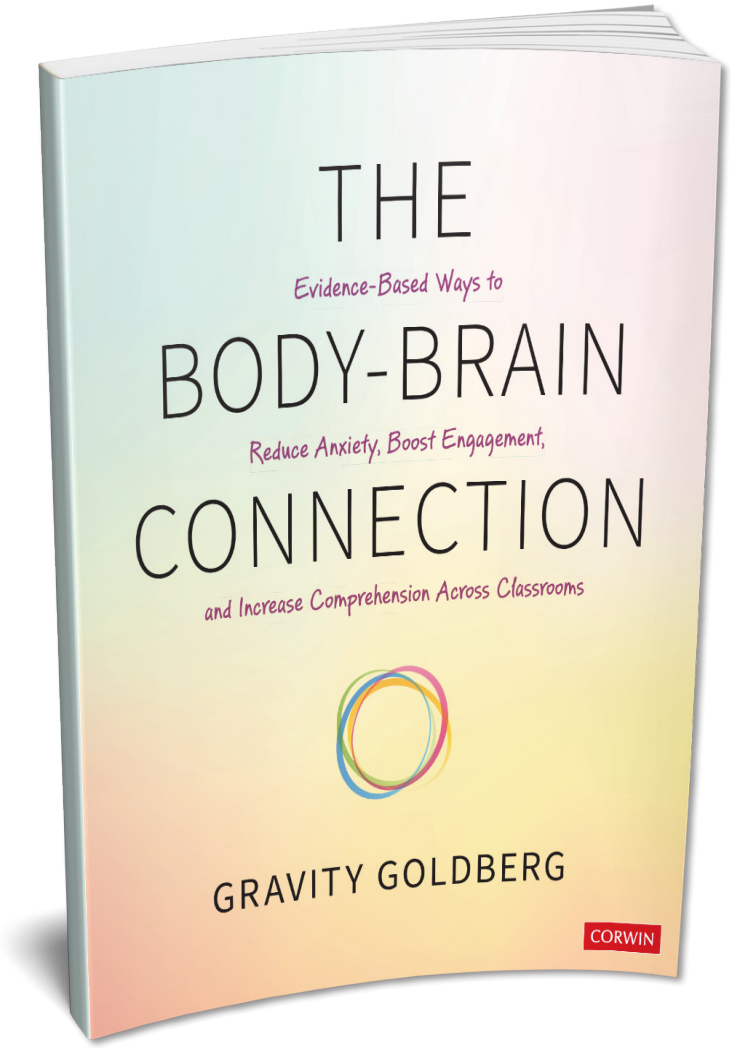

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CORWIN

HOW DOES MINDFULNESS HELP STUDENTS?

At this point we all know the term *mindfulness* and it can lead you to either roll your eyes or lean in with glee depending on your prior experiences. In this book I draw on mindfulness as a scientific concept that is defined by the American Psychological Association (n.d.) as "awareness of one's internal states and surroundings." Awareness is tied to one's ability to "notice differences" and nuance (Langer, 2024, p. 205). The ability to notice differences without judgment is a key factor in collaboration and engagement. Without awareness our students cannot directly pay attention.

Increase in Engagement

In one study, autistic children interacted with adults by playing games. The researchers video recorded and noticed how degrees of adult mindfulness impacted the children. The adults were instructed to be more or less mindful depending on the group they were put in. For example, the less mindful adults were told to be positive when playing the games but to only pretend to be interested in what the child was doing. The adults in the highly mindful group were told to be positive as well but were also told to "focus on the variability of the child's behavior and the emergence of novel elements in their emotional expression" (Langer, 2024, p. 193). They were directed to notice the child's body language, voice, inflection, and general state of being. This paying attention and noticing was framed as studying the child to "understand their internal state."

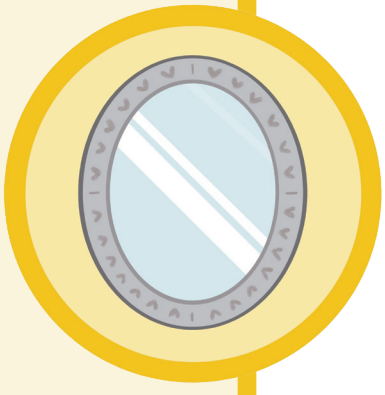
After analyzing the video recordings, the researchers found that the children who interacted with more mindful adults showed greater fun behaviors and showed fewer avoidance behaviors. They also showed an increase in collaborative behaviors and engaged interaction. This led to the conclusion that when the adults were more mindful, they helped the children become more engaged. The focused awareness and nuanced noticing also led the adults to get to know the children better. Basically, both child and adult showed more engagement and were better able to read one another.

In another study, researchers studied patients suffering from traumatic brain injury and the relatives who were their caregivers. They found a correlation between the mindfulness of the caregiver and the functioning of the patient. They concluded "mindful caregivers are likely to attend to the variability in symptoms and responses for those for whom they are caring" (Langer, 2024, p. 195). The ability to remain curious (another way of being mindful) had a huge impact on the people they cared for and on themselves.

"When caregivers start to notice small changes in the symptoms of the people for whom they are caring, several things happen. They become more mindful themselves, which is . . . good for their own health. And when caregivers are more engaged and optimistic, their jobs seem a bit easier and burnout becomes less likely" (Langer, 2024, p. 195). Langer goes on to explain that moving from global thinking (everything, always) to more specific thinking (sometimes) helps people feel better, develop awareness, and be more present. In a profession like teaching, where we often feel we have little control over many variables, it can be helpful to realize that this one shift, bringing a lens of mindful curiosity and specificity, can help us and our students feel more engaged.

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Consider the following research findings about curiosity:



- The stronger the desire to find out, the greater the activation in the reward network (Kang et al., 2009).
- The brain's reward networks activate in response to things that bring joy and deactivate in response to things that reduce enjoyment (Waytz & Mason, 2014).

You can cultivate your sense of curiosity as a teacher by doing the following:

- Turning judgments or opinions about students into questions.
  - Example: My opinion is that students tune out when their classmates share because they are egocentric. Turned into a question: Why do students seem to tune each other out? When do they tune out? When do they tune in? What seems to pique students' attention?
- Teaching a different text or topic.
  - Simply working within a new text or topic that you don't already know well can lead you to be more curious and pay more attention to the specific details.
  - Example: I usually teach this short story, but I could use this podcast or this story instead.
- Noticing nuance.
  - Example: Instead of using the words *always* and *never*, find some students to focus on and spend time noticing the nuances of when and how. Instead of thinking this student "never reads," consider when do they, for how long, and in what kinds of texts.
  - Use the nuanced noticings to look at your own teaching too. Instead of thinking I am not a good teacher of ____, think about when and where you feel confident, what the context is, and what happens before, during, and after those moments. Study yourself with nuance as well.

Your degree of mindfulness has a significant impact on the motivation of others. In one study, magazine sales people were divided into two groups. One group was instructed to treat every potential customer exactly the same with the same sales pitch. The second group was instructed to be mindful of the potential customer and to vary their pitch in new and subtle ways for each person. As I read this study I could not help but think about how some districts are handing teachers scripts and telling them to teach all of their students in the same (mindless) way. But, back to this study. The customers who received the mindful sales pitch later described the sales person as more charismatic and they were more likely to purchase the magazines from the mindful pitches (Langer, 2024, p. 184). This finding led the researchers to the conclusion that mindfulness can shape the behaviors of other people around the mindful person.

Self-Esteem and a Positive Perspective

Another study based on the idea that mindfulness impacted the others around the person took place at a boy's summer camp. The boys in the study were assigned a researcher to interview them and the researchers posed as coaches. One set of "coaches" were instructed to be mindful and notice changes in the child's verbal and nonverbal behavior across the interview. The other coaches were told to be mindless and just pretend to be interested in the boys. Both coach groups were told to be positive. After the interviews the boys were given a test of their self-esteem and asked about their overall camp experience. The researchers had already accounted for prior levels of the boy's self-esteem before selecting the participants and putting them into groups. "The children who interacted with a mindless adult had significantly lower self-esteem scores and an expressed dislike of both the camp and the interviewer than campers interacting with a mindful adult" (Langer, 2024, p. 186).

The study has connections to us educators. Our degree of mindfulness, our ability to pay attention and notice differences in our students, has a huge impact on their self-esteem and their view of reading in general. When we are more mindful of our students, they will tend to feel better about themselves as learners and look more positively on the act of reading. Both teachers and students benefit from nuanced and intentional noticing (mindfulness).

Attention to Detail

Let's look at one more study (of many more possible studies) on the impact of a mindful person in a learning environment. Researchers wrote the words from *Mary Had a Little Lamb* on an index card and included an error by adding a second "a." The card read "Mary had a a little lamb." Participants came into a room and sat down next to another person and were asked to read the card. Most readers did not notice the

error and when asked to count the number of words on the card said five words even though there were six. The participants who were seated next to a person who was instructed to be mindful were much more likely to notice the error. This happened even though the person who was mindfully sitting did not interact with the reader, nor did the reader know anything about the mindful neighbor. This study was conducted another time, but the mindful person sitting next to the reader had just finished meditating in a different room before coming in to sit down. In this case all of the readers who were seated next to a recent meditator read the sentence correctly and noticed the error (Langer, 2024, p. 187).

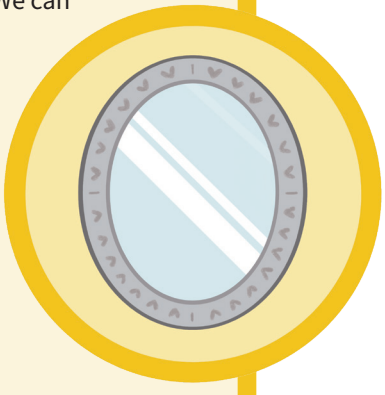
As teachers, we have likely all felt frustrated when students don't seem to be paying close enough attention as they read, write, and complete their work. What if the ways to support them included our own ability to be more mindful and to make the practice of noticing nuanced differences a key part of our days? Many of the skills we teach are actually tied to being mindful. Take a look at the chart that follows. In this chart you'll see how mindfulness and the ability to notice differences is a key reading comprehension skill across contexts as well as part of self-monitoring and self-awareness. Use this chart as a guide for lessons that teach students explicitly how to be mindful. You can work your way down this chart by teaching a lesson on each mindful practice. For example, model how you notice what you do as you read a picture book, short story, article, or video. Use the language on this chart as you model. Then give students a few minutes to try it out themselves as they read.

MINDFUL READERS CHART (APPENDIX N)

Notice what they do as they read.	"First I . . . then I . . ."
Notice their thinking as they read	"I'm wondering about . . ."
Notice their feelings as they read.	"I am feeling . . ."
Notice changes.	"This changed when . . ."
Notice differences between characters/topics.	"These are different because . . ."
Notice differences between perspectives.	"I see it like this . . ., and my partner sees it like . . ."

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

All of the moves mindful students make apply to us teachers. We can use the same ways of being as teachers to be more mindful of what students are doing.



MINDFUL TEACHERS

Notice what students do as they read.	"First you . . ., then you . . ."
Notice student thinking as they read.	"You are wondering about . . ."
Notice student feelings as they read.	"You are feeling . . ."
Notice changes.	"This changed for you when . . ."
Notice differences between characters/topics.	"You see these are different because . . ."
Notice differences between perspectives.	"You see it like this . . ., and your partner sees it like . . ."

One concrete way to be a more mindful teacher is to avoid generalizations about students such as they are right or they are good at inferring. These are really labels that don't allow us to slow down, notice, and see variance—the hallmarks of mindfulness and effective teaching. Practice your ability to notice and name what students are doing. I find it easier to first notice and name nuance in written work because I can look back at it several times. Then I practice noticing and naming when listening to students talk, which tends to be harder for me because it moves so fast and I only get one listen.

Take a few minutes to be mindful. Jot down what you notice about yourself and your students. Creating a regular routine of writing down our mindful noticings allows us to recognize patterns.

Let's practice being mindful together as we look at this transcript of a student conversation halfway through their reading of the book *Pizza and Taco: Too Cool for School,* by Stephen Shaskan.

- What do you notice?
- Can you name at least three things you learned about each student?
- Can you see any small, nuanced difference between the two students?

Ava: Pizza is really trying to be cool. I think he is embarrassed by Taco.

Eamon: Totally. Taco is so cringe.

Ava and Eamon laugh.

Eamon: He is trying too hard to be cool. That makes him [interrupted by Ava]

Ava: uncool.

Eamon: Yes!

Eamon: But even though the characters are food and not kids, they seem kind of young, like maybe second graders. Maybe even first graders.

Ava: Really? I didn't think so. I thought they were more like our age.

When discussing this transcript with teachers we noticed the following about these students: they

- identified the main characters to focus on (Pizza and Taco),
- thought about the character motivation (wanted to seem cool),
- inferred the potential conflict (trying too hard to be cool),
- inferred the character's age/grade,
- listened to one another and agreed ("totally" and "yes"),
- disagreed respectfully ("I thought they were more our age"),
- interrupted to add on ("uncool"),
- took an intellectual risk (using the word *maybe*), and
- connected with each other (laughed together).

This sort of mindful attention helps us get to know the students better, reinforce strengths, and decide on targeted next steps. As their teacher I could choose any of the items on this list to give them positive feedback on. Then I could look at my unit plans

or standards to decide what to teach them next. For example, maybe I would show them how to use their ideas to make predictions or notice when the characters shift and think about why.

HOW CAN WE MAKE READING FUN IN ANY DISCIPLINE ?

We might assume that if students are focused, able to handle challenges, and motivated to learn, they will also be having fun. This may be the case, but we can take a deeper look at what we mean by fun and design learning experiences that are more intentionally fun producing for students.

First, let's look at what fun is not. We may think that fun is prizes, games, and easy-peasy silly activities. For example, we may think it is fun to color in a picture of a favorite character from a book we read. Some may think it is fun to play Kahoot! and compete to win a game that asks you to answer questions about a topic. Others may think that it is fun to talk to friends and make book recommendations. The thing is, fun is not actually the same for everyone and fun is not inherent in the activity itself, but it does include the qualities the activity provides. Let's take a deeper dive.

For a student who loves to make art, enjoys the challenge of coloring within the lines, and then gets to share that art with others, they may find character coloring pages fun. For someone else, they may feel stressed and lack confidence in their ability to color within the lines. They may take too long to really color well and then feel rushed and anxious about the same activity. Fun is not static; rather, it is contextual and personal.

Price (2021), author of the book *The Power of Fun*, calls "true fun" the kind of fun where energy rushes "through her like a spark" (p. 13). Price goes on to explain that true fun "is the feeling of being fully present and engaged, free from self-criticism and judgment" (p. 13). She further describes three main elements that create true fun. First, we are in a state of flow and are fully present in what we are doing. Second, we bring a playfulness into the experience. Third, true fun helps us feel a sense of connection to others. In other words, "true fun is the confluence of playfulness, connection, and flow" (p. 32).