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Beyond deep breathing: A new vision for equitable, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed mindfulness practice

Addison Duane⊙, Arlène E. Casimir, Lauren C. Mims⊙, Cierra Kaler-Jones, & Dena Simmons

Abstract: As the research on mindfulness expands to include school-based interventions, middle school educators across the country have implemented mindfulness in the classroom. However, similar to other social-emotional learning approaches, when implemented in the absence of cultural context and trauma-informed care, mindfulness can be weaponized. In this paper we describe how educators can facilitate mindfulness practice in the classroom in affirming, culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways. In doing so, we propose a new vision for how mindfulness can further equity work in schools.

Keywords: *equity, mindfulness, social emotional learning, trauma-informed, culturally responsive practices*

***The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* characteristics**:

- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.

    Rachel, a seventh grader, wakes up excited to learn. Usually, she rides the bus to school, scrolling through TikTok for a morning laugh. Once she enters the school building, school resource officers (SROs) shush and tell her to remove her back-pack and place her phone in the technology bin. Standing in the long line for the metal detector, she takes a deep breath, hoping her bobby pins do not set off the alarm again. While waiting, the school counselor yells "BELL RINGS IN ONE MINUTE" from the end of the hallway. After the SROs clear her to enter, Rachel stuffs everything in her bag and sprints to her locker on the other side of the building. Another SRO, standing in a doorway with a stopwatch, and a gun in its holster, sees Rachel and yells, "25 SECONDS!" Rachel's heart races as she shoves her backpack into the locker, grabs her books and school supplies, and runs

into the classroom just as the bell rings. From the front of the room, the teacher looks up from her attendance clipboard and says, "Rachel. Amari. Jay. Late. You weren't in your seats at the bell." The teacher then instructs the class to close their eyes, imagine their favorite place to be, and take three deep breaths. Rachel is no longer excited about school, instead she feels anxious and frustrated at the injustice of over surveillance and outward shaming from staff.

For many students like Rachel, a fictional character rooted in the experiences of our students, the middle school (MS) environment can be a source of distress (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Research has found that MS climate and culture play a role in students' social and emotional well-being as well as academic success (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2014). Accordingly, it is critical to consider how to improve the educational experiences of middle schoolers (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Researchers have encouraged integrating mindfulness practices in the classroom as a solution to address the challenges and distressing conditions MS students might experience such as anxiety (Sibinga et al., 2013), school related stress (Sibinga et al., 2013; Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2015), bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), depressive symptoms (Sibinga, Webb, Ghazarian, & Ellen, 2016), suicidal ideation and self-harm (Britton et al., 2014). Several research teams (Carsley, Khoury, & Heath, 2018; Felver, Celis-de Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh, 2016; Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014) have conducted meta-analyses of mindfulness based interventions for youth. Synthesizing their findings: mindfulness has been

implemented and studied in a variety of settings with adolescents of all ages, mostly focusing on urban, low-income populations, with significant effects on students' anxiety, mental health, disruptive behavior, and academic outcomes. These findings are important, however, simply engaging in mindfulness practice does not ameliorate existing injustices (i.e. racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia) nor does it promote educational equity. Defined by Jordan (2010) as "creating a system of education where all children have equal access to quality instruction and widely available opportunities to learn to their fullest human potential" (p. 142). Moreover, in the absence of adopting a critical lens to analyze mindfulness interventions in schools, school-based mindfulness practices may cause greater harm during the middle school years, a crucial period characterized by significant developmental transitions. In this paper we explore how mindfulness practices are weaponized and outline a new vision for culturally responsive and trauma-informed mindfulness in middle schools.

Mindfulness in schools

Most current work on mindfulness in schools draws on the definition from Dr. John Kabat-Zinn, who developed the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program (Zenner et al., 2014). Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines the practice as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). However, historically, mindfulness has been conceptualized as

> the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present, and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. (Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation, 2020)

It has been practiced for thousands of years, individually, and part of various religious and secular traditions (Selva, 2020). In fact, the word "mindfulness" is a modern translation of the word *sati*, which comes from a native Indian language spoken during the time of Buddha, Sanskrit (Treleaven & Britton, 2018).

Over the past decade, educators have grown to embrace the popularized version of mindfulness. This type of mindfulness practice, often reduced to breathing strategies and meditation, disregards the cultural roots by implementing

mindfulness to increase productivity and focus (Shilts, 2018; van de Weijer-bergsma, Formsma, de Bruin, & Bögels, 2012) rather than to feel alive and present. Additionally, "beautiful, White, blonde" practitioners often deliver the interventions (Patricio, 2020; Piacenza, 2018), which centers White practitioners and portrays an inaccurate depiction of true mindfulness practice.

The danger of unexamined mindfulness

Many have cited mindfulness as a "cure" for all problems (Patricio, 2020; Treleaven & Britton, 2018). Like other social emotional learning (SEL) programs, it highlights an incomplete narrative that children need an intervention to save them from themselves (Simmons, 2017). The underlying messages of this assertion are that everyone benefits from mindfulness, people should adopt it ubiquitously, and people need saving. However, similar to other SEL interventions, without sociopolitical and racial context, mindfulness practices can become inherently problematic (Madda, 2019) or turn into another form of policing (Kaler-Jones, 2020). In her piece "Mindfulness Won't Save Us. Fixing the System Will," Christina Torres (2019) wrote:

> Teaching students to meditate will help manage their anger or frustration, but it won't remove a system that mass incarcerates their neighbors and family members. Giving students skills in socioemotional learning can help students better process and express their opinions, but it won't erase a system that was built not only to their disadvantage, but also sometimes actively set up to see them fail. (para. 5)

We contend that without acknowledging systemic causes of distress and students' context, school-based mindfulness practices in MS will not prevent trauma from occurring and may exacerbate students' trauma responses. In turn, mindfulness can run the risk of being weaponized by the very people bringing it into the space. In this case, the concept of weaponization (Pascale, 2019), refers to educators, unintentionally and inadvertently, using mindfulness practices to manipulate, coerce, or commit acts of emotional, psychological, and curricular violence.

The need for affirming, culturally responsive and trauma-informed mindfulness practices in the classroom

In this paper, we describe how educators can facilitate mindfulness practice in the classroom in affirming, culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways. In doing so,

we propose a new vision for how mindfulness can further equity work in schools. Drawing on personal experiences as educators as well as empirical evidence, we invite MS educators to consider integrating this new vision for mindfulness practice into the classroom.

Theoretical framework

There are two key concepts that can help make mindfulness a powerful intervention: trauma-informed care and culturally responsive practice. In this section, we will define each separately, as they have existed as distinct entities in education, and later explore the intersection of the two as they apply to mindfulness. With respect to trauma-informed care, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) identified six principles of trauma-informed care that support healing when integrated across policies, practices, and procedures. The principles are: 1) safety; 2) trust and transparency; 3) peer support; 4) collaboration and mutuality; 5) empowerment, voice, and choice; and 6) cultural, historical, and gender issues (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Although SAMHSA designed these principles for clinical practice (Menschner & Maul, 2016), educators have applied these domains to schools and classrooms (Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2015; Kataoka et al., 2018), and they have served as a framework for district-wide implementation, school-specific intervention, and classroom practice (see Kataoka et al., 2018 for case studies). The need for trauma-informed care in education is highly relevant, with recent population estimates suggesting that almost two-thirds of children in the United States experience at least one traumatic event before age sixteen (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2007). While SAMHSA's sixth pillar, cultural, historical, and gender issues, mentions the need for culturally affirming trauma-informed care, it does not fully address the concept of equity by failing to make the connection between equal access and opportunity for *all*.

Trauma-informed mindfulness

Trauma-informed mindfulness combines trauma-informed care with mindfulness practice. In his book *Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness*, Dr. David Treleaven and Britton (2018) root mindfulness practice in concepts put forth by SAMHSA and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, blending trauma-informed care with mindfulness and meditation (p. xxii). Similarly, Kelly and Garland (2016) define Trauma-Informed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction as practices that pair mindfulness with trauma-specific psychoeducation, while facilitating awareness aimed at avoiding re-traumatization. These interventions have been applied to students in the classroom, women in prisons, and survivors of violence, and significantly improved participants' healthy coping, decreased stress-related symptoms, and enhanced participants self-regulation skills (Kelly & Garland, 2016; Rousseau, Long, Jackson, & Jurgensen, 2019; Sibinga et al., 2016).

In reviewing the literature on mindfulness, we found few studies that considered the intersection of equity, trauma-informed care, and mindfulness. In other words, the concept of equity is frequently omitted from research studies and interventions. There is danger in citing literature absent of race and equity, especially when applying findings to school settings (Alvarez, 2020). Mindfulness practice that fails to center equity and racial justice, like other SEL programs, can become "white supremacy with a hug" (Simmons, 2020, as cited in Madda, 2019).

Culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive practices

Because of this gap, we must combine trauma-informed care with culturally responsive practices, which explicitly addresses equity. Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as practices that utilize students' culture to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. She invites educators to tap into the inner well of richness that already exists in students' culture and lives, while charging us to acknowledge that the children in our classrooms are "heirs to a great tradition of art, music, dance, science, invention, oratory, and so on" (p. 152). Geneva Gay (2000) expanded on Ladson-Billings' landmark theory to include every aspect of the school experience by developing a framework for culturally responsive pedagogy. She outlined culturally responsive practices (CRP) as using cultural knowledge, prior experience, and frames of reference to make learning more relevant for all students (Gay, 2010). In this way, CRP is validating, multidimensional, comprehensive, transformative, empowering, and emancipatory (Gay, 2000).

Culturally responsive, culturally competent mindfulness

Currently, a number of scholars are engaging in research around the concept of culturally responsive, culturally

competent, or multicultural mindfulness (e.g. Fuchs, Lee, Roemer, & Orsillo, 2013; Ivers, Johnson, Clarke, Newsome, & Berry, 2016; Perera-Diltz & Greenridge, 2018). Watson-Singleton, Black, and Spivey (2019) generated a multidimensional model for culturally responsive mindfulness, to include intervention factors such as: African American facilitators; prioritization of cultural values including self-empowerment, interdependence, and story-telling; culturally-tailored resources and culturally familiar terminology; factors outside the intervention: location; and individual factors: religious concerns, perceived benefits, and holistic health. Building on Black's culturally grounded work, we integrate these elements within classroom mindfulness practices and consider the many ways mindfulness is practiced already in our students' communities.

Drawing from these existing frameworks, we propose combining culturally responsive practices and trauma-informed care to mindfulness practices in the MS classroom. It is important to note that implementation, as with all SEL practices, is not about checking a box. Instead, it is a deep and long-lasting commitment to justice that changes every aspect of the school experience to ensure that all students, specifically those who have been historically marginalized, have an equal opportunity to thrive and develop their mindfulness practice.

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In other words, there is no quick fix. The following section outlines important considerations for mindfulness practice.

A new vision for centering equity: Culturally responsive and trauma-informed mindfulness practice

Our new vision centers equity in mindfulness practice by situating the tenets of CRP within three of the trauma-informed SAMHSA principles: safety, trust and transparency, and collaboration and mutuality. In our professional experiences as educators, we observe how mindfulness is misappropriated, weaponized, and co-opted when educators fail to examine and implement practices absent of a trauma-informed CRP lens. Where the SAMHSA components fail to center equity, CRP is rooted in equity and justice. By combining the two, we prioritize equity in a new vision for mindfulness practice. Below, we lay out the conventional ways that mindfulness may cause harm to emphasize how practices are misapplied, while also offering suggestions for culturally responsive and trauma-informed practice. Within each section, we return to Rachel, the student from the opening vignette, to provide concrete strategies for centering equity in mindfulness practice in the MS classroom.

Safety

Haines (2019) built upon SAMHSA's (2014) existing definition of safety (e.g. feeling physically and psychologically safe) by adding "emotional, spiritual, and relational safety … safety gets created when your agency, your interdependence, and your autonomy are affirmed" (Haines, 2019, pp. 135–136). The definition of safety, from a CRP lens, should also incorporate intellectual safety, where students know that their educators accept and affirm their ways of being and knowing. By establishing safety comprehensively, culturally responsive and trauma-informed mindfulness is liberating.

While educators strive to create safe classroom communities at the start of the school year, there are ways that they can misuse and weaponize safety, ultimately getting in the way of equity work. Examples of this weaponization may include: forcing students to close their eyes, telling a student in crisis to "just breathe," or mandating that students employ mindfulness while being forced to comply with a potentially oppressive ask, such as doing mindful breathing while standing in a straight line or eating lunch silently (see Fraga, 2016 for one MS example of 'mindful eating' to mandate silent lunch rooms). It could also mean punishing or policing students for employing mindfulness strategies outside of moments when it is most convenient for the teacher.

Instead, we recommend inviting students to tap into their inner-well of knowing (Ladson-Billings, 2000) by trusting that students know what they need to feel safe. In doing so, we validate, affirm, and are responsive to (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) students' experiences while

also honoring their choices by moving away from a hierarchical model of teaching and learning, where instruction is rooted in compliance. Educators can also work with students throughout the year to help them build a toolbox of strategies for when they are in crisis. As students are building their individual toolboxes, educators can guide them in evaluating their strategies to ensure that they are not harmful to themselves or others. An important part of the toolbox creation is explicitly teaching students different strategies that they can use to notice, observe, and understand their emotions when triggered. For example, during a mindful breathing exercise, we might give students options for body position and gaze, rather than mandate that every student closes their eyes, which can trigger past trauma for some students (Schwartz, 2019). This is a key aspect of centering equity, where each student can learn and practice mindfulness in a way that works for *them*. Mindfulness activities should also be multidimensional (Gay, 2010), in that students feel safe and encouraged to use the techniques from their toolbox as the need for it arises, not simply during a teacher-designated time. This approach will also provide opportunity for students to engage in self-reflection and abstract thinking, two important aspects of development during adolescent years (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). In doing this, we honor students' inner knowledge about what they need to safely engage in mindfulness practice both inside and outside of the classroom. Rachel's teacher, for example, could start by acknowledging the stress of arriving late and the trauma inflicted by the safety measures of the school. In welcoming the class, she might say, "should you need it, choose a strategy for a mindful moment, like deep breaths or mindful seeing", creating a safe space for students to own their mindfulness practice.

In underscoring the importance of safety through a CRP lens, we defy traditional methods of pedagogy and practice by co-constructing equitable and safe spaces, rather than working from teacher established classroom norms driven by educator-centered mindfulness practice. The process of co-construction honors and celebrates students' agency, creates a better MS learning environment (Edwards, 2015), and meets the developmental needs of youth who, during adolescence, may place greater emphasis on collaborative constructions (Howe & Zachariou, 2019). The East Bay Meditation Center provides examples for creating a space that is conducive to co-construction and power sharing (see Figure 1). Co-construction

establishing these mindful practice agreements is a living and breathing process that continues throughout the school year and in all areas of the classroom. These agreements deepen the classroom's commitment to a safe and brave space where all members of the classroom community collaborate on cultivating physical, psychological, emotional, relational, spiritual, and intellectual safety.

Germer (2009) stated that mindfulness is a way of being with one's self and with the world. As educators, we can open a dialogue with students to better understand what mindfulness might look like in their communities. When we invite conversations about how students see mindfulness in their daily practices, with their caregivers, or in their communities, we encourage them to see the true meaning of mindfulness – that it is responsive and a way of being in the world, rather than a way to be more productive or focused. Educators can also engage in thoughtful partnerships with community organizations that students might be a part of to honor communal knowledge, thus contributing to a more community-based process. With this, mindfulness practices are liberatory processes, a both/and of dismantling oppressive systems and creating spaces for healing.

Trustworthiness and transparency

Mindfulness is also about being transparent and establishing trust in the classroom, which SAMHSA (2014) defined as having all actions, choices, and decisions made visible, and all operations conducted where everyone is fully informed. Integrating equity through CRP also means being transparent, and sharing the history and origins of mindfulness practices as it continues to be culturally appropriated, whitewashed, and co-opted in the United States. Defined as exploitation, misrepresentation, or offense, the act of cultural appropriation exacerbates inequalities and marginalization (Matthes, 2018) by taking elements of other cultures and using without permission, respect, and/or the necessary work needed to honor the culture of origin. For example, the Chinese standing bell, often misattributed as Tibetan singing bowls (Dheden, 2020; Price, 1984) is frequently used in school-based mindfulness practice (Brown, 2007). Thus, the current theme in mainstream mindfulness practice includes appropriating components of other cultures into something lighthearted and fun, rather than rooted in the sacred practices from which they came.

1) Be willing to "try on" new ideas or ways of doing things;

2) Speak about your own experiences. Do not speak for others;

3) Try to understand and acknowledge impact. Denying the impact of something said by

focusing on intent is often hurtful;

4) Honor multiple realities by using "and" instead of "but" when speaking;

5) Refrain from blaming or shaming yourself and others;

6) If you tend to speak often, consider "stepping back." If you tend to speak only rarely,

consider "stepping up;"

7) Try to avoid planning what you'll say as you listen to others. Listen with your whole self;

8) Extend confidentiality to people in the space. Don't name names if you discuss it elsewhere;

9) You can say "I pass" if you don't wish to speak.

By implementing mindfulness in the absence of trust and transparency, educators also run the risk of exacerbating an already existing power differential (Mccroskey & Richmond, 1983). MS students, whose strong need for social belonging and sense of identity further complicate power issues (Tucker, Smith-Adcock, & Trepal, 2011), may already view the teacher as more capable, knowledgeable, and wise (Blakeslee, 2014). As a result, students may feel powerless and distrust school staff (Albertini, 2004). It is important to note that educators likely do not actively seek out opportunities to exert power, shatter mutual trust, or suppress transparency. However, the presence of the forthcoming examples could contribute to a dangerous power imbalance, which can, in turn, result in the erosion of trust and transparency. During mindfulness practice, teachers may contribute to public humiliation by calling out students for not following directions or not being able to sustain the practice for the designated amount of time. Other harmful practices include outward shaming e.g. "this student decided to laugh instead of focusing on their practice," enacting not-so-micro aggressions (Grinnage, 2019) such as "maybe if you cared about breathing more than you

cared about your hair, you could use this practice to improve your focus and grades" or "I don't know why any of you aren't taking this practice seriously, you, more than anyone, need to practice mindfulness because you and your people need to calm down." These statements and others contribute to a failure narrative, (Johnson, 2015; Simmons, 2017) and compound the problematic power dynamic, thus breaking trust and suppressing transparency.

Accordingly, when implementing mindfulness practices into the MS classroom, we can avoid the appropriation and exacerbation of the power differential by ensuring that practices distinguish and leverage culture. Leveraging culture aligns with the essential characteristics of successful middle grade schools as described in The Association for Middle Level Education position paper, *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Specifically, the position paper underscores the importance of Culture and Community (e.g. the school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all) in designing effective middle school environments. To do this within mindfulness practice, we can name the ways people from the West, East, African

and Latinx diaspora find peace and calm. This might mean approaching the practice with humility, bringing in members of the community to support the mindfulness practice, and/or having voices and pictures that reflect the diversity of the classroom space.

By showing students what their ancestors have done to cultivate a mindfulness practice, we empower, validate, and affirm students' cultural identities while providing a plethora of practices for their individual development. MS operates as a crucial time for identity development, where youth are asking "Who am I?" and "How do I fit in?" (Erikson, 1968). Amplifying cultural identities could help answer those questions and more while also teaching students to honor their ancestral wisdom. Distinguishing, acknowledging, and leveraging culture is crucial in building trust and transparency because without it, mindfulness practices can become a performative gesture, where students may recognize that educators are withholding the truth about the practice.

Another aspect of establishing trust and transparency within mindfulness is to explicitly provide students with the power to make a choice to opt-in, rather than opt-out. Providing choice, especially for MS students who are learning autonomy, is crucial to adolescent development (Alley, 2019). When students elect to cultivate their own mindfulness practice, they embody their inherent power. As they develop their practice, students may have difficulty processing some of the emotions that emerge when they go within (Burrows, 2016; Himelstein, 2013). In these moments, and throughout the school day, we can help create the trust, transparency, and safety needed for students to regard us as someone that can support them with an open-mind and unwavering support. If we are fortunate enough for our students to opt-in to practice, or share their vulnerabilities with us, we can make necessary adjustments to ensure that our practice and instruction does not contribute to students' stress responses. Understanding that the practice is multidimensional, where we can experience a variety of emotions and reactions, we can also honor when students are present but not necessarily invested in pursuing their practice that day.

By listening and honoring the invitation-only process, we can respect our students' humanity and needs, which will provide space to process emotions, examine oppression, heal, and ultimately sustain the energy needed for the work of liberation. In Rachel's classroom, her teacher could say,

"As we turn our attention from our inner landscape to our classroom community, let's take a moment to share out when you felt most alive, present, and grounded in who you are. As we share, listen to what was the same and different for you; listen to what surprised you, and most importantly listen without judgment. What will you bring from this new awareness and reflection to your practice tomorrow, and how can we support you?"

Collaboration and mutuality

According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014), collaboration and mutuality occur when people place equal importance on all members of the community, with all involved in the planning and decision making, and leveled power differentials. Dismantling the power dynamic between students and adults is not something that comes naturally, but must happen for authentic mindfulness practice to take place. Involving students in the planning and decision making is one way to do this. When implementing and refining mindfulness in the classroom, educators must remember that we learn as much from students as they learn from us. As Dr. Carla Shalaby (2017), an education scholar and activist wrote, "schools value quiet children over loud ones and operate as though adults are the only teachers in the room" (p. xvi). The new vision for mindfulness highlights the need to validate and affirm student ideas (Gay, 2002), rather than brush them off in favor of our own. The goal can and should be to build and maintain mutuality through frequent opportunities to critique and for connection with students collaborating on a fluid process. One study of middle and high school students found that teacher-centered methods such as lectures and video presentations without group discussion alienate students from learning almost half of the school day, leading to decreased engagement and increased distractions (Yair, 2000). Other research has found that engagement and learning improve when MS students are involved in the process (Gewertz, 2019). Open dialogue, feedback, and inquiry also liberate and transform the classroom space by raising consciousness through a mutual effort to understand and practice mindfulness.

It is imperative that MS educators work collaboratively with students in a trauma-informed way (Von Dohlen et al., 2019), but what does it look like when good intentions lead to negative impact? Or when collaboration exists without culturally responsive practice? A key misconception to

address is the idea that teachers "allow" or "give" students permission to share their feedback and embody their power. If we bring in mindfulness activities to the classroom without first soliciting ideas and input from students, we run the risk of erasure which can result in causing our students harm. Erasure is defined as practices in which a dominant culture attempts to negate, suppress, remove, and in effect rase the culture and existence of groups of people (Williams, 2016). In this case, a large group of mostly White educators erases the cultural history from mindfulness practice. For instance, a well-meaning White teacher sees a mindfulness guided meditation on YouTube and decides to play it for students on a Monday morning. By pressing play without inviting student feedback and involvement, they exert their power and fail to acknowledge: 1) that students may not want to engage in a mindfulness practice that once again centers whiteness 2) that many students may already be employing methods of mindful practice, 3) that students may not actually need or want to watch this YouTube video, and 4) the generational legacy of resilience, mindfulness, and cultural greatness their students bring to the space by virtue of who they are inherently. In this example, the intention of the teacher was good, but the impact it had on students mattered more.

Instead of erasing and exacerbating the power differential, we can garner feedback from students and decenter ourselves as educators, while intentionally honoring communal knowledge, strengths, and interests about the individual. With this, all MS students can continue to see and discover the power of co-creating experiences, explore their identity (Erikson, 1968), and draw on their own cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). For Rachel, this would mean that she was involved in every aspect of the process, giving feedback to her teacher along the way, making the practice collaborative and far more comprehensive (Gay, 2010). In time, Rachel may ask her teacher to implement practices she likes as part of the class' mindfulness experience. This might include culturally informed guided meditations or the use of Black voices during a breathing exercise (see Figure 2 for more examples).

It is equally important that educators are open to student feedback without becoming defensive. The process of becoming mindful is an on-going learning experience for everyone involved. We cannot assume we will get it right the first time. We must look to our students to inform how and where the practice unfolds each day. For example, at the conclusion of mindful practice, educators can say, "how did you feel about the way I started, encouraged, or closed our practice? What would you like me to continue to do? What would you like me to change or stop doing?" By modeling true listening and decentering ourselves, we show students that we want to honor our intentions by evaluating the impact of our actions, and empower the community over the self. After all, when we invite our students to be a part of shaping their mindfulness experiences, they develop practices to employ on well beyond their time in our classrooms. And that is the goal: we want our students to use the tool of mindfulness to create equanimity in their lives as they strive to be successful academically, socially, and emotionally.

Figure 2. A selected list of possible culturally competent mindfulness resources.
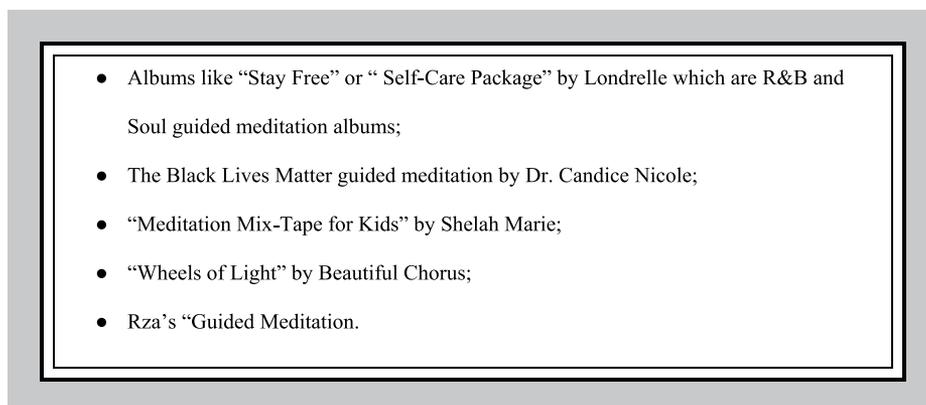
- Albums like "Stay Free" or " Self-Care Package" by Londrelle which are R&B and Soul guided meditation albums;
- The Black Lives Matter guided meditation by Dr. Candice Nicole;
- "Meditation Mix-Tape for Kids" by Shelah Marie;
- "Wheels of Light" by Beautiful Chorus;
- Rza's "Guided Meditation.

Conclusion

With this new vision in mind, we can re-imagine what Rachel's experience could be. If Rachel attended a school that acknowledged, affirmed, and validated the experiences of students in a culturally responsive and trauma-informed way, the morning would look very different. With equity in mind, educators would re-imagine school so that they designed every experience, starting on the bus in the early morning and ending once she safely returns to her home, to support Rachel's social, emotional and physical well-being. She is part of the planning for the morning mindfulness activity and excited to enter a space that values, sees, and hears her. She works with her classmates and teacher to advocate for the morning mindfulness practice, develop her own toolbelt of strategies, and use them when needed. She knows the reasons and history behind breathing exercises and connects it to her cultural and ancestral wisdom. She understands the way mindfulness practices promotes her own healing, and she may choose to practice mindfulness on her own terms, at school and elsewhere. Finally, when Rachel elects to take a moment to bring her awareness to the present, she uses mindfulness in a way that honors her inner strength.

By situating school-based mindfulness practice within the tenets of CRP and SAMHSA's principles of safety, trustworthiness and transparency, and collaboration and mutuality, there is an incredible opportunity to create meaningful experiences for students from diverse backgrounds to engage mindfulness practices in the MS setting. In this regard, the practice becomes affirming, liberatory, and empowering. As educators who want the best for our students, we must interrogate the white-washed version of current mindfulness practices, while unpacking the cultural appropriation, weaponization, silencing, and erasure that may occur in our classrooms.

> **As educators who want the best for our students, we must interrogate the whitewashed version of current mindfulness practices, while unpacking the cultural appropriation, weaponization, silencing, and erasure that may occur in our classrooms.**

We can also implement these practices ourselves, and invite other school staff to engage as well. In doing so, we believe that teachers in middle schools across the country will begin the necessary journey toward more equitable,

responsive, and empowering school-based mindfulness practice while leaning into the Culture & Community characteristics of *The Successful Middle School* to create a school community that is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). After all, middle school is the perfect place to do this as this period is a crucial developmental time between childhood and adulthood, characterized by significant developmental transitions. Angel Kyodo Williams (2002) wrote that there is a freedom spot in our brains, where mindfulness can help to heal the pain inflicted by domination and oppression. Educators can use mindfulness to create safe spaces, for all students, to process emotions, examine oppression, heal, and ultimately sustain the energy needed for liberation. We invite MS educators to analyze their current classroom mindfulness practices and ensure that existing strategies are not causing harm to students. It is critical to unlearn and reject the pervasive ways of asking students to be mindful and instead adopt a new vision that infuses culturally responsive practices and trauma-informed care, with equity at the center.

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