Shhh … listen to your pebble Mindfulness Education: The Relationship Between Children, Imagination, and Nature

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Mindfulness Education: The Relationship Between Children, Imagination, and Nature

Jeanie Yeo

Sarah Lawrence College

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College, May 2015.
On May 17, 2009, I sat among my fellow classmates in the field of the Academic Quad. It was graduation day. As I blankly stared at the stage in front, I remember thinking to myself, “When is this going to end?” Not knowing who the commencement speaker was, I noticed an old white man humbly walking to the podium. His name was Elie Wiesel.

I cannot remember the exact details of his speech. Being a Holocaust survivor, I expected a clichéd lesson about tragedy, forgiveness, and endurance. However, I do remember that I was pleasantly surprised…not only by how concise and short the actual speech was but by how sincere and bold he was when sharing the truths he experienced throughout the darkest times of his life. He didn’t speak to us like undergraduate students, children, or adults. Instead, he addressed us as fellow human beings, a cohort of humanity. It is then that I realized that each of us was in a war of some kind and fighting for a cause. But no matter what that cause might be, Wiesel urged us to: “Remember, always: Think higher and feel deeper. I repeat. Always think higher and feel deeper.”

This defines the social individual and has been the inspiration for carving my path throughout the years following my college graduation and the driving force of my thesis. I believe in an education that encourages students to “think higher and feel deeper” – a mindful education that elevates the individual and the community, immediate and distant.
ABSTRACT

A culture of education embedded in mind-body learning experiences and mindfulness approaches to knowledge on multiple levels through awareness has the potential to cultivate versatile and flexible social individuals who are mentally, emotionally, and intellectually “capable.” Since children experience the world primarily through their bodies, movement and interaction with the environment are a means for them to explore, find, understand, and fortify the self to better regulate their physical, emotional, and social realms so that they develop into social individuals who find value in themselves and in others. Therefore, focusing on strengthening children’s mind-body connection through mindfulness-based practices is a topic worth investigating. Accordingly, this thesis addresses the processes of awareness in preschool children through movement and interaction with nature. The nature component is crucial because it grounds the self inside a world that is boundless yet intimate and engulfing yet comforting. Therefore, the theme of nature was incorporated throughout the thesis project. Awareness and openness, particularly in preschool children, begins in noticing and caring not only for themselves but for others – people, animals, and “things.” Thus I created 3 activities – nature walks, stone building, and mindful movement – while observing the ways children behaved throughout each activity. The gathered observations were analyzed and related back to the importance and benefits of mindfulness education.

The goal was to foster intentional attention and sense of awareness while strengthening the mind-body connection. This study was qualitative, multidisciplinary, and experiential – an exploration based on observations of ongoing activities in the classroom – and was not intended to measure outcomes but rather document and record the process, including the children’s verbal, physical, and symbolic expression of their experiences.
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Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor, Elizabeth Johnston, whose Mindfulness course changed my life and was the inspiration for my thesis. Her insight, support, and kindness have been essential to the progress of this thesis as well as my growth as a student and individual.

Also, I would like to thank the professors at Sarah Lawrence College, particularly from the Psychology Department and Dance Movement Therapy Department, for always challenging me to expand and deepen my understanding of the world and people. In a way, their teachings made me more human, celebrating others and myself.

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My sincere thanks also go to Richard Lewis, the founder of The Touchstone Center. I have learned so much in our many conversations together about children, imagination, and nature. Your work, stories, and thoughts offered such wisdom and insight not only into the beauty of children but life overall. Thank you so much for your creative suggestions and reminding me the importance of play and imagination.

I would like to dedicate a special thanks to the children and staff at the Early Childhood Center (ECC). To the director and second reader, Lorayne Carbon, thank you for taking care of me and checking in to see how I was doing. Your presence was always encouraging and much appreciated. To the head teachers of the afternoon class, Robbin and Suzy, thank you for being so patient, supportive, and caring throughout my thesis work. I learned so much from your leadership and relationships with the children. I hope to be an educator like you some day. To the ECC children, thank you for helping me to rediscover the world in ways that I have forgotten. Your prevailing wonder, sincerity, and openness to the world have shown me the best qualities of being human and reminded me of what is still good in this world.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for making me into the passionate, driven person I am today. You have shown me what it truly means to love and support others and myself through kindness, understanding, and compassion. Thank you for your patience and unconditional love throughout my life.
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Note: All children’s names are pseudonyms.
Do you want to grow a seed?
-Aaron, age 4

I smelled the snow. I smelled it because I knew it was almost wintertime.
-Nina, age 4

I can hear the sun burnin’… I can hear the deepest.
-George, age 4
INTRODUCTION

Western culture highly values and, for good reasons, glorifies individualism and democracy. To a certain extent, this individualistic yet democratic mindset proves to be necessary; personal and collective freedom, generally speaking, is a right and privilege. However, even in the face of democracy, the overemphasis on the “self” can be limiting. The community recedes into the background, and the individual swiftly moves center stage. As a result, the surrounding world tightly revolves around the self, and the individual becomes psychologically “stuck” and unforgiving to life’s fluctuations and experiences. We become fixed in our ways and live automatically, forgetting about the choices that lie before us. Derivatives of individualism, capitalist and industrialist ideologies that praise the competitive and quantifiable approach to life often elevate material progress, which then determines the culture supporting society’s institutions, most importantly, educational. This detrimental cycle of extreme individualism, capitalism and productivity has become the norm in Western society, and it is the source that feeds the rumination of ignorance, selfishness, and greed. However, I propose that contemplative practices especially rooted in mindfulness can be a means for social justice, change and reform. By fortifying one’s self-regulatory skills, altering self-representation and reference, and promoting prosocial dispositions, mindfulness can liberate an individual from such pitfalls and resulting distress, both individual and collective. To prevent future generations from gravitating towards the same detrimental black hole of severe and mindless individualism, mindfulness practices should be incorporated into school curricula as well as practiced by educators, parents, and students. As a result, we can strengthen future generations’ self-control and resilience.
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and improve the learning experience while cultivating empathy and compassion. By doing so, it will not only hone their individual skills but social ones as well. Therefore, mindfulness-based education fosters resilient and caring individuals who can perhaps alter and hopefully redefine Western culture’s conservative, inflexible approach to individualism and life overall.
Today I wasn't as distracted as I was during yesterday’s meditation. My mind and body was more at ease, and my attention didn't wander as often. It was strange. I started out thinking about people who caused me pain and then continued to think about those who were currently bothering me. I kept catching myself judging and began to refocus my attention to my breathing, letting go of the negative tension caused by the recollection of those unpleasant and discomforting memories. All of a sudden, I found myself in a completely different context, world, and space. Although my eyes were closed, I could vividly see. I was flying through the treetops, clouds of billowing leaves and greenery...one after the other. I could feel the soft breeze as I flew towards the vast light blue sky. This image continued for quite some time, and then my mind went blinding white.

It gradually reduced to a charcoal grey. Then I saw colors... transitioning from deep purple, to dark magenta, then royal blue. This sequencing of colors kept repeating itself. However, they appeared to be shadows...slowly moving in fluid-like motions, similar to a drop of food dye slowly dissolving in water. Before I knew it, the timer went off. I realized where I was.

I was first introduced to mindfulness when I took Elizabeth Johnston’s course in the spring of 2014. As part of an ongoing assignment, students were expected to
meditate daily for at least 20 minutes while recording their experience after each session. The above excerpt is one of the entries from my meditation journal. As the semester progressed, I discovered how little I knew about myself, rarely attending to the ways I think and feel on a regular basis. I realized that I was living my life without choice – automatically, reactively, and inattentively. Mindfulness had taught me to live in “being” – to be present in the moment and to assess and reexamine myself in other ways starting with my immediate environment: the body.

Our inner lives inevitably affect our outer lives. In basic mindfulness practices, the entry to deep introspection is primarily introduced through the body. Thus, meditation practices through bodyscan, yoga, and breathing exercises help the individual to harness one’s centeredness and awareness of the body to eventually know the self in relation to the other, which entails not only intrapsychic contexts of the self but interpersonal contexts including the environment and people. Such insights enhance the self on individual (i.e., attention, cognition, physical and emotional regulation) and social (i.e., prosocial behavior, awareness, loving-kindness) levels. Thus, mindfulness is a way for individuals to reach a vital homeostasis and harmony between their inner and outer worlds, intrapersonal and interpersonal respectively, while encouraging self-efficacy. As a result, one becomes more flexible, aware, and open – becoming resilient and versatile individuals, especially when confronted with difficulties and challenges, as well as kind and caring participants of the community. Indeed, how we interact with ourselves affects how we interact with others.

What is the significance of the mind-body connection? From inside the womb to birth, we first communicate through our bodies. The way we move in response to
stimuli, both internal and external, and perceive our movements influences how we experience the outside world. Our bodies are not only barriers that separate and protect us from all that surrounds us but are mediators that converse between two worlds – the individual and social. By intentionally attending and non-judgmentally observing each and every physiological and psychological sensation, we can not only better understand ourselves but ultimately others. Thus, mindfulness is a practice that begins with knowing oneself and then transcends the self to know others with non-judgment, openness, and loving-kindness.

Mindfulness is deep awareness “that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness expands subjective and objective experiences and invites us to be free and open to other ways of experiencing and being. It is a kind of lucid experience that liberates the individual from personal attachments, judgments and meanings, and it enhances one’s capacity to truly experience others and the world in their own right and form, beyond the distortions and hindrances stemming from our own perspectives. In doing so, practitioners are able to experience enduring happiness as well as deepen their compassion and empathy. Therefore, mindfulness is overall deep awareness that encompasses three main components: 1) attention control, 2) self-regulation of the body and emotion, and 3) de-centering of the self through non-judgment. With these components combined, one can reach a state of mind and being that is aware, balanced, accepting, and free.

We experience the world with our five bodily senses and apply meaning to all that we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Thus, bodies are conduits for meditation and place
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us within another context. Evidence in neuroscience has shown this link through studies of the effects of meditation on the body, emotions or moods, brain activity, structure, and function. For example, Y.Y. Tang et al. (2007) studied the effects of short-term meditation, in context of integrative body-mind training (IBMT) and relaxation training (the control group), on attention and self-regulation. Researchers found significant changes in executive attention after IBMT training. Compared to the relaxation-trained control group, IMBT-trained participants showed higher conflict resolution scores, slight improvement of Raven’s scores, and enhanced positive moods with reduction in negative moods (Tang et al., 2007). The reduced stress responses along with enhanced positive moods demonstrate the overall psychological and physiological benefits of IBMT training as well as the interconnectedness among cognitive regulation, body awareness, and emotion regulation. Furthermore, structural MRI conducted by S.W. Lazar and her colleagues (2005) portrays the interrelated and complex interactions among the practice, mind, and body and explores the correlation between meditation practice and its effects on cortical thickness. The results indicate the overall positive correlation between meditation and cortical thickness among veteran practitioners compared to novices. Increased “cortical thickness (i.e. grey matter) in areas particularly associated with somatosensory, auditory, and interoceptive processing” suggests enhancement in attention, memory, sensory processing, self-reflection, empathy, and affective regulation (Lazar et al., 2005). Lazar and her research team also discovered that participants who meditated lacked thinning in the frontal cortex that usually occurs with age (Lazar et al., 2005). Therefore, findings such as these in the neuroscience field demonstrate the significance of the mind-body connection and how one’s outer and inner states are...
interrelated cognitively, emotionally, and physically (Holzel, 2011).

Living in a busy world and culture that thrives on speed and multitasking, attention regulation proves to be difficult for many. As an essential component of mindfulness, voluntary attention is the gateway to awareness because it allows the individual to improve regulation of internal processes, thereby allowing experience with a “sense of clarity, vividness, and high resolution” (Wallace, 2006, p. 41). To attend to something is to voluntarily and consciously shift focus, and in the midst of “distractions,” to bring and sustain “it” in the foreground of the mind. In a world where minds are often overloaded or over stimulated with all kinds of deafening clanging and noise, it is difficult sometimes to distinguish a single sound. Thus, attention is “amplification,” which allows a person to intentionally tune into a sound and momentarily and holistically experience it in its wholeness (Posner, 1994). As a result, attention and mental control are closely related. M. I. Posner (1994) specifies the various attentional systems – alerting, orienting, and executive control. He argues that alerting or vigilance, orienting or selective attention, and executive control or conflict monitoring are the mechanisms for “providing priority for motor acts, consciousness, and memory,” otherwise interpreted as experience (Posner, 1994, p. 7398).

Mental training through meditation helps redistribute attentional resources. Mindfulness enhances attentional control and versatility that allow us to shift our focus more readily and fluidly. The ability to regulate attention strengthens one’s ability to shift focus away from distractions, such as memories, future events, and thoughts emanating from the reactive, impulsive self. In addition to attention regulation, self-regulation of the body and emotions renders a more holistic awareness. Body awareness
or the “ability to notice subtle body sensations” is a precondition for emphatic responses (Holzel, 2011, p. 541). Thus, sensory experiences are connected to emotional experiences. In addition to findings that support the resulting increase of cortical thickness among experienced meditators, others also found stronger brain activation in the secondary somatosensory area and the insula and thalamus (Holzel, 2011). Therefore, meditators process body sensations of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral “stimulus as it is,” profoundly and non-judgmentally (Holzel, 2011, p. 542). By increasing internal awareness, one is able to momentarily prohibit his or her judgmental reaction and chain of thoughts, reducing “evaluative or elaborative-related brain activity” (Zeidan, 2012). For example, F. Zeidan et al.’s (2012) study shows how mindfulness meditation, particularly the open monitoring practice (OM),\(^1\) induces pain relief by altering how the pain or noxious stimulus is experienced. Individuals practicing mindfulness were better able to accept and cope with their subjective pain because they prevented themselves from evaluating and dwelling on it, thus allowing the patients to move forward past the initial pain response. Consequently, the effectiveness of mindfulness for pain reduction is being applied to the clinical field, and researchers are finding it positively influencing the healing process among patients suffering from a wide variety of diseases, particularly ones dealing with chronic pain (Kabat Zinn, 2003).

In addition to coping with noxious stimuli, mindfulness is a way to modify emotions. There is no word for “emotion” in traditional languages of Buddhism because,

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\(^1\) “Open Monitoring (OM) is associated with a non-directed acknowledgement of any sensory, emotional or cognitive event that arises in the mind.” From Zeidan, F., Grant, J.A., Brown, C.A., McHaffie, J.G. & Coghill, R.C.; Mindfulness meditation-related pain relief: Evidence for unique brain mechanisms in the regulation of pain (Neuroscience Letters, 520, 2012), 166.
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unlike Western psychology, it is seen as part of, not separate from, the cognitive processes (Ekman et al., 2005). However, Buddhists and psychologists collaborated to discuss the “nonvirtuous” (Davidson, 2006, p. 144) mental processes or “afflictive mental states,” (Ekman et al., 2005) which Westerners would interpret as destructive emotions. Craving, hatred, and the idea of a concrete self prevent one from reaching ultimate liberation and freedom because they pit the self against the “other.” In other words, these toxic mental states amplify the habitual narrative focused (NF) self, reducing experience to one’s projected judgments, emotional valence, and selfishness instead of experiencing in the moment, “as it is” (Farb et al., 2007). As mentioned previously, body awareness and regulation is closely related to emotional awareness and regulation. Therefore, perceiving bodily sensations and emotions as responses instead of reactions helps one to experience the environment and people beyond one’s distortions, imposed meanings and values. Learning how to modify the ways in which we experience sensory and emotional stimuli can counteract afflictive mental states and begin to de-center the self, thus uplifting the veil from our eyes to experience the world and others in a more lucid, profound way. Only when we are able to “quiet” the self, we are able to free ourselves from biased judgments and enhance the interconnectedness with “reality” and intersubjectivity with others.

The above explores the depths of mindfulness related to selective attention and self-regulation in various ways. Enhancing our attention seems to have a positive correlation to cortical thickness, cognitive processes, executive functioning, and overall self-regulation. The ways in which expert practitioners are able to alter their ‘default’ pathways and reactive ways of thinking are significant because they demonstrate the
profound psychological and physiological effects of mindfulness. Thus, mindfulness is more than bare attention, enhancement, and regulation. It is freedom from the habitual ways of experiencing and thinking. Mindfulness provides the option of choice and encourages free will and mind. Accordingly, it is a means to switch more readily among cognitive networks, providing other pathways of thought, feeling, and experience. The extensive neuroscientific research on the effects of mindfulness meditation portrays the growing interest in psychological and physiological benefits of such a practice. Therefore, much research continues and is being applied to clinical practices that use mindfulness as a way to ‘heal’ patients. Some studies show that meditation programs such as Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) therapy help hasten recovery or enhance responses to treatment. As a supplementary form of medicine, the program uses meditation and yoga to help patients suffering from chronic pain and other stress-related disorders. However, it is important to note that although mindfulness may be a clinical tool to help improve health and overall well-being, it is, most importantly, an ongoing practice or “state of being” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Mindfulness meditation has been incorporated into modern methods of therapy because it is accessible and versatile, offering guidance and alleviation from suffering of all kinds – “physical, emotional, or spiritual; acute or chronic” – that “affect individuals across cultures, social and economic levels, and ages” (Ott, 2004, p. 23). Therefore, doctors and therapists are beginning to incorporate mindfulness meditation into their treatment programs or regimen to more holistically meet the needs of their clients and patients. Mindfulness meditation is unique because it is “a process of paying attention on purpose to what is happening in the present moment” and “being fully awake [...]

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perceiving the exquisite vividness of each moment” (Ott, 2004, p. 24). Rather than focusing on the outcome, meditation shifts the focus to the process and experience. As a result, one broadens his or her awareness and perspective by paying closer attention to one’s relationships and internal processes within multiple contexts. Furthermore, according to the psychophysiological perspective, “Meditation is the intentional self-regulation of attention, in the service of self-inquiry, in the here and now” and thus includes “relaxation, concentration, altered state of awareness, suspension of logical thought processes, and maintenance of self-observing attitude” (Perez-de-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000, p. 49). Thus, this practice teaches the participant to focus more on the processes of the present rather than to preoccupy the self with byproducts caused by the past and future. As a result, practitioners learn how to better manage life’s disturbances, internal and external, and obstacles: “Meditation is a particularly important stress management skill because, once taught, it can be practiced independently, and at will, to both reduce acute stress and serve as a buffer against ongoing and chronic stress” and “help adapt to life stressors. […] give us a sense of peace and balance that benefits both our emotional well-being and as well as our overall health” (Singh & Modi, 2012, p.274).

The mind is an “organ of experience,” which includes the conceptual, emotional, and physical (Paulson et al., 2013). Thus, mindfulness is not only about attention control and self-regulation but is about introspection and experiential inquiry in context of non-judgment. It is the integration of all the above that allows us to be resilient, ‘happy’, kind, and compassionate individuals. To be mindful is a challenging task because the ‘natural’ or ‘default’ state of being is mind-wandering, reactive, and judgmental. However, meditation practice can alter ‘default’ modes by decoupling and reducing
connectivity to them that allows “easier” switching among various neural functions (Brewer et al., 2011). Distancing from reactive, affect and value-laden impulses of experience ironically enhances and brings us closer to that momentary experience. Steven Stanley (2012) comments on this paradox regarding “intimate distance”: “Experientially, one becomes intimate with experience but also distanced from the attachment of a notion of a self who owns that experience” (p. 205). Intimate experience has a new meaning apart from the literal, which is direct and preoccupied with the self. However “intimate,” according to Stanley, refers to the holistic, full extent of the experience that understands the self in a different kind of intimacy or closeness through self de-contextualization, leading to nonjudgmental experience, introspection, and hopefully loving-kindness, empathy, and compassion.

Our lives are composed of endless moments, and writers use language to express them. However, it is how they remember and share their story that differentiates the extraordinary from the ordinary. In a similar way, mindfulness is a skill, controlling such impulses and “expanding the field of awareness to hold your observing capacity separate from what is being observed” (Paulson et al., 2013, p. 95). In other words, we reduce the big story of “me” to capture the bigger, compassionate story of “us”. Therefore, like “good” writing, mindfulness is a skill – cognitive, emotional, and moral practice – cultivating awareness of oneself and others resulting in “thinking higher and feeling deeper” (Wiesel, 2009).
MINDFULNESS AND EDUCATION

We are at a point where we are “sacrificing culture to material progress and success, of subordinating the artist to the artisan, of prizing efficiency more than integrated personality” (Bode, 1931, p. 342). In light of its infatuation with individualism, American culture has become “economic, competitive, and superficial” as well as its culture of education (Miller 1997, p. 19). Thus, the students as well as teachers face a multitude of obstacles and stressors relating to unjust evaluation and judgment. Educational institutions value productivity and numbers over experience, and thus their judgments heavily rely on grades, test scores, and other standardized measures of evaluation. Therefore, task-specific learning overrides process learning. That is, schools knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate superficial learning through rote memorization instead of critical thinking and analyzing. They elevate the product of learning rather than the process. The current challenges of Western education derive from the dependence on superficial praises and validations through behavior, grades, and impersonal compliments such as “good job” or “well done.” They erase the meaningful experience of the learner and emphasize the child’s productivity of pleasing results (Kohn, 2001). Thus, the process is overlooked while the child is appraised in context of his or her final product or “job.” The learning experience is marred by judgment, and systemic success is equated with “good” test scores and grades (Bruner, 1996). This mistaking of a behavior or product as a reflection of only the individual characterizes a type of traditional education that is still prominent among many American and Western schools. Curricula are created to “drill students in specific behaviors rather than to
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engage them in deep, critical reflection about certain ways of being” (Kohn, 1997, p. 2). Thus, a reinvention and mindful approach to education is needed to help children, educators, institutions, and ultimately society to become social individuals who alter their ways of experiencing and relating. A change in interest and attitude towards experience needs to be the heart of focus. Therefore, the mind – the processes of thinking, feeling, and being – and contemplative practices are the catalyst of social change and reform.

The aim of education is “for the creation of new aims” because “life is a process in which the present is continuously enlarged and transformed” (Bode, 1921, p. 11). Thus, being “present” offers opportunities and multiple alternative ways that can be applied to various contexts and situations. In other words, we cannot predict what will happen and thus cannot carelessly teach task-specific skills that may or may not be applicable in the future. Instead, educators must advocate a “liberation of capacity” that expands the students’ range to resolve a variety of tasks and challenges enfolding in the moment (Bode, 1921, p. 20). That way, the student is more psychologically “flexible,” versatile, and resilient in the face of academic and personal obstacles within and outside educational settings. This highlights an important aspect of mindfulness: self-regulation of cognitive and emotional processes through attention. Attentive experience that is “present-centered, objective, and responsive” helps alter the ways in which an individual habitually processes external stimuli that are “future-focused, subjective, or reactive” (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 8). Thus, one’s capacity to relate to any experience – whether pleasurable, stressful, neutral, or distressful – is responsive and chosen rather than reactive and automatic. For example, if a student who typically gets angry, which then inhibits his learning, practices how to alter his relationship with emotions, particularly
anger, he could find alternative ways of experiencing and coping with it. Thus, he has a choice of how to relate to the experience and is given an opportunity to choose how to respond rather than “automatically” react. His altered perception of himself in relation to anger can lead to a different outlook and “healthier” response that contributes to quicker recovery. The idea of free will and choice illustrated in this example is one of the key concepts of mindfulness. Similarly to Bode’s “liberation of capacity,” mindfulness liberates the individual from task-specific, inflexible processing and expands one’s overall capacity rather than confined ability.

As previously mentioned, the overemphasis of the self in context of individualism has become a problem within American culture and education system. However, John Dewey’s (2012) *Democracy and Education* redefines the individual within the context of democracy: “But after greater individualization on one hand, and a broader community interest on the other have come into existence, it is a matter of deliberate effort to sustain and extend them” (p. 44). For Dewey, education is a vehicle or tool for social reform, and thus he sees the individual defined in context of and in relation to the community. It encourages democracy and equality and fosters capable individuals who will, in return, contribute to society. Therefore, the individual is perceived as someone who cares about the greater good. Dewey’s emphasis of “giving back” calls for the participation of the individual, the subject “I” who takes action not only pertaining to the self – direct or indirect object “me” – but in regards to the community “us,” the individual and “other” combined. Therefore, the relationship between the individual and the other is also a key element of Dewey’s individualism, and it redefines the individual as not only self but beyond self, otherwise conceptualized as the *social individual*. Equipped with enhanced
and effective functioning, experiencing, and learning cultivated by mindfulness, the individual and community become more resilient and able to effectively and compassionately push humanity forward.

The challenge is how to reorient ourselves to ameliorate the damages caused by such narrow-minded, excessive individualistic approaches to education. We must learn how to “see” from multiple perspectives in order to gauge the current detrimental situation of the education system through empathy. Thus, the individual must imagine oneself in another to “enter sympathetically into whatever is going on […] ability to enter into a wide variety of human interests with spontaneous and intelligent sympathy” (Bode, 1921, p. 45). The overemphasis of the self in individualism is prone to self-centeredness. Such reactionary, conceited mindset narrows society’s view of others, familiar and unfamiliar, and a phenomenon like Americanization occurs. The “self-glorification” and imposed power restricts understanding and empathy, and “[…] the result of education becomes, to that extent, a source of division and not of cooperation and mutual understanding.” (Bode, 1921, p. 59). Thus, democratic education must expand the concept of individual experience by emphasizing the community or common interests in addition to the self or personal interests. By doing so, the learner is capable of a deeper connection with his or her experience through “intellectual and emotional sharing in the life and affairs of men” and empathy “made in the direction of democracy and in accordance with the needs of an expanding life.” (Bode, 1921, p. 62). Thus, the aim of education is adjusting or altering single, self-centered ways of knowing by cultivating compassionate, meaningful intelligence, experience, and being.
Alternative experience through mindfulness creates new meanings. Changing one’s way of processing emotions and thought minimizes judgment and distortions that mar our perceptions of reality. Contemplative practices train the mind to diminish such flat representations of experience and allows the individual to create multiple levels of dimensions, inducing a deeper, more lucid experience of a moment. Mindfulness practice trains the mind in thought and feeling and allows the participant to readily engage and disengage at will. Freeing from habitual reactivity, mindfulness provides choice, liberating the mind to alter the “perception of meanings” though deep awareness, insight, and introspection (Bode, 1921, p. 162). Therefore, it could transform educational structures and create a holistic education that “reflect[s], in the light of all available knowledge, upon the meaning of mind or intelligence” and benefit students, educators, and ultimately society itself (Bode, 1921, p. 181).

As defined previously, mindfulness is deep awareness “that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness expands subjective and objective perspectives and invites a kind of lucid experience that liberates the individual from personal judgments and meanings. It enhances one’s experience through relational identity beyond individualism. One not only reflects on the self but reflects on the self in relation to others. In doing so, practitioners are able to simultaneously extend their self-awareness to others and cultivate compassion and empathy. Therefore, mindfulness is overall deep awareness that encompasses cognitive control through attention and self-regulation of the mind-body and emotion and transcendence through de-centering of the self. With these components combined, an
individual can reach a state of mind and being that is aware in the present, nonjudgmental, flexible, accepting, and, most importantly, caring.

Therapies based on mindfulness such as Jon Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) program suggest the effectiveness of mindfulness practice among adults who are dealing with everyday stressors, such as chronic pain, stress, or anxiety. Through self-reports and empirical measurements, studies indicate an overall increase in well being regarding attention and self-regulation – being more aware of thought and physical processes as well as effective monitoring of emotions, mood, and stress level (Tang et al., 2007). Programs based in mindfulness are unique in that the mind and body are seen as unified networks rather than two separate systems. Sensations of the body are interconnected with emotional feelings and affect our executive homeostatic network especially when coping with “stress” (Taylor et al., 2010). Thus, it is imperative to provide mind-body therapies that address experiences of both the body and the mind. Due to this mind-body interconnection, psychological and physiological processes are intertwined. In other words, a healthy mind means a healthy body and vice versa. Thus, the focus is the healing of the mind and body rather than solely on the body itself. Seeing the effects of mindfulness – deep awareness, regulation, non-judgment, and acceptance – among adults, researchers are exploring its application in educational settings. How will contemplative practices and mental training such as mindfulness affect children and their development?

Before delving into the depths of integrating mindfulness to educational settings, one must consider the approach to the culture surrounding education. As Dewey (2012) and Bode (1921) passionately argue, to construct any curriculum, one must first consider
and reflect on the intentions and motivations involved. Within a Western culture that magnifies the self while minimizing the other, we should consider the reasons for cultivating mindfulness within children. As social individuals, our lives and beings are dynamically defined and redefined by intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. We strive for self-improvement through individualism and social-enhancement through community. Thus, the intention and motivation of integrating mindfulness into educational practice is to “emphasize values of personal growth and ethics […] a ‘world view’ including social or moral values” (Greenberg & Harris, 2012, p. 2). In other words, we want to support the overall wellness of children through mindfulness or other contemplative practices and mental training to nurture social individuals who are insightful, resilient, compassionate, loving, and kind.

It is also important to consider developmental theories to supplement the planning and execution of a mindfulness program as well as “to be cognizant of the possibility of iatrogenic effects that certain practices could have with children of different ages and characteristics” (Greenberg & Harris, 2012, p. 4). That is, to ensure the safety and well being of the child, it is critical to consider the child’s overall context such as their personal life outside of school before introducing alternative practices that may indirectly place that child at greater “risk.” Furthermore, since children and adults are developmentally different, approaches or methods used for adults may not be effective, and perhaps “harmful,” in children. Thus, techniques must be adjusted and tailored to the lifestyle, temperaments, abilities, and interests of developing children (Lillard, 2011). The concreteness of instructions through useful metaphors, variety and repetition, and length of practice are factors to consider when modifying mindfulness for children and
youth populations (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Also, simple but clear explanation and rationale must be appropriate and in context of children’s current understanding while mindful practices are integrated into their daily routines (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Considering these factors, advocates of education and mindfulness adjust curricula so that they create “well-rounded” students who are cognitively, emotionally, and compassionately enriched and able.

Currently, there are mindfulness-based curricula that are in practice. Named after an Italian physician Maria Montessori, Montessori education was created to target certain sensory experiences to improve and enhance cognitive development particularly in attention, focus, and concentration. Although she originally aimed to serve children with mental delays, her work inspired others to apply her “activity-based educational programs” and methods to help all children with various abilities from diverse backgrounds (Lillard, 2011, p. 78). Montessori’s practices parallel many aspects of mindfulness particularly in attention and non-judgment. Through “concentrated attention, attending to sensorimotor experience, and engaging in practical work,” Montessori education intends to integrate and deepen the mind-body connection, attention and awareness (Lillard, 2011, p. 78).

Along with the Montessori approach, Fodor and Hooker (2008) also advocate the integration of mindfulness in school curricula through focused awareness attention. They emphasize the present moment: “[…] every experience is fresh” (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 82). As children typically do, they tend to live in the moment better than their adult counterparts. Fodor and Hooker explore the ways in which mindfulness could harness, sustain, and apply that state of mind to all aspects of the child’s academic experience.
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Through present focused awareness and attention, they use mindfulness to promote cognitive change, self-management, relaxation, and acceptance (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). Since children are still developing, it is imperative to first introduce mindfulness within a concrete framework and then move towards a more abstract meaning. Thus, Fodor and Hooker present three progressions of mindfulness: the environment, body, and focused attention meditation (Fodor & Hooker, 2008).

Children understand their surroundings in a “simpler” and more tangible way. To introduce an abstract concept like mindfulness, educators must find concrete gateways to awareness. For example, a teacher may ask the students to pick any object within the classroom and draw it (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). After the exercise, students are encouraged to carefully pay close attention to “smaller and smaller details” of the chosen object (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 84). This is a practice in mindfulness because it requires the participant to repeatedly return his or her attention back to the point of focus, which is the object. After this informal meditation interlude, students are asked to re-draw the object. Comparing the two drawings before and after the pause, students could discuss the “details missing from the first drawing that they remembered in the second” (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 84). Activities similar to this one require children to practice their awareness by focusing and observing one thing within their physical setting. By doing so, children are given the opportunity to notice and really “see” the things that are usually overlooked. Such heightened awareness of and care for the ordinary could enhance their experience into a transcending, more lucid and insightful one.

In addition to awareness of the environment, awareness of the self in the environment is also a key factor of mindfulness of the environment. Since mindfulness is
about relationships, paying attention to what the self does within an environment is crucial. Children, and adults, often go about their lives on “autopilot mode.” Thus, it is easy for one to forget the “boring,” routine things he or she has done. Younger children especially have a hard time remembering the past, even for recent events like what they ate for breakfast or if they brushed their teeth in the morning. Similar to the drawing exercise above, students are encouraged to pay close attention to details. Either the teacher or student writes down what the student did before coming to school (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). The exercise is repeated in the following days, and more details are added each time. This way, the child could see the progression of his or her awareness and practice observing his or her actions. Therefore, if one does not pay attention to the present, then it is more likely that he or she will forget. Challenging children to be more mindful and aware of details and really think about what they are doing heightens their experience and thus improves their memory.

Mindfulness of the body is the second element of Fodor and Hooker’s approach. Mindfulness practices, particularly bodyscan, cultivate “enhanced body awareness” that eventually “leads to fuller self-awareness” (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 85). Paying attention to one’s bodily experience is an important gateway to one’s psychological experience. To create that body-mind connection, teachers must first build a foundation on body sensations and conduct “simple sensory exercises to heighten non-judgmental awareness of perceptual experiences (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic sensations)” (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010, p. 222). Fodor and Hooker categorize them into three components: attending to the senses, awareness of movement, and breathing meditation (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). Attending to the senses encourages
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children to intently hear, touch, smell, taste, and feel. Activities such as slow eating help children to holistically experience an act, in this case, eating. For example, teachers could conduct a “raisin meditation,” which is also one of the first exercises in Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR therapy program (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 85). Each child is asked to slowly eat one raisin at a time taking notice of its appearance, texture, smell, and eventually taste. Then once the children place it in their mouths, the teacher reminds them to slowly chew the raisin and pay attention to what is happening in their bodies in relation to the raisin. This is done repeatedly; however, other small foods should be readily introduced to keep students interested. The raisin meditation, as well as other similar exercises, is a simple but effective way for children to amplify their awareness through the senses.

The awareness of movement shifts from the senses to coordinated motion. As in all meditation, paying attention to all vital and daily movements, both physiological and psychological, unearths the united effort of the body and mind. However, for children, coordination of motor skills is still developing. Thus, they are still “getting to know” their range of movement. Any activity that requires close attention to movement and body sensations helps children to better understand their bodies. Similar to the raisin meditation, children are asked to “slow down” their movements and walk “as softly as they can, as if walking on eggshells or on a delicate glass floor” (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 86). While they carefully walk, the teacher reminds the students to “be aware of each movement they make” and take notice of the sensations in their feet, legs, and perhaps arms and the rest of their bodies (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p.86). When the children begin to stray from the activity, the teacher asks them to note what they were thinking before
their minds wandered and asks that they bring their attention back to their bodies and the movement (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). The teacher could also introduce contrasting movements such as stomping to amplify the sensations of each body state. This activity parallels many aspects of mindfulness meditation, especially in the noticing and guiding of one’s wandering attention. Therefore, mindful movement like walking meditation is an effective way to teach children to concretely ground themselves in body awareness.

Meditation on the breath is an elemental practice of mindfulness. Breath counting helps the practitioner to focus his or her attention on the present and sensations of the movement of the air entering and leaving the body. It is a simple but effective exercise. Applying it within an educational context, teachers conduct short meditations of breath, and if it is done properly, children will begin to attend to “this basic function […] to which they never paid attention before” (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 87). As vital as breathing is, it often goes unnoticed and underappreciated. This exercise pays humble homage to this life-giving act and challenges the mind to focus on the breath and rest in its “natural rhythm” (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 87). This activity requires sustained attention as well as self-control and self-management, detecting and averting distracting thoughts and feelings. As a helpful side effect, breathing meditation also promotes relaxation; thus, it is beneficial for children to “remember” to breathe especially when they feel anxious and stressed. Breathing meditation emphasizes similar mindful components involved in attending to the senses and awareness of movement. However, it is a fusion of the two and transitions the child from concrete body-awareness through relaxation of the muscles to psychological self-awareness through softening of the mind.
Once grounded in mindfulness of the environment and of the body, children can begin to explore more abstract forms of the mind and delve deeper into the depths of their consciousness. Thus, once students are in an intuitive frame of mind, teachers could introduce “formal” mindfulness meditation. Its concept is similar to the exercises previously mentioned. However, the stimulus is internal, and it presents the individual with sensations, thoughts, and feelings generated from within. According to Fodor and Hooker, mindfulness is “the focused awareness on the thinking process” in the present moment (Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 87). Thus, the participant must intently attend to the thinking process and observe thoughts and feelings as they come and go without judgment. It is difficult to detach ourselves from personal experience, especially intrapersonal issues, and we can get “stuck” on that thought and feeling. Mindfulness helps one to become more mentally flexible, allowing the mind to readily and non-reactively switch from one thought and feeling to another rather than dwelling in it. A more concrete way of explaining this phenomenon is through the use of metaphors (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). For example, “bubble meditation” is a common technique used by many practitioners, both child and adult (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). The participant imagines each thought encased in a bubble. This allows the individual to gain intimate distance by pinpointing a particular thought and/or feeling without judgment and “letting go.” Like a bubble, that thought or feeling floats away into the distance. This technique is especially intriguing for young children since it places an abstract concept in a concrete, relatable context (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). It vividly depicts the coming and going of thoughts and feelings within a mindful state. Another mindfulness meditation technique “features thoughts on clouds drifting across the sky”
(Fodor & Hooker, 2008, p. 88). Whichever metaphor or imagery is used, simple concepts and visualizations prove to be powerful and effective among children and help them to better materialize and grasp mindfulness concepts. Metaphors and visualizations could also be used to promote creativity and imagination (Fodor & Hooker, 2008). With visualization meditation, children use their unique imagination to create a “safe haven” where they could regain their composure. This offers them a private, personalized, and immediate source of comfort, spiritual replenishment, and support. By doing so, children practice self-regulation and learn to take responsibility for not only their thoughts and feelings but actions. As a result, they are empowered and encouraged to reflect on themselves as well as their actions towards others.

So far, I have concentrated on the effects of mindfulness on self-enhancement. However, taking Dewey and Bode’s interpersonal experience into consideration, it is important to also attend to the relationships that connect individuals to others. Mindfulness is not only lucid awareness of oneself but is a conduit through which empathy and “loving-kindness” flow. Practices of self-regulation, non-judgment, and acceptance help an individual to be more aware of his or her physiological and intrapsychic processes to better understand them. Thus, one is harmoniously in tune to self and is able to experience and understand other perspectives in ways that are more “detached” from imposed judgment and distortion: “[...] the learner must adopt the standpoint or attitude of someone else in order to comprehend the meaning of what is going on” (Bode, 1921, p. 44). This kind of mental state and being is conducive to openness and acceptance, which are key factors of creative thinking and emotional intelligence. Therefore, mindfulness is an integration of the two, the individual and the
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social. Multiple studies reflect individual benefits resulting from mindfulness practice. However, as social individuals, the social benefits of mindfulness are also pertinent in the application to educational institutions. It not only enriches cognitive and emotional development but it also promotes empathy and loving-kindness. Therefore, within the context of education, mindfulness is also a means to cultivate “prosocial” dispositions within children and youth (Davidson et al., 2012).

Alfie Kohn (1991) reiterates the importance of cultivating “caring kids.” Educators not only strive to ensure academic success among the students but to nurture deeper understanding and kindness: “[…] the very profession of teaching calls on us to try to produce not merely good learners but good people” (Kohn, 1991, p. 1). Therefore, “social conduct is identical with moral conduct,” and mindfulness could transform understanding of others to expressions of kindness (Bode, 1921, p. 43). Studies of the effects of mindfulness on prosocial dispositions and behavior among children are still in their early stages. Although there have been findings that suggest that those practicing mindfulness show improvements in mood and stress and proclivity for “positive” emotions, the dynamics between mindfulness and morals are not yet fully understood. However, the effect of mindfulness on children has been an important topic of discussion and subject of exploration, and neuroscientists like Richard J. Davidson and his Center for Investigating Healthy Minds research team are conducting studies in school settings. In 2014, Davidson and his research team implemented the “Kindness Curriculum” and tailored the framework of Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program to make it more practical and developmentally appropriate for preschool children, who were 4 years of age. Over the course of this research project, they observed the effects of the Kindness Curriculum
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(KC) on children’s emotional health and pro-social behavior. The curriculum is comprised of 24 short lessons that are conducted over an 8-week period (Flook, Goldberg, & Pinger, 2014). For each week, there was a theme: 1) Mindful bodies and planting seeds of peace and kindness, 2) I feel emotions on the inside, 3) How I feel on the inside shows on the outside, 4) Taking care of strong emotions on the inside and outside, 5) Calming and working out problems, 6) Gratitude, 7) All people depend on each other and the world, and 8) Gratitude and caring for our world (Flook, Goldberg, & Pinger, 2014). The chosen themes and their sequence portray awareness through paying attention to one’s actions towards objects, such as plants and people; self-regulation, particularly of emotions; connection between one’s emotion and behavior towards others; acceptance of difficult emotions; flexibility or ability to cope with and recover from problems; gratitude; showing gratitude; and interconnectedness with immediate others (personal community) and distant others (global community). Overall, the KC was designed to integrate mindfulness practice into “children’s literature, music, and movement to teach and stabilize concepts related to kindness and compassion” (Flook et al., 2014, p. 45). According to their findings, the KC intervention group showed greater improvements in prosocial behavior and self-regulatory skills than the control group. Therefore, the KC children displayed improvements in “social competence and earned higher report card grades in domains of learning, health, and social-emotional development, whereas the control group exhibited more selfish behavior over time” (Flook et al., 2015, p.44). Like the ripple effect, the caring circle reflected in this curriculum’s framework expands outward from the intrapersonal center to interpersonal, then to communal and hopefully global. In other words, mindful awareness enhances the
interconnectedness of all things – the mind, body, environment, and others – and inspires one to stop, notice, and care for the self, other, and people. Such a state of mindful being extends our understanding from ourselves to others and enables dynamic, interactive, and meaningful relationships, thus embodying the social individual.

In addition to the KC, Montessori, and Fodor & Hooker’s approaches to education, Lillian Katz’s (1992) “project approach” also offers a more mindful, holistic learning experience. It promotes interactive and inter-relational learning within individual and group contexts. Katz defines the project approach as “an investigation into various aspects of a topic that is of interest to the participating children” (Katz & Chard, 1992, p. 4). Through independent, academic exploration and group cooperation, students develop their cognitive and social skills. It requires direct observation, social inquiry, experimentation, and gathering of artifacts (Katz & Chard, 1992). Both academic and social experiences are encouraged, and as a result, students become more interested and enthusiastic to learn and display prosocial behaviors such as group cooperation and support for their fellow classmates. Like the KC, the project approach also requires awareness beyond the subject. However, the awareness that is originally geared solely toward emotions is additionally applied in context of holistic academic growth – “knowledge and skills, dispositions, and feelings” (Katz & Chard, 1992, p. 10). Thus, the project approach also alludes to fundamental mindfulness principles and advocates awareness through sustained attention and interest, non-judgmental awareness and observation of surroundings and people, and awareness of self, both individually and socially. The individual and collaborative enterprise of the project approach is ongoing, thus emphasizing the interconnected continuum of relationships in multiple contexts.
All approaches portray mindfulness in various applications within educational settings, and they demonstrate the interrelatedness between academic success and emotional health in developing children. One either directly or indirectly depends on the other to maintain the delicate balance of the child’s overall well-being. However, as in mindfulness meditation, one needs an experienced instructor and guide who can support and sustain the practice. Thus, commitment of educators to mindfulness practices is paramount to the effectiveness and efficacy of any mindful approach: “Training teachers to embody mindfulness by developing a foundation of personal practice creates a wider and more sustainable benefit to the system of education” (Meiklejohn, 2012, p. 8). If teachers personally practice mindfulness, then they are able to create a mindful, fruitful context in which students can grow. Along with the theme of relationships, it is no surprise that the educator’s state of mind and behavior influence students. Findings from Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) study show that teachers’ social and emotional competence is positively associated with prosocial classroom ambience. Teachers who practice two key factors of mindfulness, self-regulation and nonjudgmental emotional awareness, are more in tune to students’ emotional and mental states and needs. As a result, teachers develop “supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 493). Other studies of contemplative and mindfulness-based cognitive training of schoolteachers show a reduction in negative emotional behavior while promoting prosocial responses within the classroom (Kemeny et al, 2011). In addition to benefits on the professional level, mindfulness provides educators with personal benefits, particularly dealing with stress. Stress has a detrimental effect on teachers not only in their
professional lives but personal ones (Flook et al., 2013). Thus, promoting and supporting mental health among educators is an important factor to include when considering the efficacy and quality of learning. Cognitive training such as mindfulness “makes individuals less reactive to negative experience and more likely to notice positive experience, resulting in a cascade of psychological and physiological benefits” that will translate in the classroom (Flook et al., 2013, p.183). Therefore, minimizing destructive experiences and encouraging constructive ones “transforms educational structures” that alter “the way the classroom works and feels, not just the way each separate member of that class acts” (Kohn, 1997, p. 16). Since mindfulness is a practice or a way of life, it is important to extend it beyond educational settings to personal spaces outside of school. Similar to the reasons above regarding the teacher’s role in instilling mindfulness in students, parents and family members also play a significant part in nurturing mindful, healthy, and resilient children and generations (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Thus, teachers and caretakers are the child’s mindful guides who are “always there and always loving” (Lillard, 2011, p. 82).

Society needs to stop, think, feel, and reflect more about what it does, not only to itself but to those within it as well as those surrounding it. To care and find interest and ‘beauty’ in the ordinary is the underlying theme reflected in the reasoning, interpretation, and construction of a mindfulness-based education system and society. Attending to how one thinks, feels, and responds in relation to the “other” cultivates a social individual who cares and is emotionally and intellectually aware, lucid, and compassionate. At the cost of others, capitalism and industrious productivity place individualism at the center of Western culture and its educational institutions. The byproducts of such extremes are
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selfishness, ignorance, and callousness. Efforts are made for the sake of self-
glorification, and intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships remain underdeveloped
and stunted. As a result, there is an overemphasis on systematic evaluation and material
“progress,” and children are facing more and more challenges that stem from judgmental,
mechanical, and conservative education. Whether caused by personal or situational
handicaps, adversities are a part of life. We cannot control the past and predict the future.
We can only change how we relate to the present moment and hope that such changes
will generate a better future. Mindfulness is about bridging and enhancing relationships
to our own bodies, thoughts, environment, and, most importantly, people. In addition to
personal fulfillment through awareness and self-regulation, it ultimately instills
understanding, loving-kindness, and empathy; they are the seeds of change and social
reform. Thus, implanting and integrating mindfulness into the practice and culture of
education may perhaps cultivate future generations who think more critically, feel more
deeply, and act in greater awareness, love, and wisdom. Such a state of mind may help
uplift the fog clouding our current judgments of reality and redeem us from the self-
serving, detrimental epidemic of not caring. As the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin
Gyatso, once said, “Simply try to be a better human being” (Harrington & Zajonc, 2006,
p. 218). This is the intention of a mindful education that embodies the social individual.
The relationship between the body and mind is undeniable yet mystifying. The subject has been long explored and there has been a resurgence of interest in investigating the mind-body connection in contemporary clinical research. For example, researchers (Tetile et al., 2008; Kraemer & Marquez, 2009; Barton, 2011; Telles et al., 2013; Lange et al., 2014) studied the effects of exercise on physical and psychological health among patients suffering from mental health problems. Although research still continues to investigate the direct relationship between physical activity and mental health, there is statistically significant evidence “that exercise reduces anxiety, depression, and negative mood, and improves self-esteem and cognitive functioning” (Tetile et al., 2008, p. 39). Whether it is swimming, running, gymnastics, dance, yoga, or any type of physical activity, exercising offers a variety of activities that encourage a wide range of movement. The link between the body and the mind is apparent and fundamental to our overall well-being.

Although physical movement through exercising has many health benefits, does the extent of those benefits, particularly psychological ones, vary across different types of physical activity? Are there differences between conventional exercise and mindfulness-based activities such as yoga? In recent years, since the introduction of Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program, neuroscientists and other researchers have been interested in the effects of mindfulness-based practices on patients, novices, and practitioners. Yoga is one of the most common and popular methods used to strengthen the mind-body connection, the foundation upon which the principles of mindfulness are built. It has been used as an
alternative to conventional methods and incorporated into modern therapy and treatment. For example, a study conducted by J.M. Kraemer and D.X. Marquez (2009) compared the psychosocial effects of walking and yoga among older adults, who were 50 years of age or older. Results indicated that those who participated in yoga sessions reported lower levels of depression and anxiety than those who only walked. Others such as N.S. Rathore and M.K. Choudhary (2013) studied the impact of yoga on subjective well-being and stress and concluded that yoga noticeably reduced stress and thus increased the well-being of participants. Although there was no definitive correlation specifically between yoga and mental health, results from their study as well as their predecessors have shown that “frequent practice of yoga improves quality of life” and thus has value as a means to holistically heal those who suffer from psychological and physical ailments (Kraemer & Marquez, 2009, p. 400).

According to Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program, there are 3 types of mindfulness meditation: (1) formal, (2) body scan, (3) and mindful movement, such as hatha yoga, walking meditation, and eating meditation (Ott, 2004, p. 27). The first type of mindfulness meditation requires stillness – sitting, lying, or standing – and internal awareness of the mind, attention and thought processes, as well as returning one’s focus to the present. The second, body scan, “allows individuals to develop a focused, concentrated awareness of the body” (Ott, 2004, p. 27). And the third:

[mindful movement] consists of slowly, mindfully moving the body through a variety of lengthening, flexing, and strengthening exercises. […] with careful moment-to-moment awareness of one’s breathing and of sensations that arise in
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the body as it is moving or being held in one position for a series of breaths. (Ott, 2004, p. 28).

This type of meditation can be applied to many forms of movement such as yoga, walking, or eating as long as the participant moves and acts with intention, thought, and awareness, paying acute attention to occurring sensations and internal processes.

Integrating principles of mindfulness, engagement and connection between the mind and body is a vital part of the practice because it focuses on the individual’s physical and mental fitness. As seen in the various types of mindfulness meditation – formal, body scan, yoga, walking, and eating – mindful movement, noticeable or subtle, internal or external, is an essential and effective catalyst towards healthy, holistic living.

MINDFULNESS AND NATURE

In addition to mindfulness, psychologists and neuroscientists have investigated the “human-nature relationship” (Nisbet et al., 2011). Often times, officially and unofficially, nature is said to be healing, having similar effects as mindfulness practice on our mental and emotional health such as “[…] stress reduction, improving ability to concentrate, alleviating the effects of depression, and improving self-esteem” (Maller, 2009, p. 523). In other studies, having access to a natural setting sometimes has physical benefits and accelerates recovery for patients undergoing treatment or therapy (Maller, 2006). Whatever the case may be, contact with nature, whether it is direct or indirect, influences psychological and physiological health on multiple levels.
Like mindfulness practices, the integration of nature has been a growing practice in modern therapy. Termed “nature therapy,” this therapeutic practice “relates to the environment as a live and dynamic partner in the shaping of the setting and the process” (Berger & Mcleod, 2006, p. 81). Therefore, nature provides a sanctuary for consolation, openness, non-judgment, and peace – a fruitful environment for healing, reflection, and growth. In addition to its therapeutic role, nature also offers something unique – a source of holistic well-being:

Nature and natural settings have well-documented relaxation, healing, and restorative benefits (Laumann et al. 2001; Kaplan 2001), but research has focused mostly on nature as a recuperative measure, rather than as a source of well-being. […] We suggest that human psychological health is related to the state of the environment and time spent in nature, and that people’s subjective sense of connection with nature may contribute to well-being. (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy; 2010, p. 304).

Thus, nature becomes the means to reconnect the body, spirit, and mind. In a study conducted by Berger & Mcleod (2006), direct contact with nature is described as “touching the soul” because “direct contact with natural elements can trigger strong emotions and sensations that were not previously touched or shared” (p. 89). Therefore, like mindfulness, nature induces understanding through the mind-body connection, and what we physically experience with nature affects how we feel internally and vice versa. Ultimately in both contexts, the individual is urged to assess from other perspectives through relativity and flexibility rather than absolutes. Nature provides a physical, insulated place that is protected from society, its judgments and clamors.
As mentioned previously, movement and nature are effective means to promote mindfulness. However, most previous research has been dedicated to adult patients and participants. What about children? How do mindfulness-based practices affect younger populations? How do we implement such practices among children and instill mindfulness? Perhaps the answer lies in their greatest strength: play.

Children love to move. They are wholeheartedly expressive and use the body to speak and communicate. Thus, movement is a paramount aspect of child development and must be considered especially in the discussion of mindfulness-based education. As seen in previously mentioned studies, the significance of movement is also true in adults. We are made up of a mind and a body, and although we are not always aware of it, they are inseparable. We use the mind to think and decide while using the body to act on those thoughts and decisions. Therefore, the two are inevitably integrated with each other, and addressing the body component is just as essential as addressing the mind. Therefore, the effects of mindfulness meditation as well as other programs rooted in the experience of the body such as Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR, yoga, and deep breathing exercises, is a popular subject within current research.

DMT utilizes movement as a means to holistically understand, approach, and assess the psychological needs of an individual. However, it not only focuses on oneself but the relationship between oneself and other. Movement in context of DMT not only includes blatant gestures but one’s facial expressions, muscle tension, and what most people commonly refer to as “body language.” Thus, one can say that movement is an
essential yet “hidden” language with which we speak and use all the time, usually without our knowing it (Amighi, 1999). Furthermore, we have a signature style consisting of a unique repertoire of movements that expresses who we are. Similar to mindfulness movement, DMT observes how we move by expanding our awareness and paying attention to the positioning, muscle intensity, and shapes of our own and others’ bodies. More so than adults, young children tend to express themselves primarily in physical ways. Therefore, “doing” or the sheer act of experience is an essential component of a child’s physiological, psychological, and cognitive development and ultimately contributes to his or her overall adult health, which is why neuroscientists are currently studying the benefits of mindfulness practices on children. K.M. Lange et al. (2014) studied the effects of yoga on children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Results show how yoga, as a complementary therapy, could have beneficial effects for children diagnosed with ADHD and highlight the importance of further research on the efficacy of yoga in regards to this and other disorders such as anxiety and anger management. Another target population consists of ‘typically’ developing children in educational settings, and in recent years many researchers have been investigating the effects of yoga on school children and how it affects students’ overall well-being in regards to stress, emotion regulation, and physical health. D.I. Berger et al. (2009) conducted a pilot study of the effects of yoga on inner-city children and reported:

[…] enhanced well-being following the intervention, as reflected by perceived improvements by the majority of participants (50%-80%) in behaviors believed to be directly targeted by yoga, including physical well-being (i.e., strength,
flexibility, balance), self-perceptions (i.e., liking oneself, liking the way one’s body looks and feels), and self-regulation (i.e., attention, ability to calm oneself, behavior in class, sleep). (p. 40)

Like adults, children are also in need of “healing” and “strengthening” of not only the mind but the body. Therefore, it is essential to address and include movement when simultaneously implementing mindfulness practices and improving their academic experience and perhaps overall performance and well-being.

In addition to movement, children are “visual” learners. They need concrete and relatable examples to better understand and grasp the world around them. True learning begins with one’s experience with the natural world. Although nature is present in many aspects of life in more elusive forms, such as figurative language that helps individuals to express, visualize, grasp, and clarify a thought or feeling, it is surprising that the presence of “the Green” is seldom noticed, appreciated, and integrated into predominant American and Western education. “Playing outside” has become a rarity in our educational system, and the era of playing, creativity, and the outdoors is quickly being replaced by an age dominated by technology, standardized tests, and harsher grading standards. Learning has become less explorative and students are forced to “take tests,” “sit still,” and “stay inside.” As a result, children are restless, stressed, and not truly learning. They are impaired, stuck in a rigid system that is unforgiving and unaware of students themselves or their “being”, distinct learning styles, and needs. However, being and playing in nature provides an opportunity for children to engage the mind and body while learning through meaningful experience and exploration.
Beyond the promotion of overall health benefits, there is also an unseen yet powerful quality about nature and mental processes, particularly regarding creativity, attention, and awareness. In *Last Child in the Woods*, the author Richard Louv (2008) posits the “link between human creativity and experiences in nature” and emphasizes the importance of “naturalist intelligence” (p. 52). Naturalist intelligence was Howard Gardner’s eighth intelligence, described as “the human ability to discriminate among living things (plants, animals) as well as sensitivity to other features of the natural world (clouds, rock configurations)” (Checkley, 1997, p. 9). The key words “discriminate,” “sensitivity,” and “natural world” highlight important factors of the relationship between the experience in the natural world and mindfulness practice. In both cases, the mindful individual must be intentional yet flexible and vigilant yet relaxed. Nature physically and psychologically places us in a larger yet intimate context and consequently encourages us to pay attention to other things outside of ourselves. Thus, the natural world provides a place of playful exploration, solace, solitude, reflection, and intuition. Being present in a natural setting or place helps us to physically and mentally perceive ourselves within a context that is larger than us. It has a special way of shifting our immediate personal context and placing us somewhere that is greater and wiser:

> It is an entry into a larger world […] takes me out of myself, out of the limited scope of human activity, but this is not misanthropic. A sense of place is a way of embracing humanity among all of its neighbors. It is an entry into the larger world. (Louv, 2008, p. 67)

It is not enough to see ourselves as insulated selves or beings. One must feel, explore, and be a part of the whole. In other words, one is “in relation” to something else. An
insulated self lives in isolation and loneliness. However, being a part of a whole allows for an ‘other’ to guide and push us forward towards reflection and introspection. Thus, the individual is able to perceive the world through multiple lenses and enhance his or her understanding, experience, and vision of life.

However, I believe that the mindful individual is exceptional in that he or she is able to transcend the immediate self and “see” things from multiple perspectives to understand deeply and know things holistically. Such meta-awareness is reminiscent of E. Schachtel’s (1959) “oneness.” From his book Metamorphosis, he describes the creative process as focusing on something “outside of self” that engages multiple exploratory approaches to understand an “object” in its wholeness (Schachtel, p. 181).

Mindfulness is also a way to enhance our approach and perspective to “objects” we encounter either directly or indirectly. Therefore, openness and the ability to frame and see oneself in context of something larger, literally and figuratively, increases awareness and expands understandings that are essential principles of mindfulness and creative practice; and ultimately, it generates meaningful learning that is open and enhancing rather than judgmental and restraining. Furthermore, the natural world consists of a plethora of “habitats [that] are rich with life and opportunities to learn,” and also offers a place of non-judgment and intuition (Louv, 2008, p. 172). Nature is distinct from other places because it invites the individual with complete acceptance of both the mind and body, which may be why children, as well as adults, find comfort, inspiration, and solitude in it. Since children primarily explore the world through their bodies and five senses, it may explain why nature is so appealing to them. Ultimately, it reveals to children that humans are not the only beings occupying the world and thus provides a
familiar yet mysterious place of solitude, intuition, and endless possibilities. Nature simultaneously engages the mind through de-contextualization and stimulates the body through active exploration and thus renders meaningful learning and experience of many kinds.

MINDFULNESS, the CREATIVE PROCESS, and NATURE

“The nature of experience can be understood only by noting that it included an active and passive element. […] We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return: such is the peculiar combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness or value of experience.”

- J. Dewey (2012, p.70, Democracy and Education)

As mentioned previously, the overemphasis on self in context of extreme individualism has created a dichotomy between the “self” and the “other.” As a result, there is a hyperactivity that erases the holistic nature of experience defined above by Dewey, and the individual becomes over “active” and unbalanced, completely disregarding the “passive” component of experience. However, one does not have to oppose the other. This balance between the self and other – active and passive – is encouraged by mindfulness principles, which are also promoted by the creative process.

Mindfulness enhances the senses and experience through awareness, attention, non-judgment, and openness. To better understand our internal processes helps us to
better access them in response to the external environment. Such awareness and “knowledge” enhances our overall perception, which then improves our response to an array of stimuli, pleasant and unpleasant. In a way, the creative process requires similar approaches. The unconstrained and nonjudgmental approach to the world is advocated by E.G. Schachtel’s (1959) concept of “openness.” To truly understand the world surrounding us, we must be aware and open and temporarily let go of our preconceived knowledge, which often inhibits other ways of knowing and thus restricts our overall understanding. We must “see” objects from multiple points to truly and more wholly know them. Schachtel describes this phenomenon as “oneness with the object,” which can be anything such as a person, place, thing, event, thought, feeling, or problem (Schachtel, 1959). Oneness requires multi-faceted perception from two modes of experience or thought: allocentric and autocentric (Schachtel, 1959). An individual in allocentric mode keenly focuses on the object while autocentric mode elicits sensory, overall emotional feel of the object. In other words, oneness requires a mind-body connection. In their fervent approach to the natural world, children display active allocentric exploration but, at times, can also demonstrate moments of autocentric experience when they pause to linger a little longer in nature. The experience of oneness also reminds me of R. Arnheim’s (1969) “expressive qualities” in reference to H. Werner’s “physiognomic perception” (p. 455). Werner emphasizes the importance of experience deriving from a world of feelings and action, otherwise identified as physiognomic perception. He believes that this kind of experience dominates early childhood in the form of animism and personification of objects, both living and non-living: “[children] approach the subject in that they are characterized by possessing a
kind of demeanor and active behavior which, under certain circumstances, may bring them to life” (Werner, 1978, p. 67). Due to little differentiation between the technical or objective and intuitive or subjective modes of thought, children are more likely to assign objects human-like qualities such as feelings and thoughts, sometimes perceiving them as living beings and potential friends (known as animism). For example, leaves caught in the spiral of a wind could be perceived as playfully dancing while a sequestered willow tree is seen as a weeping loner. Overall, both Schachtel’s “oneness” and Arnheim’s expressive qualities rooted in Werner’s physiognomic perception require interest, acceptance, and non-judgment to render such experiences. In other words, one must momentarily surrender himself or herself to other understandings that are beyond the conventional or cultural way of one’s thinking. Arnheim’s expressive qualities and Werner’s physiognomic perception offer a powerful perspective that we later forget and sometimes tragically abandon as we get older. With such perception rooted in expressive qualities, the individual is more open, reminded of other perspectives and possibilities that offer an opportunity to experience oneness, the enrichment and deepening of understanding. Thus, openness, oneness, and physiognomic perception are interrelated and are crucial agents of the creative process as well as mindfulness practice because they free the creative, mindful individual from one approach to allow multiple ways of experience, eliciting a different, more holistic understanding of the “object” at hand. Similar to children, creative individuals are able to access this open, playful approach to the world:

   If expression is the primary content of vision in daily life, the same should be all the more true of the way the artist looks at the world. The expressive qualities
[physiognomic properties] are his means of communication. They capture his attention, they enable him to understand and interpret his experiences, and they determine the form patterns he creates. (Arnheim, 1969, p.455)

Such “expressive qualities” emphasize the vital mind-body relationship advocated by mindfulness. Childhood experiences with things of the natural world have a significant role in the ways they see, approach, and understand the world that is unique. The physiognomic experience as an adult may be richer than that of a child’s because the adult is more aware, developed, and has a higher capacity for meaning making from a larger source consisting of a variety of symbols, knowledge, and experiences. However, children have an exceptional ability to imagine, non-judgmentally and openly “know” and “feel” the things around them, and this “gift of childhood” is often discouraged as we develop into adults (Gardner, 1982, p. 57). Therefore, as a means to acquire and enrich our understandings of the world, we must remember, “what our childhood still asks of us” (Lewis, 2012, p. 6). Nonetheless, remembering and accessing a child-like approach does not simply mean to be childish and immature. It calls for the complete opposite: higher thinking and deeper feeling for our surroundings. The creative process encourages this child-like, open approach by means of mindfulness and imagination. Both are not only about expanding our understanding but extending our compassion for others to “find a link, a means of communication, through our imagining, to any and all forms [especially of nature] of life outside of myself” (Lewis, 2012, p. 6). It is a practice of empathy and compassion not only for the self but for others. As we get older, we often lose this connection and forget the things that have always been there but were too
“small” for us to notice whether it is a trivial thing such as a pebble or a vital process such as our breathing.

Thus mindfulness and creativity are interrelated, and when combined, they have the potential to realize meaningful learning and experience. There are many media which one uses to create, especially those embedded in the fine arts such as writing, drawing, dancing, and acting. However, one does not need to know how to write, draw, dance and act to be creative. In a strange way, artists are like problem solvers trying to restore harmony and balance in their own creative work (Arnheim, 1969). Arnheim was a student of Max Werthimer who led the Gestalt movement in psychology that opposed behaviorism and promoted a holistic and creative view of perception and cognition:

The Gestalt approach to perception challenged the assumption that complex processes could be reduced to combinations of simpler ones added together. Gestalt psychologists also questioned the reduction of new discoveries to old habits. Wertheimer believed in the reality of discovery, in the capacity of the human mind to create something genuinely new. (Doyle, 1987, p. 195)

Rather than focusing solely on externally observable behavior, Gestalt psychologists studied how people perceived and solved problems because they posited that solutions often come with the changing of the representation of the problem. Therefore, they observed the process of restructuring and insightful thinking dependent on existing knowledge, heuristics, and implicit assumptions (Ward, 1995). As a result of the movement, problem solving was no longer seen as trial and error or simply the sum of its parts. Instead it highlighted productive or creative thinking relevant to everyday life.

Influenced by Gestalt psychology, Arnheim also focused on how perception is organized
in regards to visual art. He believed that visual perception consisting of form, structure, and configuration influenced the quality and overall meaning of the whole creative work and viewed the artist as the problem solver (Arnheim, 1969). He identified the creative process, particularly visual perception, as a means to clarify or solve a “problem” and that thought and understanding was realized through the visual medium (Arnheim, 1969). Thus, an individual’s visual perception is closely tied with “thinking aloud” that is often seen among children as they try to grasp and make sense of the world (Arnheim, 1969). Similarly, life presents puzzles and disturbances that call upon the problem solver within us. However we, too, are artists because we find innovative ways to “solve” and deal with life’s problems in keeping with Dewey’s definition of experience. In our “passive” state, we observe and assess; and in our “active” state, respond. Therefore, we are constantly creating through our thoughts, ideas, feelings, actions, and so on. Ultimately we simultaneously embody the artist, artwork, and creative process. As long as the individual finds some way to make meaning, he or she can find his or her own medium of expression and evoke the “artist” within. Therefore, one must continue to create to truly experience meaningful learning. In other words, to create is to live…to be human and a social individual.
INSPIRATIONS for SPECIFIC MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES

Nature and Children’s Imagination

When I was 6, I used to collect caterpillars. Hoping that they would turn into butterflies, I spent all summer catching these velvety dark brown creatures. But no matter how many I caught, all of them turned into moths. I was disappointed at first but eventually grew fond of them. Moths were who they were, and I had to accept that fact. The distinction between human and nonhuman faded, and I was no longer a child. I was their friend and protector.

While I was hiking near my house, I noticed a flash of a tiny lime green “thing” swaying in the breeze. As I walked closer, I realized that it was an inchworm hanging by its silk thread. Gently, I placed my palm underneath its body, and it immediately began to crawl. As I watched the inchworm move up my hand and change its body shape from a horseshoe to a straight line, then horseshoe again, I smiled at this peculiar, odd creature. Like the warmth of the sunlight, I felt embraced and was no longer alone. He was my friend. I carefully placed him on a leaf hanging from a branch of a nearby tree and watched him crawl along the edge. I watched until I could no longer see his shadow cast upon the leaf. He was gone. Although it happened in September, I still wonder from time to time what had happened to him. Was he a butterfly or a moth? Or will he stay an inchworm forever?
When children play in nature, the natural world becomes their “theater of perception in which he is at once producer, dramatist, and star” (Cobb, 1977, p. 29). It is not only a place of intuition and play but of imagination, the foundation of creativity. Thus, the sensory experience in nature sows and nurtures the seed of creativity while encouraging holistic experience of the mind and body: “Creative evolution, as understood in this work, consists in the achievement of richer and more creative relations of the total (but individual) organism with its total environment” (Cobb, 1977, p. 95). Originally inspired by Edith Cobb’s *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977), David Sobel (1993) expanded upon nature as a place of comfort, possibilities, and imagination by discussing its role in the development of ‘self’ in his book, *In Children’s Special Places*: “I suspect that it is the sense of self, the ego about to be born, that is sheltered in these private places” (p. 48). Sobel conducted several interviews with children and adults and asked them to describe their “special place” and their experiences in it. From his observations of the given responses, he noticed a pattern: a majority of the interviewees referred to their childhood years and spoke about the time spent in forts, dens, and “bush houses” that functioned as private, intimate habitats of solitude, solace, and reflection located in the natural world (Sobel, 1993). As mentioned earlier, nature is like a stage or “theater of perception” where children can harness natural objects and create their own world: “The creation of these worlds from shapeable, open-ended materials […] gives children the opportunity to organize a world and then find places in which they can become themselves” (Sobel, 1993, p. 81). In a similar way, creative individuals also create their own world where they are both creators and inhabitants and in the process try to rediscover their evolving self.
Like Sobel and Cobb, others believe that there is something unique about the relationship between our imagination and the natural world. As the founder of the Touchstone Center for Children, a nonprofit educational organization in New York City, Richard Lewis has dedicated his career and life to cultivating “imagination and poetic thought, particularly in relation to the natural world, as pivotal to all learning” (The Touchstone Center, 2014). Lewis posits that creativity begins with child imagination originating from intimate conversations with the natural world. Thus, the ways in which children interact and “play” with the natural world fosters awareness, imagination, and compassion – the roots of mindfulness and creativity. The need to explore and openly notice “things” greater than and, more importantly, smaller than ourselves and to find meaning or a connection to them is the beauty of a child’s imagination:

And then suddenly, seemingly in a fraction of a moment, when something small, very small, on the ground catches their [children’s] attention, they become utterly still, absorbed in their concentration, as if a mystery, an opening somewhere, was about to happen. (Lewis, 2012, p. 3)

Therefore, the natural world is a gateway to mindfulness, creativity, and overall experience that invites “what our childhood still asks of us” (Lewis, 2012, p. 4). It also teaches us to be open, allowing us to meet and be one with an object – living or nonliving, human or nonhuman. Children are amazing at recognizing and caring for unlikely things, especially natural objects and creatures. What appears to be small and insignificant to an adult calls out to the child, who then transforms it into a being that could listen, speak, smell, taste, and feel. Therefore, in addition to creativity as a
remaking of reality and making meaning, our experience in nature teaches us how to be compassionate, to care for things outside of and “smaller” than ourselves.

ANDY GOLDSWORTHY

Andy Goldsworthy is an example of an individual who demonstrates mindfulness throughout his creative process. An English contemporary sculptor, Goldsworthy uses elements from the natural world to create structures that are often built in the setting of nature (Malpas, 2007). His work captured the attention of the global community not only because of the peculiar yet intriguing character of his structures but for his unique artistic perception, his “sensitivity, intuitive response to nature, light, time, growth, change, the seasons and the earth” in creating his works (Malpas, 2007, from synopsis). His experience or creative process is as equally and perhaps more important than the work itself. In his own words:

The most profound thing I can say about a sculpture is how it is made
Learning and understanding through touch and making is a simple but deeply important reason for doing my work

I want an intimate, physical involvement with the earth. I must touch
…I take nothing out with me in the way of tools, glue or rope, preferring to explore the natural bonds and tensions that exist within the earth…Each work is a discovery
When I began working outside, I had to establish instincts and feelings for Nature…I needed a physical link before a personal approach and relationship could be formed. I splashed in water, covered myself in mud, went barefoot and woke with the dawn

When I’m working with materials it’s not just the leaf or the stone it’s the processes that are behind them that are important. That’s what I’m trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole

I couldn’t possibly try to improve on Nature. I’m only trying to understand it by an involvement in some of its processes.

I often work through the night with snow or ice, to get temperatures cold enough for things to stick together. You approach the most beautiful point, the point of greatest tension, as you move towards daybreak: the sunlight which will bring the work to life will also gradually cause it to fall apart.

(Friedman & Goldsworthy, 1990)

Like mindfulness practice, Goldsworthy’s poem emphasizes the experience of the “here and now” through the mind-body connection, and he focuses on the present, creating moment by moment. His approach and interaction with the materials, particularly stones, portray the non-judgment and openness that mindfulness and theories of the creative
process embody. Inspired by traditional Scottish stone memorials called *cairns*, one of his signature sculptures is the cone, which was usually built with ice, branches, or stones. In the following excerpt from Thomas Riedelsheimer’s documentary *Rivers and Tides* (2004), Goldsworthy narrates as he is in the process of building one of his stone cone sculptures on the beach:

> Total control of the work could be the death of a work. The stone’s speaking. All the moment when something collapses, it is intensely disappointing…and this is the fourth time it’s fallen…and each time, I got to know the stone a little bit more. I got higher each time…so it grew in proportion to my understanding of the stone. And that is really what one of things my art is trying to do…is trying to understand the stone. I obviously don’t understand it well enough…yet…

In the context of mindfulness, Goldsworthy’s description of “total control” could mean inflexibility. When an individual is inflexible and fixed in one state of mind, he or she is paralyzed, narrowing and restricting one’s perception, understanding, and creativity. As a result, one is unable to think “outside of the box” and perhaps never reach a holistic solution to a problem. Therefore, such inflexibility could be ultimately destructive. Similarly, Goldsworthy takes his time to carefully “listen” to and get to “know” the stones “a little bit more.” Furthermore, he describes his cone sculptures as interconnected markers that indicate various points of his personal and artistic career:

> “People make small piles to mark pathways […] So all the cones are related in some way and they’ve become markers to my journeys and places that I feel attachment towards” (Riedelsheimer, 2004). His cones are not only representatives of particular moments but are contributions to the whole: “Each piece is individual, but I also see the line combined
as a single work” (Goldsworthy, 2000, p. 7). Such perception echoes the call of the mindful, social individual. We are individual yet social, and distinct yet alike. As portrayed by Goldsworthy’s artistic process, nature is the vessel for mindfulness, and creativity and problem solving is a metaphor for life. Life itself is the “problem” but how we live it is a creative process and ultimately the solution – to “think higher and feel deeper” (Wiesel, 2009).

THE PEBBLE

I found that children have an eye particularly for rocks and other small things of nature. Whether it is intentional or not, they have a curious way of paying attention to details that many adults would not bother with or even be aware of. Perhaps this is because they are smaller and more vulnerable than their adult counterparts, and as a way to cope with their “smallness” they pay attention to things that are smaller than they are so that they can feel “bigger.” Regardless of the reason, a child is very intentional when choosing a particular object, in this case, pebbles and rocks. Like nature, “A large rock in a natural setting invites fantasy play” and imagination, the root of creative thinking (Crain, 2007, p. 1). Rocks are not only present in the realm of children’s play but are seen in the adult world as well. Stone therapy is used to help struggling individuals who are facing challenges of all kinds. However, I believe the most common struggles are internal, having to do with some kind of “psychic disturbance” (Crain, 2007). A developmental psychologist and advocate of stone therapy, William Crain (2007)
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discusses the unique and healing nature of stones in his article “Stones.” A famous personal struggle he discusses belongs to a renowned psychoanalyst, C.G. Jung, who expressed his own psychic disturbance in *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections* (Crain, 2007). As Jung reflected on his life, he remembered himself as a boy, about 10 or 11 years old, collecting stones and mud to build houses and castles (Crain, 2007). That was when he realized, “There is still life in these things. The small boy is still around, and possesses a creative life which I lack. But how can I make my way to it?” (as quoted in Crain, 2007, p. 3). From then on, Jung began gathering stones and building structures with them; and as a result, “this play released a stream of fantasies and led to a journey into the depth of his unconsciousness” (Crain, 2007, p. 3). Stone building became his therapist and inspiration, helping him in times when he found himself “stuck” or confronted with a “black wall.” Such an experience “opened up ideas,” and Jung used his creativity with stones as a medium to connect with the universal or “collective unconscious” in order to converse with the “ancient spirits” (Crain, 2007, p. 4).

Exemplified in Jung’s case, it is apparent that stones as well as nature play a significant role in self-rediscovery and understanding that offers some kind of a transcendental, spiritual experience. In times of struggle, Jung’s stone play was a means to balance and center himself; it was a way to stay grounded and “stay connected to something solid – the earth and nature” so that he did not get carried away or overwhelmed by his troubles deriving from both his internal and external environments (Crain, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, the natural world, as well as objects residing within it, is a place of “play” where imagination flows and fantasies flourish and a place of sanctuary where one can retreat to, meditate, and reflect. Jung was not the only one who valued and respected the power
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of stones. The Lakota Native Americans also viewed stones as powerful and healing.
For them, stones embodied a living and wise spirit that is “old beyond imagination,
ageless, and eternal” (Crain, 2007). In both Jung’s experience and Lakota beliefs
regarding stones, the effect of nature on humans is significant. Crain’s article, as well as
guidance from Lewis, was the inspiration for not only the nature walks and stone building
series but the pebble activity.
METHODODOLOGY

I conducted 3 activities throughout the 2014-2015 school year beginning with the nature walk series in the fall semester and then introducing stone building and mindfulness movement series in the following spring semester. Taking nature walks first allowed the children to get connected with their senses and thus helped to familiarize their mind-body connection. It also provided a physical place in which they can visualize themselves in the context of something larger than themselves: nature. This encouraged the children to use their bodies to explore the external environment with their five senses while paying closer attention to what surrounded them.

The whole class participated in the nature walks, which were a regular part of the class activities. Children were encouraged to share their experience by making artwork such as drawing pictures, writing stories, or sculpting a memento. We completed 6 nature walks by the end of fall semester. With the exception of the first and last walks, the remaining four focused on one sense at a time (touch, vision, smell, and sound; taste was excluded as a safety precaution). At the beginning of spring semester, I introduced the art of stone building by showing them a small video clip of a contemporary British artist named Andy Goldsworthy, who is renowned not only for his unique land and environmental art but his creative process in relation to the natural world. We collaboratively built multiple stone sculptures outside throughout the month of February into the first week of March. A short meditation walk followed each completed stone sculpture, which was added to our growing stone garden. However, there were many unexpected challenges and thus revisions to the activities had to be made. Due to
inclement weather and freezing temperatures, we were able to build only 3 stone sculptures outside. However, on the days we stayed indoors, I offered “building with stones” as one of the classroom “table top” activities and observed the children play and build their own stone sculptures. Furthermore, I decided it was best to discontinue the meditation walks because the children had much difficulty focusing and following directions while we were outside. Consequently, I introduced other simple mindfulness-based exercises – such as deep breathing, creative movement, and observation drawing – on the days we were indoors.

For observations, the head teachers, student teachers, and I video recorded and/or took photographs documenting the nature walks, stone sculptures, and mindful movement exercises. I also took note of the children’s verbal and physical expressions as well as the adults’ observations to gather further insight into the children’s overall experience. As a complementary addition, I also included personal reflections to capture my own journey throughout the thesis work.

Participants: I worked with Robin and Suzy’s afternoon class at the Early Childhood Center on Wednesdays and Fridays, from 1:00PM-4:00PM. Their ages ranged from 3 to 5 years old with a total of 16 children (7 boys and 9 girls). Therefore, activities required additional adult supervision and assistance from the head teachers as well as from the student teachers.
SHHH...LISTEN TO YOUR PEBBLE

NATURE WALK: Connecting to the senses and awareness of things around us

“Nature for the child is sheer sensory experience [...] His environment consists of the information fed back to his own body by environmental stimuli. [...] the mutual relations, the adaptive give and take between living organisms and their environment, represent the ecology of the individual organism. [...] This mutuality is equally nourishing and productive of life and form to the mind and to the body.”

-Edith Cobb (The Ecology of the Imagination in Childhood, p. 29)

After the first nature walk, which was an introduction to the series, I realized that the children had difficulty focusing and paying attention to things of nature. As expected, their excitement took over, and it was not long until their minds and bodies wandered off toward other distractions. Therefore I needed to find a creative, concrete way to help the children to channel their attention and connect to their senses as a way for them to tap into another kind of awareness of “things” surrounding them and apart from their immediate self. At first, I was puzzled as to why it was difficult to engage the students. However, with guidance from Lewis, I finally realized the missing element: playful imagination. Thus, as a way into their world, I used an object of nature – a pebble – as a means to induce mindfulness and enhance the activity as well as to cultivate a personal relationship between the children and nature:

As I sat on the carpet surrounded by the preschool children, I realized that I was witnessing something very special and wonderful. This was the day I introduced “my friend” to Robbin and Suzy’s class. The children naturally huddled over my
closed hand, and when I opened it to reveal a small, black pebble inside, they softly gasped with intrigue. Surprised yet eager, they wanted to get to know my pebble. I conversed with it and shared stories of our hiking and running adventures. Then one child interrupted, “Do you have a pebble for me?” I answered, “Of course I do,” and pulled the basket full of small envelopes, in which a pebble was encased. I handed out the envelopes, each displaying a student’s name, and gave each child his or her own pebble: “Take out your pebble and get to know it. Talk to it...listen to it. Hear what your pebble has to say.” To better hear their pebbles, the children carefully held them close to their ears. I was amazed to see them handle their pebbles with such gentleness and intense concentration. One child exclaimed, “I can hear the ocean!” while another said, “It says we’re going for a walk!” Without hesitation, all the children could not wait to share with me their pebbles’ secret words. Listening to them bubble over with excitement and anticipation, I was immersed in their intimate world of imagination and was grateful to be part of it.

At the beginning of our second nature walk, I shared a story about my pebble by telling them how it saw, felt, heard, and smelled things that I otherwise would miss because of its smallness. I mentioned, “Imagine what kinds of things it is able to see from way down there on the ground. Things sometimes look different depending on where you are.” When I gave each child his or her own pebble, I reminded them to ask their pebble what it wanted to see, hear, feel, and smell in the natural world. Therefore, the goal was to have the child simultaneously show the pebble around and indirectly experience the
world as if he or she were the pebble itself. Thus, the pebble became an extension of the child and allowed him or her to “see” things from another perspective.

The nature walks were a way for children to connect to their senses and gain awareness of “things” surrounding them. They included the areas surrounding the ECC at Kober, focusing on a different area for each walk. Ultimately, the nature walks became closer, deeper explorations of familiar areas, where the children would rediscover and discover things of nature. Walking in nature had a special way of shifting our immediate personal context and placing us somewhere that was bigger than us: “It is an entry into a larger world” (Louv, 2005, p. 67). Thus, it had a unique way of planting and nurturing the seed of awareness in children while encouraging them to experience their surroundings with mind and body.

As part of the class curriculum, I conducted a total of 6 weekly nature walks throughout the fall semester. As described above, the first one was an introduction, the following four focused on a specific sense (sight, hearing, touch, and smell), and the last was dedicated to making garden homes for their pebbles. Since they began their day playing outside, we went on our nature walk prior to their regular outdoor play. However, before going on our walks, the class and I met inside on the carpet so that I could prepare the children for the activity. Then we went outside to the designated location and observed “things of nature.” Once the walk was over, the class began their routine outdoor play. For observations, the student teachers and I video recorded the nature walks and art activities, and I also wrote notes and took photographs of the children’s artwork. With the support of the head teachers and student teachers, I led all
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the activities (nature walks and art projects) including prompts, facilitation, and sharing/closing discussions.

We started at the beginning of class, approximately at 1:15pm. Using the pebble activity, I prompted the children to “pay attention to what they see, hear, feel, and smell” while they were walking. The first nature walk was an exploration of the area surrounding Slonim House, and there was no specific instruction except for “to look for things of nature”; the middle 4 walks focused on the following sequence of senses: sight, smell, touch, and hearing; and the last walk was focused on finding items for their garden homes. When outdoor play was over and we returned to the classroom, I conducted art activities as part of their normal “classroom activities.” Therefore, like the walks, the art projects were part of the class curriculum and routine. To end the nature walk series, the children made “garden homes” as a token of thanks to the pebble for showing them things in and of nature that they may have not noticed before.

Dates of Nature Walk Series:


Oct. 29: Walk 2 (Sight) – introduction of the pebble activity; explored the front of Kober near the boulders.

Nov. 05: Walk 3 (Smell) – explored the back of Kober in the middle area where the garden, large sand box, and bike path are located.

Nov. 12: Walk 4 (Touch) – explored the front area of Kober where the stone steps are located.
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Nov. 19: Walk 5 (Hearing) – explored the fenced in area on the side of Kober farthest from Kober parking lot.

Nov. 21: Walk 6 (Closing) – Garden Home; children gathered things of nature to decorate homes for their pebbles.

Once the children got acquainted with their pebbles, I encouraged them to have a conversation with their pebbles about what they found/did that day during the nature walk. Since the teachers always offered “art making” as one of the classroom activities, I utilized the pebble to invite children to express and represent both their and the pebble’s nature experience through a medium (drawing, painting, and sculpting). To end the nature walk series, the children made “garden homes” for their pebbles as a way to transition into the next phase: stone building. They incorporated natural elements (e.g., leaves, sticks, pine cones, etc) to decorate their homes. The pebbles were later reintroduced at the closing of the thesis project.

Corresponding Art Activities:

Oct. 24: Walk 1 (Introduction) – children collected things in nature and later teachers displayed them on a table for the students to observe and play with.

Oct. 29: Walk 2 (Sight) – no art project; I wanted the children to get acquainted with their pebbles. However, we did have a small sharing time while we were outside discussing what our pebbles and we had found.

Nov. 05: Walk 3 (Smell) – paint (red, yellow, blue, white)

Nov. 12: Walk 4 (Touch) – sculpture (clay and objects of nature)
Nov. 19: Walk 5 (Hearing) – paint (red yellow blue)

Nov. 21: Walk 6 (Closing) – Garden Home (materials: small 4x4 inch cardboard jewelry box, felt cloth, and things of nature)

STONE BUILDING:

“If somebody says, ‘What’s special about a rock?’ don’t even tell them. I don’t. Nobody is supposed to know what is special about another’s person’s rock.”

(Byrd Baylor, 1974, Everybody Needs a Rock)

After returning from winter break, I began the stone building series on Wednesday, February 4. We met inside the classroom prior to outdoor play, and I introduced the children to the work of Andy Goldsworthy (described briefly above), who specializes in creating artwork with and in nature. I showed them a short clip from a documentary (Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working With Time) of him building one of his signature stone cones. However, I chose a particular clip demonstrating Goldsworthy’s endurance and composure especially when his structure collapses multiple times to show the children that “failure” is momentary and indicates progress towards something “greater.” After the video clip, I had the children sit in a circle in preparation for an exercise, practicing building a stone sculpture together. Each child took turns selecting a stone from my stone collection and incorporated it to the growing sculpture in...
the center of the circle. I reminded the children, “This is how we will build our stone sculptures outside.”

We designated the fenced-in area located on the side of the Kober building to be our stone garden, the haven for our sculptures. Again, we sat in a circle and followed the same procedures outside as we did inside during the practice round. Once we finished building, we did a brief walking meditation, slowly encircling the stone sculpture once. However later on in the series, I discontinued it because, for them, being outdoors was not conducive to the internal focus and calm needed for a walking meditation. Therefore, I conducted other dynamic mindfulness exercises through creative movement, which is further expanded on in the following section.

On the days we stayed indoors, I offered “stone building” as one of the classroom activities. I placed a basket of stones at the center of the table and set four trays, in which each child built his or her own stone sculpture. Adding on to the indoor individual stone building activity, I introduced observation drawing. Once finished building, the children drew a picture of their sculpture on a piece of white paper. Each child drew from two perspectives – to the left and right of their sculpture. The second observation drawing was done on the last day of the thesis work. Instead of having the children build and draw individual stone sculptures, I returned their garden homes that were made in the fall semester and instructed them to draw their pebble inside its home. As a way to end the whole series, I returned the garden homes as well as their drawings. I also attached a short description to each garden home explaining the thesis project and activities as a way to include and encourage parents to continue the nature dialogue at home. As a simple yet effective means to practice mindful perception – with openness and non-judgment –
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date the observation drawing sessions were used to promote focused attention to details and encourage overall awareness of the stone structures and garden home. For observations, I watched how they interacted and built with the stones and documented their comments as well as photographed their finished work.

**Dates of Stone Building Series:**

Feb. 04: Outdoor, Stone Sculpture 1
Feb. 06: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculptures A
Feb. 11: Outdoor, Stone Sculpture 2:
Feb. 13: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculptures B
Feb. 20: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculptures C
Feb. 25: Outdoor, Stone Sculpture 3
Feb. 27: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculptures D with observation drawing
Mar. 04: Indoor, observation drawing of Garden Home

**MINDFUL MOVEMENT:**

“For the young child, movement is a way of exploring and discovering his world and himself. […] With self-awareness comes awareness of others, and the potential which creative movement has in this area of development is perhaps its most exciting aspect and one from which all can benefit.”

—Norma Canner (…and a time to dance)
In the beginning of the stone building series, we did a brief walking meditation immediately following the construction of the stone sculpture. However, as described above, being outside seemed to be too distracting and stimulating for the children. Thus, I decided it was best to introduce basic aspects of mindfulness – such as focused attention and awareness – in more creative, engaging ways through movement. I conducted activities emphasizing those basic principles through muscle contraction and relaxation, deep breathing, and vestibular function or balance.

Since children are typically expressive, energetic and active, I wanted to conduct mindfulness-based activities rooted in creative movement and activity. Therefore, after we “put-away” all the toys and materials, we gathered in the block room in preparation for “freeze dance.” The children were asked to dance while the music was playing. When it stopped, they had to “freeze” in place. After a few rounds, the children had to freeze into ice statues. As they were frozen, I narrated and pretended to “turn down the temperature” and instructed the children to “freeze harder and harder.” I then “turned up the temperature” and asked them to “slowly melt onto the floor until we are all puddles of water.” In order for the children to pay attention to their body tension and challenge their overall balance, I extended the melting process by counting down from “10.” Once we reached “1” and were lying on the floor, I asked them to close their eyes and “go to your quiet place,” and “while you think about your quiet place,” we took several deep breaths, focusing on our inhalations and exhalations. Then I encouraged the children to slowly return their attention to the block room and asked them to slowly freeze back into ice
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statues. To emphasize body awareness through gradual muscle tension, I again counted
down from “10” until they were frozen in their ice statue pose.

These mindful movement activities were created to emphasize awareness and
focused attention on various levels. The freezing and melting sequence was done so that
the children could deeply experience the process of increasing tension and total relaxation
of their bodies as well as their breaths. This way, they hopefully became more aware of
the mind-body connection throughout the activity as well as paid more attention to the
various sensations occurring within their bodies as they move.

Dates of Mindful Movement Series:

Feb. 20: Freeze/melting ice statues activity

Feb. 27: Observation drawing of individual stone sculptures; freeze/melting ice statues
activity; breathing with stones

Mar. 04: Observation drawing of garden homes; freeze/melting ice statues activity;
breathing with stones; balancing stones on bodies
OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Nature Walk Series

Active Exploration

The way that the children observed things in nature was intriguing to watch because they explored with uninhibited curiosity. This was apparent throughout all the nature walks, particularly the first. For example, Eddie (age 3.8) constantly asked questions (“What is this?” and “What shape is this?”) and his behavior throughout the walk portrayed his eagerness to take in and “to know” the things around him. His approach was literally and figuratively “hands-on,” and he continuously asked questions about things of nature he encountered. Eddie continued to do this inside the classroom when he was inspecting the pinecone and acorn. Like Eddie, the other children not only used their sense of sight to see the object but had to get close to it, feel it, and hold it. This was most apparent when the children were carefully observing the purple berries:

Suzy pointed out a bush of purple berries. Immediately, the children flocked to it. The students were so close to the berries that their noses almost touched them. However, just looking was not enough, and very soon all of the children began touching; a few of the children started picking the berries. Suzy reiterated one of their class rules when going outside: *Do not pick or break off any thing or thing of nature that is not yet on the ground because it means that it is still growing.*

Overall, the children’s approach to nature reminded me of Schachtel’s allocentric perception: “[...] the perceiver usually approaches or turns to the object actively and in
doing so either opens himself toward it receptively or, figuratively or literally, takes hold of it, tries to ‘grasp’ it” (Schachtel, 1959, p. 83). In context of allocentric perception, the individual is actively exploring, which encourages openness leading to oneness with the object, thus deepening one’s knowledge and understanding (Schachtel, 1959). Similarly, the ECC children expanded their knowledge and understanding through various means primarily through the reality of their bodies. They had to do more than mere looking. They wanted to throw, feel, hold, shake, and squeeze things of nature to better understand them in multiple contexts such as gravity, weight, movement, texture, and density. Thus their joy in active exploration and “grasping” of the natural world is a demonstration of Schachtel’s allocentric mode of experience and is the gateway to other modes of thought, which children later acquire as they develop.

The children’s active mind-body exploration also reminded me of J.W. Getzels and M. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) study of art students and their creative process, particularly how they approached the “problem” or task of drawing a “still-life”. Examining the ways the art students approached and interacted with the presented still-life objects, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi inferred that the quality of interaction correlated with the quality of creativity. Art students who “played” and demonstrated “intensive rather than cursory exploration” of the objects were able to “probe into their deeper and more profound qualities” and thus composed artwork that generally scored high in originality, aesthetic value, and craftsmanship ratings (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 110). Similar to the art students, the ECC children explored things of nature by using their bodies and playing with things of nature. I do not posit that the children reached Schachtel’s “oneness” but believe that their interactive, open
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approach has potential and is a crucial component of the creative process and mindfulness practice that many of us tend to forget. Perhaps child’s play is a precursor to mindfulness, creative problem solving, and critical thinking.

Synaesthesia: Crossing of Modalities of Perception

There was also the presence of combining the senses, but I am still unsure if this phenomenon stemmed from intention or confusion. Regardless, the ECC children tended to cross modalities of perception by mixing what they saw, heard, felt, and smelled. For example, George (4.8) said, “I can hear the sun burning” as he stood in the sunlight. His comment demonstrates Schachtel’s autocentric mode of experience as well as the phenomenon of “synesthesia” or perception across modalities (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001). In response to feeling the warmth of the sun, George said, “I can hear the sun burning” and moments later said, “I can hear the deepest.” His comment is an example of synesthesia in that he combined his sense of hearing and sense of feeling when he spoke about the sun. It also demonstrates Schachtel’s autocentric mode of experience in that he felt the overall body feel of warmth. Therefore, in context of the creative process and mindfulness, this kind of active grasping and feeling allows for the participant to enrich and thus deepen his or her understanding through the engagement of both the mind and body.

Synaesthesia also occurred during the art activities. Aaron’s (4.5) painting of “ants behind a tree” demonstrated how he was able to cross his sense of hearing with sight and movement. When I asked him how he heard the ants crawling since they were
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“so small,” he explained, “Yeah, I heard them doing this” and gently tapped his toes on the floor while tapping his yellow-dipped paintbrush across the page.

Aaron’s painting

On Walk 3, the day we used our sense of smell, Nina (5.0) painted snow. Confused, I asked her, “Where did you find snow to smell? I didn’t see any when we were outside.” She casually responded, “I smelled it because I knew it was almost winter time.” In this instance, the child is combining her imaginative perception with the physical. Therefore, she smelled what she knew – winter time. George, Aaron, and Nina perceived one “object” in multiple ways and engaged multiple senses. However, the most interesting observation was their engagement of the mind and body, and how their reality of the mind and the reality of the body coincided with each other.

Symbolic Play and Imagination

As seen throughout most of the walks, the children transformed things of nature into something else. For Junior (age 3.5), the stick was a sword; Aaron (4.5), the leaf/stick structure was an airplane; Eddie (age 3.9), the clay sculpture with 2 protruding sticks was Spiderman; and George (age 4.8), pinecones were motors.
These examples of symbolic play portray the early forms of imagination as well as mark the beginning of abstract thinking. The children mentioned previously recognized patterns or characteristics of the “real” thing and were able to apply them when constructing the imagined thing in another context. Thus, Junior’s stick was a sword because it possessed the basic structure of a sword, which is long, narrow, and “handy.” The leaf of Aaron’s makeshift airplane was reminiscent of wings while the stick embodied the form of the main shaft or body of a plane. The protruding sticks of Eddie’s Spiderman sculpture might have captured the superhero’s ability to shoot web from his wrists. And the pinecones of George’s machine sculpture were motors because of their similar, cylindrical shape. This symbolic play is an important aspect of the creative process as well as a demonstration of mindfulness because it encourages the individual to find patterns across contexts and modes of experience, thus eliciting combinations of various understandings, which is crucial to Schactel’s concept of “oneness” as well as the mindfulness concept of “nonjudgment” and “openness.” With oneness, the creative individual possesses a greater ability to “see,” relate, and make unlikely and unique works of art. With an opened mind and non-judgmental heart, the children were able to “engage in free and spontaneous experimentation with physical and symbolic elements.”
through both the body and the mind (Gardner, 1982). They “saw” things of nature not only as what they were but what they could become.

Interaction with the Medium

There were three kinds of general interactions with the medium: pure exploration of the material, representational, and expressive. As frequently seen in the observations of painting, children were interested in the sensory experience of the medium itself. Therefore, Cindy (age 4.5) painted with only water, and others spent most of the activity mixing colors. For example, Olivia (age 3.5) spent most of her time mixing blue and white until her paper was completely covered in light blue, and Brady (age 4.0) did the same except his was multi-colored. Furthermore, these children displayed such focused attention and prolonged concentration that it seemed as though they were in a meditative state – what they were feeling, thinking, and doing were aligned.

In addition to pure exploration of the material, there were children, usually older, who approached the medium as a tool of representation and expression. Aaron (age 4.5) painted a picture that represented the things of nature he smelled – compost, cherries, and onion grass. However on another occasion (Walk 5), he had more of an expressive approach and painted a picture of “ants behind the tree” that captured the size, sound, feeling, and movement of the ants marching. Others, like George (age 4.8) and Linda (age 5.2), also painted with an image in mind but played with the medium within the original framework as well. As a result, the students’ pictures were evolving as they explored the medium. George explicitly stated and painted “the sun burning” and a “t-
wex rawing;” but as he continued painting, he began to smear the paint right below the sun and told me “the sun is going down.”

George’s painting

Linda ultimately painted a “a tree branch.” However, her tree underwent a few transitions. First it was a “butterfly flittering.” Then it changed to “ice,” “car,” and finally “tree.” Due to the properties of the medium, the content of her picture was changing as she played around with the paint, which eventually resulted in a green-brownish form reminiscent of a tree. Therefore, when I asked her to describe her picture, she replied with “tree…a tree branch.”

Linda’s painting
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The relationship between the creative individual and the chosen medium is an important component of the creative process because it affects how he or she will think, approach, and work. Given the particular properties of a medium, the artist must find the “right” one that will help clarify and deepen what he or she wants to “say.” For Arnheim (1962), visual perception helps us to find and construct meaning through form. Therefore, through the medium and visual thinking, “the artist is able to see what he meant” (p. 134).

More than a pebble…

The pebble activity helped the children to focus and encouraged them to hold their attention and be present in the moment. Therefore, they began noticing things that usually went unnoticed:

Nearby, Olivia (age 3.4) came over to tell me that her pebble wanted to find a hole. Her gaze towards the ground, she carefully walked away. It was not long until Olivia returned to tell me that she and her pebble found a hole. Skeptical yet intrigued, I asked, “Where?” She gestured with her hands to come follow her. Head tilted and gaze down towards the ground, she carefully and slowly searched for the hole. She pointed to a burrow and looked up with a radiant smile, “Here!” Genuinely surprised, I responded, “You did! Wow, I didn’t even know this was here the whole time! Thanks for showing me.”

Olivia and I were both delighted to discover something new in a place where we thought we knew so well. On the day we used our sense of smell, a few children used their pebbles to further investigate things of nature. For example, Max (age 4.3) was in the
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garden gently gliding his pebble on the surface of a flower petal towards the center into the pollen. Others were by the surrounding fence to smell the mums:

   Inhaling, I said, “It reminds me of…perfume.”  Aaron (4.5) took a deep whiff.
   Suzy asked, “Why do you think there are so many bees here?”  Aaron responded, “Because it smells like perfume.”  “It smells like honey to me,” Olivia added.  “I found a bee!”  Aaron called out and motioned to me to come over.  He was focused on a particular bee that was “working” and pollinating one of the mums.
   We both stared at it for a few moments.  “Look how fuzzy it is!”  I said.
   “Yeah…He’s working very hard,” said Aaron as he continued to look at it.

I was intrigued to see the children intently observing the flowers and bees in such detail and precision. Instead of automatically walking towards the usual leaves and sticks, they were paying closer attention to other things of nature. This may be due to the location and designated sense of smell. Regardless, it was evident that each sense brought about unique observations of nature, and the pebbles encouraged the children to explore in all directions and levels, high and low.

   Furthermore, it seems that being in nature and having the pebble as a walking companion sparked security within the child and thus promoted prosocial behavior. Usually quiet and to himself, Aaron was very involved in the pebble activity while we were outside on our walk. He was eager to show me the things he and his pebble found and excited to share with his peers. Perhaps other factors contributed to his change in behavior but I think it partly had to do with the nature walk and his new pebble friend. When sharing, Aaron was the first to volunteer and introduced the class to his pebble named “Aaron.”  He also had a few blades of grass and a twig that were little Aaron’s
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“friends.” There were other children who also found friends for their pebbles. Thus, in addition to attention to detail and change in behavior, the children’s behavior towards their pebble demonstrated their more gentle, nurturing, and caring side.

This behavior was also evident when they were decorating their pebbles’ garden homes. The children made “garden homes” on the last day of the nature walk series to thank our pebbles for “helping us to explore things in nature” and showing us “so many things in nature we might have missed.” Throughout the garden home activity, I noticed that the children cared for their pebbles and made sure that it was comfortable. For example, a few children asked for an extra piece of felt cloth for their pebble’s bed and blanket. A couple of students, Nina (age 5.0) and Jasmine (age 4.7), said they were “done” but later returned with “food” for their pebble. This observation was interesting because there was a subtle distinction between the meaning of shelter and the meaning of home; the former implies bare necessities to ensure the physical well being of the pebble while the latter caters to the pebble’s emotional needs such as comfort and security. There was also a distinction between filling the box with things as opposed to carefully placing and arranging them. The children either tried to put as many things inside the
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box or glued them with careful attention and focus. Linda (age 5.2) tried to “stuff” a pinecone in the box. I challenged her and asked if she could find a way to make the pinecone fit so that we could put the top back on. After a few unsuccessful attempts, I suggested that the whole pinecone did not have to go inside. Then Linda started to break off pieces of it to put inside the box along with leaves, twigs, and seashells. Her garden home appeared “crowded” and had many things of nature inside it.

Linda’s garden home

The fact that Linda did not use glue demonstrated to me that the box was an empty container in which to put her things rather than comforts of home for her pebble. The children who took the time to carefully glue and arrange each object inside the box seemed as if their intentions were in the best interest of the pebble. Aaron’s (age 4.5) garden home had a twig and other pebbles from previous walks that he identified as its family, who surrounded his pebble “Aaron.”

Aaron’s garden home  Bruce’s garden home

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Bruce’s (4.3) garden home consisted of only leaves, and his pebble was tucked away, peeking out from underneath a folding leaf. Therefore, there seemed to be a noticeable difference in effort, time, and intention demonstrated by the way the children handled and arranged the materials.

Werner’s physiognomic perception and Arnheim’s expressive qualities were apparent in the children’s interaction with their pebbles. From the pebbles’ inviting appearance – its small size and smooth roundness – the students immediately befriended them and introduced them to things of nature as if they can see and found friends for them as if they could feel. The children also held their pebbles with care as if they needed to be looked after. Therefore, the pebble was perceived beyond its physical properties as an inorganic conglomerate of compressed minerals. It had expressive qualities and was a living, seeing, thinking, and feeling being…a friend. With such an approach, the children’s physiognomic perception of the pebble offers a different yet important kind of understanding that originates from expressive, intuitive qualities rather than “scientifically oriented education” (Arnheim, 1969, p. 455).
At the beginning of class, before going outside for outdoor play, the children met me in the classroom on the rug. I said, “We’re going to do something a little different today. We are going to build stone sculptures.” I asked the children if they knew what stone sculptures are made of, and one child (Max, age 4.7) answered, “Wood!…and metal.” I replied, “Are you sure stone sculptures are made of wood and metal?”

Moments later, another (Adela, age 4.7) added, “Stones!” I replied, “Yes, stone sculptures are made of stone…but wood and metal could also be part of the sculpture. However, they are first made of stones.”

As mentioned earlier in Methodology, I introduced the work of Andy Goldsworthy by showing the children a video clip of him building a stone cone sculpture. However, I selected a particular clip that demonstrates his perseverance when facing failure, frustration and disappointment to remind the children, “It is ok when our
sculptures fall. We just take a deep breath and start again...just like Andy Goldsworthy did. It took him 4 or 5 tries to finish this one sculpture.”

I then told the children that we were going to build a stone sculpture together outside. However, to help them visualize the activity, I decided it was best to practice inside first. They were sitting in a circle, and I called on each child to come and “pick a stone to add to our sculpture.” Each child selected a stone from a box of various stones that Lizzie and I retrieved from areas near our homes (some from a Cape Cod beach, Hudson River beach, and Hook Mountain, from a hiking trail). Once we finished the exercise, I told them that we would be making more sculptures together throughout February to create a stone garden and reminded them that we will be making another one on Friday. To close, I said, “Ok, now we’re going to build one outside but this time we’re going to leave it!”

We walked to the fenced in area on the side of the Kober building (same place where we did our hearing activity, which was part of the nature walk series). The snow was deep and untouched, and thus we easily sank as we walked into the area. Since there was about a foot of snow on the ground, we had to “stomp out the area” to create a stable, flat and compact foundation for our stone sculpture. Like we did inside, we sat in a circle. Each child selected a stone and added it to the growing sculpture. At the end, we did a brief walking meditation by slowly walking around it while holding hands. To keep the children focused, Robin commented on the color of some of the stones: “Do you see that red one?” As expected, some of the children were more interested in playing and jumping in the snow. As we were walking, a couple of students deliberately “fell,” slowing down and interrupting our walking meditation. I suggested, “At the end, we can
all fall down together.” Moments before completing one rotation, the same children “fell” and so did the rest of the class. I said, “We will leave our stone sculpture here and build another one on Friday!” Jasmine (4.10) responded, “I’m gonna miss it.” I empathetically replied, “Well, it’ll be here so you can visit it anytime.” Then the children exited the area to continue their outdoor play.

Knowing that it was supposed to snow before Friday, I wanted to mark the location of our sculpture in case it was covered. I saw Aaron nearby and asked him if he wanted to help me build a mound to “mark where our sculpture is.” He suggested, “Why don’t we make a snowman?” I agreed and he began to build a mini snowman. He asked if he could use the pebbles from my stone collection and selected small pebbles for the snowman’s eyes and mouth and a larger rock for its hat.
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The overall structure was flat and expanded across the horizontal plane rather than the vertical. Therefore, I was surprised to see that the children did not stack the stones. A few of the children threw the stones towards the center while others paused and carefully placed theirs. The difference in approach may be due to intention: disrupting or adding on to the stone sculpture in progress. Either way, each child was curious about the before and after or cause-and-effect of action. Like mindfulness, this observation highlights relationships of multiple things, in this case the stones, and how they are in relation to one another. Whether it was throwing or placing the selected stone, the children saw changes in the collaborative sculpture as a whole as each participant added a stone. This simple yet significant insight is part of the foundation of mindfulness practice because it promotes awareness of not only one part but the whole and that part in relation to that whole.

Feb. 06: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculpture A

Due to the low temperature, the children did not go outside to play. Therefore, I offered the stones as a manipulative or “table-top” activity. When Suzy was informing the children of the available activities, I added, “There are stones at that table so you can build something with them. Perhaps you can build your own stone sculpture like we did on Wednesday.”

Adela (age 4.7) and Junior (age 3.9) were the first to play at the table and they sat across from each other. Adela picked a stone one or two at a time and placed each one on her tray with intent and careful planning. Junior began lining the stones along the inside.
of the tray’s border. However, as he saw Adela working, he took handfuls of stones and dumped them onto his tray.

Adela: That’s enough Junior! (To me) He’s taking too much!

Junior: I need more!

Jeanie: But Junior, you have a lot on your tray already. Are you using all of them?

Junior: Yeah, I’m lining them up. I need them.

Jeanie: How about you use the ones you have and start lining them up?

Junior listened to my suggestion and began lining up the stones. After the two children left the table, Linda (age 5.5) came.

Linda: What’s this?

Jeanie: They’re stones! Since we didn’t get to go outside and build our second stone sculpture, I thought it would be nice if we made our own inside.

You can use these stones to build.

Linda picked one up and smelled it. Pleasantly surprised, I smiled and she smiled back.

Jeanie: I never thought of smelling it. I wonder what it smells like? (I sniffed) It smells really earthy…like dirt. (Linda giggled and began to build) Do you know where I got these stones?

Linda: No, where?

Jeanie: I got them from the mountain, beach and the Hudson River.

Linda: (She picked one up) Where is this one from?

Jeanie: The beach.

Linda: (She picked up another one) This one?
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Jeanie: The mountain…on a hiking trail.

Linda: How about this?

Jeanie: The beach…I can tell because it’s small, really flat and very smooth.

Then Linda began telling me story about how she found a coral from the bottom of the ocean. She also described a movie about “all different kinds of rocks” and how a girl had a pet rock named Boulder. Linda eventually began stacking some stones by placing one on top of another. However, no more than one stone was placed on top of another.

Linda’s individual sculpture

Later, her friends (George, Claire, and Cindy) came over to the table. George (age 4.11) was making what looked like a design while Cindy (age 4.7) and Claire (age 5.4) were watching Linda. As they watched Linda again ask me the origin of each stone, they began repeatedly asking Linda the similar question: What’s this [stone]? To my surprise, she correctly identified the stones numerous times. When I asked her how she knew the stone was from the mountain, she replied, “Because it’s big.” George laid out the stones on his tray in an interesting arrangement while Cindy spent most of her time looking and handling the stones (not so much interested in the design but rather in their physical properties).
George’s individual sculpture

Claire’s structure was like a mini dome, which she identified as a “home” for her dinosaurs. Eventually, George and Cindy left the table and Linda and Claire remained,

Claire’s individual sculpture

playing with dinosaurs and stones. Throughout dramatic play, the stones were used as food and weapons.
Adela and Junior were eventually fully engaged in the activity. Each child demonstrated focused attention in different ways. Adela carefully selected and arranged her stones one by one with intent and precision while Junior attentively lined up his stones one by one along the inside of the tray’s border.

Both children observed the physical properties of the stones, particularly their size and color, before adding it onto their evolving sculptures. Adela grouped her stones according to size and used distinctive light-colored stones while Junior only used dark-colored stones and arranged them from largest to smallest. Like Goldsworthy’s description of creating his stone cone, it was as if “the stone was speaking” to them. Similar to a meditative state, Adela and Junior dedicated themselves to each stone, one by one, moment by moment.

Linda, George, and Cindy also displayed a similar concentration and balance. Linda’s incorporation of the light-colored stones contrasted with the dark-colored stones underneath them; George placed stones in all four corners of his tray with a conglomerate in the center; and Claire carefully used stones of various shapes, sizes, and colors to
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balance her “dinosaur house” by paying attention to detail, adding smaller stones to occupy the gaps in the structure.

Feb. 11: Outdoor, Stone Sculpture 2

There weren’t as many children who participated in the stone sculpture building activity today. Although class officially starts at 1pm, many children often arrive late. However, low class attendance might have been due to sickness or the flu. Thus there were only a total of 6 present during the activity, and one (Adela, age 4.7) did not want to participate. Also, since it snowed over the week, Sculpture 1 was barely visible. We were able to see a couple of stones peeking from under the icy, packed snow. I placed two sticks to mark its location.

We chose to build Sculpture 2 near Sculpture 1. Max went first and placed his stone on top of a small mound of snow. The rest of the children placed their stones around his. We then held hands to prepare for our walking meditation. Naturally, the children began to sing “Ring Around the Rosie” and fell down at the end. However, they quickly lost focus and became careless, stepping on the sculpture. I reminded them, “Be
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careful not to step on our sculpture. Should we sing another song?” George (age 4.11) exclaimed, “Wheels on the bus!” We sang wheels on the bus, but this time the children were paying more attention to the middle where the sculpture was. Then they “fell” again towards the end of the song.

It was interesting how moving in a circular motion triggered songs echoing the properties of the circle. Perhaps the association between physical movement and mental processes demonstrate the connection between the body and mind. Although participants lost focus and awareness midway into the activity when they were singing, my verbal cues helped them to redirect their attention and hold focus on the sculpture. After a quick reminder, the children quickly adjusted their bodies and moved in a careful manner so as not to step on it. The slowing down of the children’s bodies reflected the calming down of their inner states: the pace of the song slowed down as they moved more slowly and carefully around the sculpture.

Furthermore, the two youngest children in the group chose the smallest stones. Brady (age 4.3) chose a small pebble and Charlotte (age 4.7) chose a small, flat, smooth beach stone. They both placed their stones close to another, either near or touching the other. In the end, both of their stones were “nuzzled” in between two large ones. Perhaps the children perceived the stones and other objects of nature as representations of themselves, and such a perception demonstrates the versatility of nature and its many expressive qualities: physical, mental, and emotional.
Feb. 13: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculpture B

We stayed inside again today due to frigid temperatures and wind chill outside. Thus, I offered the stones as a tabletop activity. The set up was the same as last time (4 trays and a basket of stones in the middle of the table).

Olivia, Eddie, Jasmine, and Cindy played at the table. Eddie (age 4.0) immediately chose two of the biggest stones and started banging them on his tray as if they were fighting action figures. I sat next to him to demonstrate “building with the stones.” I started with one large stone and then placed a smaller one on top. Intrigued, Eddie began to build his own structure and placed small stones on top of his two big ones. However, after a few minutes, he lost interest and left the table.

Eddie’s individual sculpture

Jasmine’s individual sculpture

Jasmine (age 4.10) took his place after he left. She began placing the stones on her tray from the top. She continued for a few minutes but got distracted by her peers at the table. Then she took all the stones from the basket and dumped them on her tray.
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Cindy (age 4.7), who was also playing with the stones, asked if she could have some. After some convincing, Jasmine asked Cindy which ones she wanted and gave her some stones. Jasmine covered about half of her tray until she suddenly said, “I’m done” and offered her stones to Cindy, who was sitting across from her.

Once Jasmine left, Cindy continued to build her sculpture. She placed a small, flat beach pebble in each corner of her tray. She then took 3 large stones and placed them in the center and arranged them in a triangular shape. At the center of the 3 large stones was another small, flat beach pebble.

Cindy’s individual sculpture

Olivia (age 3.8) built a structure in the bottom, left corner of her tray. Her structure consisted of 3 large stones and some medium stones. She arranged them so that the smaller ones were standing vertically, either leaning on or being held in place by the large stones.
Olivia was the first to vertically “stand” her stones by either leaning them against or wedging them in between others. Her assessment of the stones and their range of height, color, texture, and size, allowed her to approach them in an innovative way, different from her peers. In addition to the typical approach of stacking, Olivia found another way to optimize the height of her sculpture. Therefore, more attentive and careful exploration of the materials generated more possibilities and revealed other ways of building. Although appearing “simple,” her expanded awareness allowed her to choose a method rather than automatically build. Furthermore, the arrangement of Cindy’s sculpture portrayed balance and symmetry, which suggests her awareness of the overall structure and layout of her work while building. She carefully placed stones in relation to others in order to maintain the overall harmony of the sculpture and the resulting pattern was reminiscent of a mandala…soothing, balanced, and continuing.
Feb. 20: Indoor, Individual Sculpture C

We stayed inside again today due to extreme cold temperatures. I again offered the stones as a tabletop activity. The set up was the same as last time (4 trays and a basket of stones in the middle of the table).

Olivia, Jasmine, and Adela sat at the table. Jasmine (age 4.10) was the first to play at the table. She immediately began grabbing handfuls of stones and dumping them onto her tray. Instead of building with the stones, Jasmine was most interested in dramatic play. At the sight of the pile of stones she collected and her tray, she pretended that she was “making turkey.” She used another tray as a lid and covered the “turkey.” When Jasmine decided that the turkey was finished, she “served it” by sharing the stones, which represented pieces of turkey.

Meanwhile, Adela (age 4.7) was at the table carefully working on her structure. She lined up 2 flat stones side-by-side and stacked a “layer” of smaller, round stones on top. On a couple of stones, she placed another stone creating “towers” 3 stones high. However, after an altercation with Jasmine, she left the table.

Adela’s individual sculpture
Olivia (age 3.8) began by creating a cluster of small stones near the lower right-hand corner of the tray, and it soon turned into a stacked pile. She “started over” and began building on the left side. This time, she placed 2 large stones and then carefully stacked smaller ones around and on top of them. Eventually, her structure increased in width and height, with a balanced stone as its highest peak. However, after a couple of stones toppled over, Olivia began working on the width of her structure by using larger, flat stones to increase its area. Her growing structure reminded me of a flower blooming.

Extending on her last discovery on how to maximize the height of the stones in various ways, Olivia became an “expert” at building tall structures. This time she combined stacking with standing stones. However, when part of her sculpture toppled down, she quickly adjusted to expanding it on the horizontal plane. Instead of height, she focused on building its width. Like Goldsworthy, she was not stuck and kept working to
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better understand the stones through another approach and another level, the horizontal plane. Adela’s sculpture is also worth mentioning because its construction portrayed the builder’s overall awareness and attention to detail, particularly symmetry.

Feb. 25: Outdoor, Sculpture 3

Today we built our third stone sculpture. It was a bit chaotic because the children seemed to be a bit more unruly and restless than usual. Some children were throwing and kicking snow onto the sculpture while we were building, and others were leaving the circle to run around. Upon the many distractions and loss of interest, I dismissed the children. However before dismissal, Suzy asked the children, “Say one thing about the sculpture. Maybe say what it looks like to you.” As we went around, most children responded with “rocks and snow.” Suzy encouraged them to say something different than what was said. Two children (Aaron and Linda) had interesting responses. Aaron (age 4.8) said it looked like “a person” and Linda (age 5.5) said “a star.”
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This day was particularly difficult because we did not go outside first as we usually do. Instead, we started the day playing inside and went outside at the end of the day. Perhaps the children’s restlessness was compounded by these circumstances. Although the activity did not go as planned and I wasn’t able to complete it, I realized that mindfulness-based activities (i.e., outside walking meditation) used for adults was perhaps not the best for this group of children. It was difficult for them to focus while we were outside. For most of them, being outside was more stimulating than calming. On previous days when I tried doing the walking meditation, it was hard for them to calm and regulate their bodies. In retrospect, our past walking meditations were not true to the principles of mindfulness walking meditation. Considering how well the indoor activities (building individual stone sculptures and mindful movement exercises) went, I thought it was best to focus on those activities to implement the mindful movement portion of my thesis.

Despite the incompletion of the outdoor stone building activity, Aaron and Linda were able to take their time to observe the collaborative sculpture. From their responses, I was again reminded of nature’s versatility in regards to creativity, portraying the relationship between what the object is and what it can be. For Aaron, it was a person, and Linda, a star.

Feb. 27: Indoor, Individual Stone Sculptures D with Observation Drawing

Today we again built individual stone sculptures, but I asked the children to draw their finished work from two perspectives: to the left and right of the sculpture. Below
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are short descriptions of each sculpture and drawing accompanied by corresponding photographs.

Claire (age 5.4) – stacked her stones and drew a conglomerate of circles.

Claire: Sculpture

Claire: Left

Claire: Right

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Aaron (age 4.8) – took his time to carefully stack his stones and drew with a brown crayon, depicting a big oval with 3 small circles touching it.

Aaron: Sculpture

Aaron: Left

Aaron: Right
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Junior (age 3.9) – carefully arranged and rearranged his stones a few times but none were stacked and drew a conglomerate of curving scribbles.

Junior: Sculpture

Junior: Left

Junior: Right
Olivia (age 3) – took her time to carefully stack some of her stones and drew closed circular, concentric figures depicting one small colored-in brown circle, indicating the pebble on top of one of the stones.

Olivia: Sculpture

Olivia: Left

Olivia: Right
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Linda (age 5.5) – took her time to carefully arrange and stack her stones but did not use all of the given stones and drew one large circle surrounded by smaller ones on its top half.

Linda: Sculpture

Linda: Left

Linda: Right

Jasmine (age 4.10) – lined up all her stones across in front of her according to size and drew circles side by side across the horizontal plane to create a circular arrangement. She did not draw a picture from the right view.
Bruce (age 4.6) – lined up stones curving up on the left end where the smaller stones were, and the right end consisted of larger stones. He drew circular figures and scribbles horizontally, like his sculpture; when he drew from one end of the sculpture from a vertical orientation, he drew a vertical line lengthwise across his paper and then circles drawn on top of it.
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Bruce: Sculpture

Adela (age 4.7) – took the longest to build her sculpture and was the last one in the group to finish, approximately 20 minutes; she carefully stacked and arranged one stone at a
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time and drew closed, circular figures that were colored in with various colors – brown, red, peach, tan – to form a conglomerate whole.

Adela: Sculpture

Adela: Left

Adela: Right
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George (age 4.11) – arranged his stones to create a dispersed, scattered pattern and drew black and brown circles to depict the stones; only some circles were colored in. However, in the second drawing, he colored in all of the circles.

Cindy (age 4.7) – did not use all of her stones and only stacked them, 6 stones high; she drew concentric circular figures, which looked as if the perspective was from the top looking down at the sculpture.
Cindy: Sculpture

Cindy: Left

Cindy: Right

Eddie (age 4.0) – built “Iron Patron’s mask”, which consisted of a large stone with two smaller “eyes” on top to create the face; he drew two circles for the “eyes,” a larger one for the “chest,” and lines for the “mouth” and “arms.” He did not draw a picture from the right view.
Nina (age 5.3) – took her time stacking and arranging her stones into a pile and drew in detail but only of specific areas of her sculpture; when she sat to the left, she drew the bottom right portion; when she sat to the right, she drew the bottom left portion.
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Except for George, most of the children piled, stacked, or lined up the stones. Furthermore, most drawings, except for Linda’s, changed as the participants’ perspective changed from one side of the sculpture to the other and depicted either individual circular figures indicating individual stones or a conglomerate of round scribbles indicating the general arrangement of the whole sculpture such as a pile. The most distracted children – Jasmine, Cindy, and Eddie – were most interested in the stone’s properties such as size, texture, and shape. Cindy sorted them by size and color while rubbing their surfaces with her fingers; Jasmine arranged them in a line from smallest to largest; and Eddie kept asking, “What’s this?” as he held each one close to his face.

It was interesting to see how the children approached each observation drawing. Often glancing and pausing for a few moments, they seemed to carefully refer back to their sculptures while they were drawing. Such close examination and focused attention on the object at hand demonstrated the acute channeling of concentration and awareness held throughout the time it took to finish the task. Furthermore, Cindy and Eddie’s particular interest in the stones themselves portray Schactel’s openness or active, non-judgmental exploration of an object. In addition, Nina zoomed in on one particular area
of her sculpture and drew a detailed picture of it. It was amazing to witness a child
display such precision and intensive attention for an extended amount of time
(approximately 20 minutes). Evident in her body language, her mental concentration was
physically demanding, which was why she was unable to finish drawing the rest of the
sculpture. At the end, she was very satisfied with her complete, “unfinished” work.

Mar. 04: Indoor, Observation Drawing of Garden Home

Today the children drew an observation picture of their garden homes. I took 4 children at a time to another classroom to do the activity. Each child was given a square piece of paper (to echo the shape of the garden home box) and prompted to draw what they saw inside the homes “as they are.”

Aaron (age 4.8): With a brown color pencil, drew circular figures designating the pebbles and a line representing the stick.

Aaron’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing
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Adela (age 4.7): drew a square indicating the frame of the box, a round grey scribble in the center representing the pebble, linear scribbles on each side depicting the sticks.

Adela’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing

Bruce (age 4.6): drew a human-like figure that was supposed to represent the leaf and a circle on the bottom to indicate the pebble inside.

Bruce’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing
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Claire (age 5.4): without looking, she just began to scribble as soon as she sat down. However, she recollected her focus and drew circles for the pebbles and two parallel lines portraying the layout of the sticks.

Claire’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing

Eddie (age 4.0): drew a large circle, which represented the acorn. However, he quickly lost focus and interest in the activity, and soon after, he left the room.

Eddie’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing
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George (age 4.11): drew a square indicating the frame of the box, a large scribble depicting the “fuzzy” or milkweed pod, and a small colored in circle representing the pebble.

George’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing

Junior (age 3.9): drew a large scribble depicting the “fuzzy” inside his garden home.

Junior’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing
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Linda (age 5.5): drew each object that was inside her garden home – the “x” was the two crossed sticks; the figure on top was the acorn; the figure on the left was the feather; the figure near the bottom right-hand corner was the pebble.

Linda’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing

Max (age 4.7): said that the circular figures represented the shells, and the colored in figure was the pebble.

Max’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing
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Nina (age 5.3): out of all the participating children, she drew her figures most accurately and in detail. The blue figure on the bottom left was the pebble; the circular figures across the top were the pieces of pinecone flakes; the blue arrow-like figure was the feather; the small red circle towards the upper right was the acorn; and the brown round figure with a line extending upwards was the leaf.

Nina’s Garden Home and Observation Drawing

Overall accuracy and attention to detail varied across the drawings. Some children chose colors most resembling the color of the object they were drawing. Others arranged the figures in their drawings identical to the corresponding objects in the garden home box. However, what was most interesting was how the children captured the form of the object they were drawing. For example, George and Junior drew large circular scribbles depicting “fuzzies,” and Nina drew a small round scribble with an extending upward line embodying the crumpled leaf and its stem. She also drew an arrow-like figure that looked like a modern, abstract depiction of the feather that captured the upward curve of its top half. Therefore, the children tended to draw the items generally
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accurately and expressively. Regardless, they captured details in different contexts regarding form, shape, and color.

As seen in the last observation drawings of individual stone sculptures, participants generally demonstrated engagement and careful observations of the object at hand. Therefore, they tended to often pause, closely examining the things inside the garden home by looking, touching, and moving around the items inside. Such diligent, thorough observation helped the children to holistically approach the drawing task. Children who took their time and repeatedly looked at their garden homes drew with more accuracy and detail. They displayed prolonged attention, patience, and calmness while working. Such states are conducive to the development and strengthening of mindfulness.
Mindful Movement Series

Feb. 20: Freeze Dance, Ice Statues, and Puddles of Water

Today I wanted to focus on body awareness by conducting an activity exercising down-regulation of muscle tension and promoting relaxation skills by introducing deep breathing.

After put-away, I conducted a short creative movement activity consisting of freeze dance and relaxation. The children were instructed to dance while the music was playing but to “freeze” when the music stopped. On the third freeze, we pretended to be frozen ice statues that, depending on the given “temperature,” either hardened or softened/melted. When melting, I would countdown from 10 to 1 until we were all “puddles of water on the floor.” Then I told them to think about their “quiet place” and go there. While we were “there” I had the children take a few deep breaths. I extended each breath while narrating, emphasizing the overall sensation of being totally relaxed, still and “melting” onto the floor. Then I asked them to “come back to where we are…here in the block room, but stay lying down” and told them to “gently wiggle your toes…wiggle your fingers…and wiggle your nose.” Then we took one final deep breath and “rolled over to your side and slowly freeze back up to your ice statue.” I then counted down from 10 to 1 until we were all again standing in our statue stance, and we waited for the music to start again to continue with freeze dance. I did this sequence a total of 3 times making the relaxation/breathing segment a little longer each time.

The children were very engaged in this activity most likely because it tuned into their lively and active nature. I thought it was best to feed into their active, high energy
SHHH...LISTEN TO YOUR PEBBLE

and high intensity states first in order to enhance the relaxation segment of the activity. Thus having the children experience extreme high, intense muscle contraction helped deepen the sensation of total relaxation. When the children froze and were further hardening as I lowered the temperature, I saw some participants shaking with such high intensity as they scrunched their faces and tightened their fists. The countdown was deliberately incorporated to help the children slow down their melting. By doing so, they were given more time and opportunity to feel what was happening in their bodies as they gradually melted onto the floor. Such overall body awareness and intentional slowing down of time are also used in mindfulness meditation, traditional and bodyscan. They encourage the participant to pause and pay attention to the present moment and internal processes, physiological and psychological, as they unfold. Such body and mind connection and awareness are conducive to a holistic experience that enhances the understanding of the participant on both individual and social levels. Doing this exercise not only exercised mindful movement but engaged the children’s imagination and sense of playfulness. After today’s mindful movement session, I realized how necessary it was for the children to thoughtfully “feel” their bodies and slow down with both high and low intensities.

Feb. 27: Freeze Dance, Ice Statues, and Puddles of Water

We again did freeze dance, alternating with melting and deep breathing exercises. However, this time I incorporated large stones to further ground the children in their breathing. While they were “puddles of water” and lay on their backs, I placed a stone on top of their abdominal area. I asked them to “pay close attention to what happens each
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time you breathe in (inhale) and out (exhale). Does it move? How does it move?” One child exclaimed, “It’s going up and down!” Another said, “It’s moving!” Then I explained to them why it moves: “Our stomach and lungs grow when we inhale and shrink or go back down when we exhale.” To close the mindful movement activity, we froze back into our ice statues posing with our stones. The following children posed in a way that demonstrated their awareness of the body in relation to the stone:

Linda (age 5.5) – bulged torso forward with one arm extended and the stone in hand.

Claire (age 5.4) – stood straight and tall with the stone balanced on top of her head.

Adela (age 4.7) – bent over 90º with the stone balanced on her lower back.

Like Linda, others also posed with the stone in hand. However they, instead of the stones, were the main focus. Thus, in most poses, the stone yielded to the child rather than the child yielding to the stone.

Breathing and posing with the stones demonstrated each child’s body awareness in relation to something else. While we were lying down and breathing, many were most interested in their body’s effect on the stone. A few participants exaggerated each inhalation and exhalation by sucking in and billowing out their stomachs to make the stone move. As for the final pose with the stone, a few of them took the stone into consideration when freezing back into their ice statue. For those children, the incorporated item affected the way they moved and positioned their bodies while others froze in positions that either minimized or ignored the presence of the stone. Regardless, participants expressed body awareness in different ways, levels, and at various points of
the movement activity. For some, the deep breathing exercise worked best, and for others, it was creative posing. In both segments, the children were given the opportunity to explore and move their bodies in relation to an object outside of themselves.

Mar. 04: Balancing the Stone

To further expand upon body awareness, I wanted to do a balancing activity that called attention to a particular focus: the stone. Originally, I wanted to incorporate balancing the stone on different parts of the body into freeze dance. However, due to limited time, I had to improvise. Therefore, I decided to integrate a simple balancing activity into their hand-washing routine.

In preparation for snack time, the children usually gather on the carpet for a story and then are called one by one to wash their hands. When I called a name, that student walked over to the student teacher to get a stone. With the stone balancing on top of the head, he or she walked towards where I was standing. Once the child reached me, he or she gave me the stone and then proceeded towards the sink to wash his/her hands. Aaron (age 4.8) balanced the stone on top of his miniature bear toy’s head. The stone was actually balanced on top of its head as Aaron carefully and slowly walked over towards me. Claire (age 5.4) walked to me without dropping her stone and with her hands down by her sides. Nina (age 5.3) also walked over to me without dropping her stone but her hands hovered on both sides of her head near the temples, framing the stone balanced on top. Linda (age 5.5) barely moved while she was balancing her stone and progressively shortened her body as if the weight of the stone was causing her to shrink downwards.
Most children were aware of the stone while walking and closely monitored their steps to keep the stone from sliding off from the top of their heads. However, others such as Max (age 4.7), Eddie (age 4.0), and Junior (age 3.9) were more eager to quickly finish and held the stone in place with one hand. Whether they held the stone in place or left it untouched, all the children changed their usual walking stance and style to accommodate the weight of the stone on top. Although at varying levels, the change in their posture and steps suggests an awareness of the stone. The children were paying attention to their bodies while walking and yet were keeping in mind the unseen stone on top.

Furthermore, I noticed that many of the children returned their stone to me by tilting their heads forward, allowing the stone to slide off and drop into the dish bowl. Such an unexpected approach portrayed their awareness and lightheartedness, not only playing with the stone but with gravity.
CONCLUSION

The reality of the body was either equal or perhaps greater than the reality of the mind in that the children were most engaged in the physical, open, non-judgmental experience of each activity. During the nature walks, the ECC children immersed themselves without hesitation into the natural world by doing — climbing boulders, crouching behind trees, grabbing leaves, touching mushrooms, and digging in the dirt. The stone building series required more control, concentration, and finesse as the children built and drew observation drawings of stone sculptures and garden homes. And lastly, the mindful movement series strengthened the participants’ awareness of their bodies and various physical sensations as they moved through a range of muscle tension and relaxation. Such mindful engagement throughout all activities also sparked imagination — questions, thoughts, and ideas — that advanced their sensory and mental engagement in return. The ways the children painted objects of nature, constructed stone sculptures, and “froze” indicate the presence and need for a mindful education that is creative, interdisciplinary, and multisensory — physical, cognitive, and emotional. Therefore, the ECC children’s participation consisted of active, ongoing movement between the experience of the body and the experience of the mind. Their ability to wholeheartedly and openly “grasp” or “do” something was evident in each activity. Whether it was observing things of nature, building a stone sculpture, or melting into a puddle of water, the children were learning in multiple ways that fully engaged their whole being, mind and body. In other words, they were learning how to think higher and deeper.

Furthermore, the way the children observed their peers during the activities is another important observation to include. They rarely intruded or interrupted one
another. During the stone building and observation drawing series, I noticed that many of them quietly peered over to look at their neighbors’ work. They also were spatially aware while doing the mindful movement series and did not deliberately break others’ and their own concentration during the posing and balancing exercises. On the day I challenged the children to balance stones on their heads, I could hear them hold their breath and softly whisper to one another as their fellow classmate carefully walked towards me. This kind of group concentration, cooperation, and respect is reminiscent of the ambiance of a group meditation in that it physically and mentally places participants in an environment of individual and communal harmony. Therefore, mindfulness-based exercises can be a practice in togetherness – the part in relation to the whole.

In regards to nature, I believe that children’s exploration of the natural world is similar to mindfulness and the creative process because of the activation of the mind-body connection and emphasis on openness and overall play. It engages both the mind and body and provides a multitude of possible experiences without overwhelming the individual. The natural world is vast yet intimate, powerful yet inviting, and tranquil yet dynamic. Perhaps that is why it affects us, both children and adults, in so many ways and on various levels. It is a place of play, intuition, and imagination that cultivates creativity and mindfulness. For children, the natural world is a “theater of perception in which he is at once producer, dramatist, and star” and appeals to all the senses, both body and mind (Cobb, 1977. p. 29). Although children do not posses the same conceptual understanding of the surrounding world as adults, I strongly believe that they possess another kind of understanding and approach that most of us have forgotten or outgrew: non-judgment and openness. Whether it is caring for a pebble or using a stick as a sword, the child is likely
to imagine multiple possibilities for an object that go beyond its conventional, given identity. Therefore, the pebble became a friend and the stick became a weapon. Also, my observations of the ECC children showed that the distinction between the reality of the body and reality of the mind was not yet clearly defined. Thus, the children tended to readily and seamlessly combine their sensory experience and imagination to create another, more meaningful and “sensible” experience. The children used their bodies and their minds to create a new and meaningful reality, which, in a strange way, became their creative work. Their artwork, stone sculptures, observation drawings, and frozen statues are evidence of expanding discovery and understanding through the imagination.

What we feel, smell, taste, hear, see, say, do, and think embody who we are and demonstrate the many ways of understanding and perceiving others and the world around us. Children’s eager yet embracing approach is demonstrated in the way they explore and play. Their wonder, fascination, and non-judgment are precursors to greater and deeper understanding, otherwise known as loving-kindness in regards to mindfulness practice and “oneness” in context of the creative process. Thus using a similar open approach, the mindful and creative individual increases the likelihood of recognizing and associating seemingly disparate “objects.” This allows the individual to be more actively receptive towards the “other” rather than imposing one’s own perception. Mindfulness and the creative process encourage us to be more open to those around us in order to discover something new through clarity, loving-kindness and oneness. Particularly seen in the nature walks series and pebble activity, there was a similarity between mindfulness and the ways children think and perceive the world. Overall, it was a practice of keen awareness and compassion.
One of the greatest challenges of working with children is unpredictability and diversity. This was especially true in a preschool classroom setting with children whose ages varied, it was difficult to plan activities that catered to diverse personalities and levels of energy, interest, and ability. Mindfulness is a unique practice because it is a state of mind. Thus, it is embracing, yielding and flexible, and there are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into daily routines and multiple contexts. When there was not enough time to do a planned mindful movement activity, the same stone-balancing task was incorporated without disrupting the class’s daily routine. For a fidgety child who had difficulty sitting still, simple mindful movement exercises such as contracting and releasing muscle tension helped to calm his body and center his mind. That same child walked with poise and grace as he balanced the stone on top of his head. Mindfulness not only proved to be a creative, embracing, cost effective means to connect with and center the children but a way to get to know who they are as individuals and better meet their needs. Evident in the observations, something as small as dedicating 5 minutes to silent, slow breathing, carefully drawing an object, or balancing a stone on one’s head could make a subtle but significant shift in perception for both the participant and instructor. Both individuals are able to experience the self and other in a different context. Therefore, mindfulness exposes and engages both educators and students to other ways of being rather than task-specific skills. As a result, a meaningful relationship built on trust is established between teacher and student, and that bond becomes the foundation for holistic, active learning, awareness, and ultimately mutual understanding that nurtures a balanced, social individual who is resilient and able to think higher and feel deeper.
FURTHER REFLECTION

The various activities inspired by mindfulness-based practices allowed me to get to know the children in various contexts and see who they were from multiple perspectives. Often, they surprised me. Children who I assumed would reject the activities were the most engaged and invested in them. Eddie (age 4.0), a mischievous and ‘physical’ individual, lay so still as he became the puddle of water. As the stone was placed on top of his head, he walked with such grace, care and focus. Aaron (age 4.8), a shy and mild-tempered individual who normally did not participate in group activities, was always the first to take initiative. He spoke the most about his pebble and was one of the few children who followed up with me about the stone sculptures. Through the nature walk series, we were able to have many conversations together, and I learned that he had a sister and brother, whose breath “stinks” because “he eats a lot of stinky foods.” It seems as though each activity called to the child and me in different ways and thus portrays how mindfulness-based activities embedded in nature and creativity catered to the very “nature” of children and perhaps all of us. Thus, mindfulness practice is versatile and can accommodate children across multiple contexts and developmental stages. In a strange way, the activities called to mind those hidden, unfamiliar parts of who we are and evoked the pebble inside all of us. As a result, we were able to further “see” one another and ourselves.

The thesis work itself has been both challenging and rewarding. Implementing mindfulness within an educational setting proved to be the most difficult when student assistants are not fully convinced or supportive in the cause. Due to limited time, I was unable to properly and fully inform and train the student teachers in regards to
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mindfulness practice. Therefore, in the beginning in the fall, I was distressed by insufficient adult supervision, presence, and support and personally struggled with disappointment and discouragement. However, in spring semester, I changed my approach by recognizing and stopping detrimental rumination and making more efforts to increase communication with the teachers. As a result, I found myself less reactive and less affected by such stressors. This experience highlighted the importance of preparation and training prior to the implementation of a mindfulness-based education.

I also learned how to be more flexible and open while working with the children. I had to let go of control. Throughout my thesis work, I realized that my rigid, idealistic approach was counterproductive and, at times, destructive. At first, it was very difficult to adjust and accept the possibility that my activities may not go as planned. However, as the thesis work progressed, I learned to see “failures” as opportunities to let other things emerge and was better able to improvise and integrate the same mindfulness principles but in creative ways. Thus, I realized the activities worked best when they were incorporated into daily routines and catered to the children’s imagination and playful nature. Unexpectedly, the whole experience has been a practice of mindfulness not only for the children but for me. Working with the children was a constant reminder to “breathe,” and let go. They taught me how live in the present, enjoying each moment openly, non-judgmentally, and wholeheartedly.

The following are two excerpts: one from Spring 2014 and another from Fall 2014. The first was a requirement for Lizzie’s Mindfulness course, and as a written assignment, the students had to meditate daily and write about their experience:
During meditation, I noticed how little I knew about myself, rarely attending to the ways I think and feel. I realized that I was living my life without choice—automatically, reactively, and inattentively. Due to this limited state of mind, I had been living life lacking awareness not only of myself but others. Mindfulness had encouraged me to restart the process of knowing and understanding myself and taught me how to be present in the moment and to assess and reexamine myself in other ways starting with my immediate environment: the body.

I continued meditating throughout the summer, and the following school year, when I began my thesis work, I began to notice a difference. I was not sure what that difference was but I felt something shift inside me one day. Below is a reflection of that day:

After doing the pebble activity with the ECC children on Wednesday, I decided to take my pebble home with me. I went to Cold Spring, a quaint town over the Bear Mountain Bridge. It was cold and there was an overcast of grey clouds. It was raining, but they weren’t raindrops. It was misting.

The first cold day of that week, it smelled and felt like fall. I don’t know what it is about the rain, but it brings out the smell of the seasons—the wetness captures the scent of things. Perhaps this is why I like it when it rains.

Besides the smell, the rain has a way of playing with time. It is as if the motion of water falling, dripping, rushing, misting, and staying still also manipulates the motion of time. Most of all, it affects our time. When it rains, we want to find
shelter. We hurry – rushing and scurrying – until we reach that dry and warm place. And once we find it, we pause, waiting for it to pass...staying in the moment.

We had brunch at a nearby restaurant on Main Street that was built inside a house. Sitting inside an amber-lit, wooden flooring dining area that would had been the family/living room, I looked outside the window while holding the mug of hot apple cider in between my cupped hands. From the moment I inhaled the tangy yet spicy steam of apples and cinnamon, I felt warm in every way.

After brunch, we walked towards the waterfront near the Hudson. I took out my pebble and held it in my hand. There was a pot of flowers and plants nearby, and my pebble was compelled to go and see. In the midst of all the grey that surrounded us, the colors of the flower petals were bright and vibrant – deep magenta, violet blue, and pumpkin orange. I placed my pebble on each one as I caressed each flower. Then a fuzzy, pastel green plant caught my pebble’s attention. I rubbed its velvety leaves between my fingers while trying to recall the plant’s name. It was Lamb’s Ear. As I stood in the stark coldness and wetness of the rain, I was comforted by the stillness of Bear Mountain...the earthy smell of wet dirt...the gentle caress of Lamb’s Ear...and the flow of Hudson River. I graciously accepted their invitation. I was myself.
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

-Walt Whitman (stanza 1, *Leaves of Grass*)
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