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## RESEARCH

# Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction as Professional Development for Teachers

BAILEY HERRMANN AND JESSICA GALLO

“I work with all at-risk students, so a lot of them have really heavy things going on in their lives. And what I realized a couple years ago was that in order for me to do this job, I have to completely focus on being the teacher and being somebody who is a positive influence for the kids. I can’t try to be their mental health care professional. I can’t try to be their parent. I can’t try to be their home. Every time I go out into all these areas that are not for me to be in, it spreads me really thin and I can’t do what’s most important for me to do for them.”

**I**n the vignette above, Anne (all names are pseudonyms) shares some of the reasons that she has felt stressed in her work as an English teacher at an alternative high school in the Midwest. Although Anne works at an alternative school, her story has a lot in common with the stories teachers in other school settings might tell about their work. No matter what kinds of students they work with or where they teach, teachers are often asked to fulfill multiple roles for their students; this feeling of being constantly pulled in many directions at once can leave teachers feeling depleted and stressed.

Teachers’ stress in the classroom can have staggering effects on the profession as a whole. In fact, the prevalence and costs of teacher attrition are alarming. Fourteen percent of U.S. first-time teachers in 1999-2000 left teaching, and 15% changed schools at the end of the year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). And according to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) “Thirty-three percent [of new teachers] leave within three years and almost fifty percent leave in five years” (as cited in Ciriza, 2005, p. 1). Beginning teachers in schools with high poverty rates (defined as 50% or more of the students being eligible for free or reduced-price lunches) left teaching at a rate of 16% after the first year, whereas beginning teachers in schools with medium poverty rates left teaching at a rate of 9% (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Furthermore, “public school teachers who started their careers in small schools

were more likely to switch schools at the end of the year than those who started in large schools [but] the percentage that left teaching at the end of their first year was about the same” (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, pp. 693-694). Gonzales and Sosa (1993) found that “the most talented new educators are often the most likely to leave” (as cited in Andrews & Martin, 2003, p. 4)—perhaps this is because, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1999), “teachers earn 20% to 30% less than workers with the same amount of education and experience” (as cited in Andrews & Martin, 2003, p. 5). Talented teachers can easily find higher paying—and possibly less stressful—jobs. One possible solution to teacher attrition and burnout is retaining talented teachers who are already in the profession.

Of course, there are many reasons that teachers choose to leave the profession. But with the ever-increasing demands on teachers to do more in their teaching with fewer resources and less time, stress is certainly one of the factors that can affect a teacher’s decision to leave. For teachers who stay, stress also accompanies the complex nature of working with students who have stressful lives themselves; as teachers work to support students in a multitude of ways that reach far beyond the grade on the next test, teachers take on more stress in having to seek out diverse sources of support for students’ various needs. Furthermore, for many schools and districts, the stress felt by individual teachers affects the school and collegial climate for other teachers. Teachers who are feeling overwhelmed by the stress of their careers can be reluctant to add new challenges to an already overflowing to-do list, which can diminish the collaboration between faculty members. By designing professional development opportunities for practicing teachers to manage the stress of their day-to-day work lives, school districts provide a supportive environment, which may help to retain teachers and avoid teacher burnout.

This study explores a professional development opportunity, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which

helps teachers, such as Anne, develop stress management techniques. We examine the stories of teachers at two different Midwestern high schools who have participated in a MBSR teacher professional development course in order to understand how MBSR has affected their lives inside and outside their classrooms. The following research question structures our inquiry: What are the effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for teachers?

## Defining Mindfulness

Kabat-Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). In Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction training, secular meditation techniques are used to raise a person’s awareness and reduce his or her level of distraction. MBSR programs are often 8-10 week group sessions, which include individual practice at home. Participants are encouraged to focus their attention on the moment through body scans (“sequentially attending to each part of one’s body, starting with the tip of one’s toes to the top of one’s head”) and breath awareness activities (“noticing the sensations in one’s nose, throat, and chest as one breathes”) (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012, p. 156). Thomas, a teacher who attended mindfulness training and uses it in his classroom, describes mindfulness as “being aware of everything and being distracted by nothing” and explains that MBSR has made him “more aware of [his] response to whatever situation [he] find[s] [himself] in.” Although a goal of MBSR is to reduce stress, Anne explains that one does not “[do] a meditation to make anything go away. You [do] this to be more mindful in your life. To be more mindful when you’re really angry. To be more mindful when you’re in a lot of pain. To be more mindful when you’re very stressed out. It’s not going to make it go away. It’s that you can experience it as your best self, as your most clear self.”

## Methodology

We used case study methodology for this study, which allows for investigation of the “local particulars of [an] abstract social phenomenon” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3). Using collective case study methodology, we are “interested in the meaning people make of their lives in very particular contexts” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 9). Because of this, each teacher represents an individual case and provides insight into how teachers engage in MBSR as professional development. Furthermore, this research is what Stake (2000)

calls an instrumental case study. These cases represent a way of understanding Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction as professional development for teachers in two schools. In this way, “the case [individual teachers’ experiences with MBSR] is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else [the nature of MBSR as professional development for teachers]” (Stake, 2000, p. 437).

## Data Sources and Analyses

Of the eleven teachers and administrators who enrolled in the MBSR course, four elected to participate in our study. This article focuses on the stories of two of the four participants, Thomas and Anne, who teach in two different Midwestern high schools. The interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately one hour; we audio-recorded the interviews and later transcribed them. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and we coded the data using inductive and deductive analysis (Graue & Walsh, 1998). We then sorted the data “into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 148). Our analysis was inductive in that we looked for themes about the MBSR course that the participants emphasized in their conversation. Examples of inductive themes were the role that MBSR plays in teachers’ lives inside and outside of school, the stress of teaching, and affordances of MBSR as professional development. Our analysis was deductive in that we interpreted the data through the lens of our own personal and professional understandings of teaching and professional development. We read the data in conjunction with scholarly literature related to teacher stress and burnout, teacher learning and professional development, and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. In addition to analytic coding in NVivo, we wrote analytic memos throughout the process of sifting through the data.

## Mindfulness as Professional Development for Teachers

The participants in the study valued the benefits that the MBSR course had on their classroom instruction. One of the benefits of MBSR that Thomas explained was having increased compassion. He said, “I think you can’t help but be more compassionate when you are mindful, because you’re just more aware of where people are. And teaching [requires] being compassionate.” In addition to becoming a more compassionate teacher, Anne explains that teaching

involves managing student behaviors that can cause her own stress level to skyrocket. After taking the MBSR course, however, Anne has found a way to correct student behavior and cope with the stress that can accompany behavior management. She says, "I can be compassionate about it. And I can realize that [the student] was not a person who [was] put on this earth to ruin my life."

Thomas and Anne both implemented mindfulness practices in their classrooms with their students on a daily basis. Both saw the impacts of the practice in their students' behaviors. Thomas provides this example: "The class that was just in here, this is my most difficult class. But today, we did a body scan, and they turned in about 75 minutes of solid work. And they would never have done that without it, I don't think." While this evidence is anecdotal, many teachers

would be excited to see these kinds of changes in their students. Thomas and Anne also explained that some of their students reported using MBSR techniques on their own, once they have learned them in Thomas's and Anne's classes. Thomas said, "Some students have responded that it helps them sort of focus and sort of transition into the class. Some students have said it's helped them in athletics. Some students say that it helps them before they take their tests, or they use it before they do a presentation or something in another class." Understanding potential benefits for teachers and students who practice MBSR daily raises exciting possibilities for future research.

As we analyzed the data in this project, we further came to realize

how different MBSR is from traditional forms of professional development. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, as a program for professional development offers a unique opportunity for teachers. Unlike more traditional professional development, MBSR is designed to manage teachers' stress in their lives as a whole rather than just acting as a troubleshooting strategy for stress that arises in the classroom. By considering the participant in the MBSR course as a whole person (not just a classroom teacher), the course helps teachers manage stress (their own and their students') on a daily basis rather than as a reaction to difficult situations

that arise unexpectedly. It's about a constant awareness of stress triggers rather than putting out fires. In the words of Thomas, MBSR is "overarching." He explains, "The benefit of mindfulness is that it affects every aspect of the practice of teaching, whether it's developing curriculum, whether it's interacting with your students, [or] interacting with your co-workers." Teachers also enjoy the agency involved in being in control of their own professional development options. Anne explains, "We've talked about ... how we want professional development to be at our school because something I realized in this process was that we have a really great staff of really, really smart people but we've never been in control really of our professional development." Professional development is always a top-down mandate, not only that it be done, but how and with which workshops and topics. MBSR, however, offers an alternative to traditional professional development that focuses on changing teachers' practice. Instead, MBSR supports teachers to change the way they approach their work and reactions to stress so that they are better equipped to make changes to their practice.

### Conclusion

MBSR as professional development provides promising opportunities for teachers. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for professional development such as MBSR in districts that have the highest turnover. Because of high teacher turnover rates and high recruitments costs in diverse urban schools, MBSR would be especially helpful to implement in these districts where it can "have the most immediate impact" (Moir, 2003, p. 12). While wealthy suburban schools have relatively low turnover and low recruitment costs (an estimated 15 percent of a teacher's salary), diverse urban schools have high turnover rates and high recruitment costs (an estimated 50 percent of a teacher's salary, and sometimes up to 200 percent) (Moir, 2003). Although professional development alone cannot eliminate the problems of retention and turnover in school districts, it does provide one possible solution. As professional development, MBSR can impact teachers and help them to manage stress in all areas of their lives.

As teaching becomes more complex with changing national mandates and increased teaching loads, it is important for school districts to provide support for teachers that goes well beyond trainings for new teaching initiatives. A revised notion of professional development that takes into account the entirety of a teacher's life and work in the classroom is

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one way to provide this support. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, as professional development for teachers, offers an exciting new avenue to explore.

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