in schools in Alberta? Will curriculums change to reflect teacher and student mental wellness needs? There were times in this study when it felt like the multi-layered

stories of my teacher participants kept opening up new unanswered questions. There is a need for more studies on the lived experiences of teachers who are practicing mindfulness in schools. My participants have opened up a part of their lives to me and illuminated some of the complexities involved in sharing and living mindfulness in school landscapes. I believe the discourse on mindfulness for teachers is opening up. It would be fascinating to follow up with my participants in two or three more years to further illuminate this work.

This study is about spaces in the lives of teachers. It is about spaces in classrooms where mindfulness can take root, and spaces in the minds and hearts of teachers where they have felt the support and nourishment of mindfulness. Rogers (1980) described how experiential knowledge was the deepest level of understanding. The committed, embodied mindfulness practice of my participants is what opened this deepest level of knowing in them, and they have expressed in their stories that mindfulness has helped them to live healthy, happy and meaningful lives. It is my hope that policy makers find these stories compelling. Perhaps in the future teachers' embodied knowledge of mindfulness will be the new standard for wellness in classroom landscapes across the province.

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