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CREATIVITY-FOCUSED MINDFULNESS FOR STUDENT WELL-BEING

by Danah Henriksen and Kyle Shack

Abstract
Taking a whole-child approach to schooling, the authors address how creativity and mindfulness are connected and suggest practical ways that teachers can integrate them into the curriculum.
Key words: *creativity, curriculum, mindfulness, student wellness, teacher wellness*

Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.
–Abraham Lincoln

A potentially overlooked area of learning in schools involves student well-being. Content will always be important, but it is often taught in ways that lack engagement and creativity or that do not address students as whole people with social and emotional aspects and needs. This problem suggests two related issues. One is that schools are often focused solely on academic achievement in ways that are tightly content-driven or rigidly focused on standards and high-stakes testing, and therefore lacking in creativity. The second issue is that students are often struggling with social or emotional challenges that get lost in the heightened curricular focus on achievement. An effective way to address this problem is to take a whole-child approach to schooling that incorporates creativity-focused mindfulness throughout the curriculum.

As educators are increasingly pressed by standards-based teaching and testing, they may inadvertently ignore the social and emotional needs of students, particularly those at risk of academic failure. A survey on adverse childhood experiences by the Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health (2011/2012) showed that nearly half of all children have experienced at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma.

Nearly a third of U.S. youths ages 12 to 17 have experienced two or more types of childhood adversity that are likely to affect their adult physical and mental health. Most young people regularly experience emotional challenges, from everyday anxieties or concerns to more serious issues or traumatic events. They rely on schools for help in developing their ability to cope. Yet, while educators struggle to address these emotional needs, they are simultaneously tasked with teaching content in "standardized-test" driven ways that have been stripped of human-centered opportunities to create, explore, and learn.

Most students today have ready access to factual or content-based information. So, more important than specific content may be their approach to the world—that is, their ability to be creative and to navigate their own lives and thinking in ways that scaffold their social–emotional learning. As one National Teacher of the Year Award Winner noted:

> Ultimately what students will gain from your class is not all the content knowledge . . . it's how you approach it, that students will pull away the bigger lessons that they'll take into the real world, which is essential in this day and age. (Henriksen & Mishra, 2015, p. 21)

Skills related to well-being, such as mindfulness and creativity, are relevant and applicable across curricula, age groups, and contexts. Though teachers often care about helping their students develop these skills, the bounds of curriculum frequently squeeze out these skills or give them short-shrift in favor of rigid standards-based subject learning. However, teachers can weave these skills and habits of mind for well-being into curriculum in many ways, and two interrelated ones are discussed here: mindfulness and creativity.

These two concepts have received much popular attention. To educators they may seem like buzzwords that are difficult to integrate into the structures of schooling, particularly amid standards-based pressures. These concepts, however, are interrelated such that as teachers work on one area, they can improve the other, and vice versa. Neither requires a curricular overhaul to be woven into student learning. By first understanding how these concepts are connected and are important to well-being, teachers then can implement some practical approaches to address them within the curriculum.

Mindfulness and Creativity in Well-Being

Student well-being overwhelmingly correlates with more positive, successful, engaged, and motivated learners throughout school and life (Keye & Pidgeon, 2013). Although certain well-being factors are not within the control of teachers or schools, others—such as mindfulness and creativity—may be directly influenced within education settings.

Mindfulness is the practice of "non-judgmental, moment-to-moment awareness" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 2). The skill of mindful awareness can be learned through meditation or other practices that help individuals become more aware of their own thoughts and experiences. With practice, mindfulness is a fairly accessible way of connecting with thoughts and emotions by focusing attention on the present moment. Research has consistently shown that through developing more awareness about one's own thinking and the present moment, people experience less anxiety, more positive emotions and engagement, and other mental and emotional benefits (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009).

Creativity is a way of thinking that brings about something new that is interesting or effective. Although creativity is often thought of as an ability of gifted or talented people, anyone can exercise creativity, which involves new ways of thinking and seeing the world that allow for novel and interesting ideas. An individual's creativity can be strengthened, enhanced, or developed through opportunities to explore, create, and try new things. While creativity in schooling is often viewed in terms of its instrumental value for solving problems, it is also connected to deeper aspects of well-being in terms of expression, meaning, and joy. It supports and is supported by mindfulness practices.

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The Need for Creative and Mindful Practices

Creativity is generally considered a 21st-century skill or capacity for students (Zhao, 2012). Most people agree that education should prepare young people for the future, and the future is highly uncertain. Creativity in schooling can offer young people structured experiences in dealing with uncertainty—including giving students opportunities to think in new ways and to develop confidence and competence in resolving uncertainty.

Beyond the practical value of habits of mind for problem-solving or developing new ideas, creative practice and expression have significant value for wellness. Psychologists have begun to explore how people use their creativity to find meaning in life (Richards, 2018). Creativity allows expression and reflection, and offers alternate ways of thinking that can help individuals make sense of difficult things. Psychologist James Kaufman (cited in Keenan et al., 2018) noted that the sense of continuity imbued by engaging in creativity makes it critical to being human. Even small-scale acts of creative work or thinking, such as those of students in schools, may benefit health or well-being.

Relatedly, mindfulness has become popular for promoting emotional resilience and well-being. By becoming more aware of personal thoughts, individuals become better at navigating their thinking in psychologically healthy ways (Bennett & Dorjee, 2016). This skill may be more pressing than ever for students today. One large and well-designed study showed that approximately 22.2% of youths under age 18 struggled with mental health issues, with nearly half of that group suffering from anxiety and depression (Merikangas et al., 2011). Evidence shows that mindfulness practices are often more helpful than many other approaches to emotional or mental wellness (Kropp & Sedlmeier, 2019). Even for well-adjusted students, mindfulness can increase self-efficacy, help concentration, and improve mood, self-regulation, and engagement (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007).

Creativity and mindfulness can work together in synergistic ways to form what could be called creativity-focused mindfulness. The biggest hindrances to creative thinking often involve stressful thoughts, fear of failure, and the negative internal self-narration that scaffolds most human thinking. Most people do not objectively notice and detach themselves from these thoughts or self-check their mental and emotional well-being. The nonjudgmental aspect of mindful awareness—that is, noticing and separating from such thoughts—may account for why mindfulness practices can improve people's beliefs about their own creativity (Capurso, Fabbro, & Crescentini, 2014).

Creative self-beliefs are the bedrock of creative capacity. Likewise, creative work—such as open-ended, project-based, or arts-based learning—as opposed to high-stakes test-driven learning, is likely to help students get involved more mindfully or deeply in a learning experience.

Bringing Creativity and Mindfulness Into Classrooms

Creative teaching practices vary by subject matter, grade level, and context. However, in a study of teacher creativity (see Henriksen & Mishra, 2015), Danah Henriksen (the first author of this article) found common practices among successful, creative teachers (i.e., National Teacher of the Year Award winners).

- *Infusing real-world learning into lessons and activities.* Teachers can design or create lessons that focus on real-world examples or scenarios in the form of project-based learning (e.g., teaching about alternative energy by having students conduct town-hall meetings representing different energy industries, consumer groups, politicians; or teaching combinatorial math by having students figure out all of the cafeteria's lunch combinations in a year).
- *Including cross-disciplinary learning experiences.* Teachers can include interdisciplinary activities that weave across different subject matters or ideas (e.g., teaching English language arts by discussing how movements in a novel resemble movements in music; including some visual arts or theatre within the teaching of science).

- *Taking intellectual risks and encouraging students to try new things.* Teachers can keep an open mind and an eye out for new ideas to try in teaching, as well as encourage students to be creative, try new things, or examine new ideas in their own learning (e.g., having a class philosophy that making mistakes is okay because it offers a chance to reflect, learn, and go forward; emphasizing open-minded thinking as a guiding philosophy for a class).

When attempting creative lessons, teachers may note that students are uncomfortable in open-ended, project-based spaces that do not have one-right-answer approaches. Because most students today have grown up in a standards-based environment of high-stakes testing, they can be nervous or uneasy with creative opportunities or anything that affords openness or more than one possible answer. Yet, students must be prepared to enter a world of uncertainty, varied possibilities, open-endedness, and ambiguity. To this end, they need opportunities to engage in open-ended creative learning.

So, how can teachers offer mental preparation to lessen such fears of failure and discomfort with open-endedness or uncertainty? How might teachers help students become aware of their thinking, regulate emotions, manage challenges, and become more mentally and emotionally healthy? Many possibilities may be found among mindfulness and creative practices. Suggested here are some simple practices or entry points into these concepts in teaching that may strengthen students' creativity-focused mindfulness.

Consider the opening quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." Mindfulness is not separate from learning, but rather can be a tool to sharpen the mental axe before attempting to chop down the metaphorical tree. It is valuable not only for emotional and mental health but also supports creativity.

Supporting Practices for the Classroom

Practices for creativity-focused mindfulness can begin with small steps. A good place to start is for teachers considering these practices to try practicing mindfulness themselves, which can have important added benefits for reducing teachers' stress and increasing their own well-being.

Meditation moments. Mindfulness is a large arena of practices, of which meditation is a common and easy entry point. Simple meditation practices need not take more than a few moments of class time and can be done at the start of any class or at strategic points during the day. The process simply requires guiding students through a few moments of heightened awareness and attention to a specific focus (e.g., their own breathing, a phrase, a feeling, an image). For teachers who are unsure about how to do this, there are countless meditation apps, many of which are free or offer free versions. Using one of these apps to scaffold brief meditation moments during class can be an invaluable mindful practice. A few commonly used and practical application meditation tools are Insight Timer, Headspace, and Calm, which have a range of guided meditations for varied ages (even for children under age 5). Other apps such as GoNoodle and ClassDojo have mindfulness tools specifically designed for teachers to use in schools and classrooms.

Regardless of which tool is chosen, or whether teachers guide the meditation themselves, students can learn, through this practice, to observe their own thinking. During guided meditation, as the mind drifts to thoughts or worries, a vocal reminder gently brings the attention back to breathing or other object of focus. The more that students practice, the more they may develop their awareness of their own thoughts and where their attention is at, which can help them to detach from anxieties and generate more expressions of creativity.

Sarath (2006) suggested that meditation is essential for investigating one's own mind and expanding one's education to develop qualities such as mental clarity, inner calm, compassion, and notably, creativity. He asserted that such approaches are essential to education, given the demanding

challenges and creative opportunities that teachers and students encounter.

The effects of practicing meditation for even a few minutes a day can be dramatic for coping, emotional regulation, and well-being (Weinstein et al., 2009). For teachers who wish to integrate other mindfulness practices (e.g., mindful eating during snack time, mindfulness games), there are readily available resources online. The benefits of meditation on cognitive and emotional self-regulation cannot be overestimated.

Mindful emotional regulation. Kyle Shack (the second author of this article) has been a Social Studies teacher in an alternative high school—a school in which students have experienced crises that have prevented them from being successful in traditional educational settings. This school seeks to address students' needs through a Mind, Body, Spirit initiative. Despite constraints faced within the school—such as limited resources, minimal parental involvement, and poor attendance—the aim of this initiative is to overcome challenges and educate each student as a whole person.

When first implementing mindful techniques, Shack recognized a need for formative assessment of his students' emotional state. Therefore, he designed an easy, student-centered self-assessment. Students assess their emotional status on a scale of 1 to 10 by responding to a simple question: "How are you feeling?" This 1-to-10 assessment was added as the first question students answered at the beginning of class as part of a daily warm-up quiz activity. Using a numeric scale reduces the amount of instructional time lost to the activity and provides an easy entry point for students to reflect on their emotional state.

This immediate, honest communication about students' emotional status helped Shack to meet students' needs. For instance, if a student is at one of the extremes of the scale, or if there is a pattern in the student's ratings for that week, the teacher can take a moment to find out why. In Shack's classroom, this led to connections and conversations that might not otherwise happen.

This mindfulness check-in also immediately influences classroom instruction. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs suggested that students cannot learn or exercise higher-order skills if their most basic needs are unmet. Creativity, for example, falls high on Maslow's Hierarchy, at the very top of the pyramid. Given the challenges that many students face, teachers may struggle to make them feel safe or comfortable enough to learn, let alone to work creatively. Based on this simple mindfulness assessment, the teacher can redesign lessons, differentiate activities, or simply counsel with a student to scaffold his or her experience and draw out the student's thinking. The effects of this simple technique are noticeable; Shack has been able to avoid potential "blow up" moments with students who are dealing with something much larger than the day's lesson, so that they can focus on learning.

By helping students become comfortable enough to share their thoughts and emotions, a teacher may set the stage for creativity. Once students are comfortable, it is then possible to integrate some of the creative teaching practices noted earlier in this article in ways that students can approach with less anxiety.

Even more important than the teacher's recognition of a student's emotional state is how students recognize their own emotional state. Doing this emotional check-in early in class requires a student to pause, self-assess, and acknowledge his or her own emotions. Most teachers have witnessed a student breakdown, not realizing that the student was on the brink of an outburst. The check-in practice gives students an opportunity to recognize their true status. It is important that no judgment is attached to a student's rating—in other words, it is as okay to be at a 1 as it is to be at a 10. This check-in may be one of few vehicles for some students to honestly acknowledge their emotions.

The "voice of judgment." Psychologists often have described an internal monologue that every human being has, which critically judges one's thoughts and actions, and affects willingness to engage creatively. Every person has thousands of thoughts every day; some are helpful, but most are counterproductive. Along with these thoughts comes an internal voice that judges and filters a person's experience. Ray and Meyers (1986) tied this Voice of Judgment (VoJ) to one's sense of creative

identity. The development of a creative identity at any age is a continuous, evolving process. Even a slight decrease in self-judgment results in an increase in a person's capacity to engage creatively.

One arts-based activity to help students identify and persevere through their VoJ can be inserted in almost any curriculum where students are being asked to create something. Because the technique is somewhat abstract, it tends to work best with older students, starting in middle school, but it may be adapted age-appropriately for younger students. In this activity, each student creates some sort of visual to represent his or her own VoJ as a person or a physical object/idea through sketching, drawing, or by any other simple arts-based means. This task gives students an opportunity to identify anxious or problematic narratives in their own thinking. Personifying thoughts as something external helps students separate from and let go of negative self-talk or other unhelpful thoughts, allowing creative thinking to emerge more productively in their work. This technique has been applied in studies seeking to improve students' resilience and creativity, and it can be adapted, as appropriate, for various educational settings (Workmon Larsen, 2018).

Such activities work well when couched in a discussion with students about their beliefs regarding their own creativity or about their feelings toward their work in school and in other settings. Another related activity, which can be used in place of or alongside the VoJ is the Voice of Persistence (VoP). In this activity, students discuss their inner thinking or voice that helps them persevere and keep going when things get difficult or when they are down, worried, or struggling. Again, students can personify that voice in a visual or other form, perhaps representing it as a friend or family member, a person who inspires them, or even a sensation such as feeling a warm glow from the sun. By letting students discuss and represent their inner monologues, they can become more mindfully aware of and better able to manage them.

Closing Thoughts

Mindfulness and creativity have been touted as essential practices, skills, or habits of mind for the 21st century. While educational trends come and go, core concepts like these have longevity because of their utility and benefits throughout life. The two concepts have been connected in research settings, but they are too often discussed separately in education. The goal here is to consider these concepts in connected ways in schools. As teachers or school leaders begin to understand how mindfulness and creativity connect and fit into a larger picture of well-being, these concepts can synergistically be infused into, or operate with and within, school curricula. This notion of creativity-focused mindfulness is a function of what students need, not only within schools but also for their well-being as creative learners and citizens in the world.

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