

A TEAM EFFORT: CREATING A MINDFULNESS PROPOSAL

By Laura Lanois, Upper School Resource Teacher

How might participation in a mindfulness learning group foster productive collaboration in 9th grade students?

AREA OF STUDY

Today our minds are so ‘busy’ — are our minds just full or are we being mindful? Our boys face multiple stressors including academic competition, academic performance, parental expectations, peer pressure, and time constraints. I’ve noticed they are often hesitant or unwilling to stop, think, and reflect on their actions and reactions and thoughts. They need alternative coping strategies to deal with these pressures. It is up to us, as educators, to help them learn to slow down and appreciate the silence. The reflection. The quiet. The introspection.

I’ve long wondered if introducing mindfulness within a group study framework might help the boys increase their awareness. Perhaps metacognition (thinking about thinking) could increase engagement in their learning. The more aware and participatory boys are in their learning, the more effective the results tend to be in the long run.



Incorporating mindfulness into the curriculum was a long term goal, and I wanted the boys to join in the planning of this initiative. I began my investigation with a small group of boys. If I introduced mindfulness theory, allowing time for discussion and reflection, could this team of students collaboratively make a pitch for its value in our school culture?

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

Research overwhelmingly supports incorporating mindfulness pedagogy into the daily lives of our boys. In the article, *Mindfulness and Student Success*, author Matt Leland explains that “mindfulness is about focus and intention and both of these qualities are imperative to academic success.” He also explains that “students and coaches have benefitted from using mindfulness training to increase athletic intention and focus. This helps these student athletes recognize and understand their internal states and not get distracted or overly emotionally involved in a game.” Carol Dweck’s research highlights the many behavioral, academic, psychological, physical, and neurological positive effects of mindfulness.

Due to various personality types and learning styles, productive group work can be challenging. In the New York Times article “*The Rise of the New Groupthink*,” Susan Cain states that “people in groups tend to sit back and let the others do the work; they instinctively mimic others’ opinions and lose sight of their own; and often succumb to peer pressure.” Gregory Berns, a

neuroscientist at Emory University, expands on this idea by stating that he “found that when we take a stance different from the group’s, we activate the amygdala, a small organ in the brain associated with fear of rejection.” Professor Berns calls this “the pain of independence.” When assigning group projects, it is important to support all boys in their collaborative efforts.

For the introvert, group work can provoke anxiety. In some instances the hesitancy to speak is by choice and can reflect an introvert’s true nature. Susan Cain recommends that “our schools should teach children to work with others, but also to work on their own for sustained periods of time. And we must

recognize that introverts [like Steve Wozniak] need extra quiet and privacy to do their best work.” In the article *When Schools Overlook Introverts*, Michael Godsey notes that “cooperative learning doesn’t have to entail excessively social or overstimulating mandates; it can easily involve quiet components that facilitate internal contemplation.”

Educators can foster productive collaboration within student learning groups. Susan Cain explains that with clear expectations and roles to complete the task at hand, group members feel safer and more likely to contribute to the outcome of the assignment. Adam Cox states succinctly in his book, *Boys of Few Words*, “through practice and repetition, he [the boy] gains a more sophisticated awareness of when his communication and behavior will be positively or negatively acknowledged.”

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METHOD

Originally, I introduced the topic of my action research project to the 9th grade class. Interested volunteers submitted a Google Form. The 6 boys who ended up joining the group were academically above average, conscientious students. A few of them were quiet and introverted, while a couple readily expressed their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Regardless, they were motivated to learn about mindfulness and work together to 'sell' the idea of incorporating it into the 9th grade curriculum.

First, the boys completed a survey on what they already knew about mindfulness. I then conducted some introductory mindfulness lessons. The team discussed how they felt their peers could benefit from the practice of mindfulness, and they brainstormed what and how they should share this concept with the broader school community. They were then ready to execute their group task.

They had lots of ideas. Rachel Lotan, in the article *Group Worthy Tasks*, notes that groups "... can devise different plans, explore multiple paths, and come up with legitimately different solutions — or even [with] no definite solution at all." The group ultimately decided to create a presentation to communicate why mindfulness was important and how it might be integrated into the curriculum. They would share it with those they felt were most 'responsible' for the 9th grade curriculum.

Mrs. Lotan points out that "multidimensional group worthy tasks allow more students to make significant contributions to the group effort by using their various talents, intellectual competencies... and problem solving strategies." The individuals in the group chose roles and responsibilities based on their comfort level. They chose to meet during long lunches, breaks, and even once over dinner. A shared Google document helped collaboration efforts; boys answered questions relative to their efforts, offered opinions, and gave and received feedback. We regularly communicated through email; however, face to face meetings tended to be the most successful mode for collaboration.

All in all, this group of boys went through a respectful, democratic process as they chose what mindfulness content to include, decided how to present, and selected an audience for their presentation. Through their group work, they learned more about the central concept of mindfulness. As they worked, I collected data through observation, surveys, and audio and video recordings. I noted how the group dynamic evolved, whether successfully or not, to accomplish their task at hand and how their performance affected the progression of the group.

FINDINGS

I made several discoveries through analysis of my collected data. Although boys collaborated through Google documents and emails, they were most productive when seated face to face and working collectively to complete the task.

Some boys eagerly added to group discussion while others chose not to contribute at all. The latter can be for numerous reasons, two of which I noted during my observations: introversion and hesitation caused by fear. One member of our group would often begin to add a comment to the discussion; however, he would seem to second guess his own opinion, stating "*I was going to say something, but I changed my mind,*" letting other more outspoken group members take the lead. We should be cautious in our expectations of students who are fearful of putting themselves 'out there' and yet gentle encouragement could be productive. In Charles Duhigg's article *What Google Learned in Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team*, the author describes the team performing well only once everyone's voice is heard. He also states that if one person or a fraction of the group took over, the 'collective intelligence' of the group declined.

MINDFULNESS POSITIVE EFFECTS

Behavioral - reduces substance use and aggressive behaviors

Academic - improves concentration capacity, increases executive functioning skills, enhances memory, increases overall cognitive functioning, reduces test anxiety

Psychological - boosts mood, increases self esteem, aides with compassion

Physical - improves immune functioning, helps with sleep, reduces stress

Neurological - growth in gray matter in prefrontal cortex, positive changes in brain-wave patterns associated with well being

Boys were more willing to participate and share their emotions during group work, and this participation was enhanced when they felt safe. The empathy evoked through mindfulness discussions added to this sense of security and a collective purpose. In his book, *Boys of Few Words*, Adam Cox emphasizes that “learning is almost always enhanced by emotion because emotion stimulates our perceptual awareness, allowing us to sense and absorb information on multiple levels.” He goes on to say, “We can think about things in one way but feel another way altogether.” This further explains the boys’ willingness and interest to ‘tug at the heartstrings’ (their words) of the faculty to whom they were choosing to present their information.

Finally, when tasked with spreading awareness about a topic they found relevant and meaningful, these boys worked together with purpose. They remained focused on their objective and used democratic methods to accomplish their task. As they discussed, listened, shared, and expressed their opinions in an organized manner, I was impressed with their productivity and their final collaborative product.

PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

This research has reinforced my belief in the need for a mindfulness pedagogy. As educators, we must recognize that the boys are not accustomed to having or creating quiet, downtime. Adam Cox notes that “...the self concept we build from thoughtful, constructive behavior is like a microchip that tells our mind how to think, and act in a variety of situations.” He goes on to state succinctly that “...we notice the reactions we get in response to our behavior. This stream of information has a cumulative effect on how we think of ourselves.” We must teach the boys to take time for quiet reflection, understanding that our students struggle to make the time to slow down in order to prioritize. It is also important for us to recognize that our students have never been without technology and would benefit from learning to cope without it periodically. In order to do this, we must model healthy behavior for our boys to emulate. I will continue to promote integration of mindfulness into our curriculum.

If I were to conduct action research again, I would choose participants from my scheduled Study Skills classes or 10th grade advisory group. Upper School boys are extremely busy with academics and athletics, not to mention extracurricular activities. They have little to no free time for voluntary action research projects. As a result, scheduling meetings remained a struggle throughout this action research cycle.

I might begin mindfulness lessons with a practice activity from Christopher Dillard’s book, *Growing Up Mindful*, which contains a plethora of ideas, to teach the boys to learn to start an academic activity by quieting their mind. Another way mindfulness could be incorporated and offered to be accessible to all of the boys would be through Advisory meetings. As a warm up activity, this could set the tone for the day and encourage the boys to learn to be more introspective and aware of their actions and reactions, to proceed with calm success in mind. Learning more about themselves and the importance of acting instead of reacting, being proactive instead of curative, and ultimately reflective and insightful will aide in our boys’ understanding and their well-being.

ENDNOTES

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