

Walking Mindfully With Middle Schoolers: The Development of an After-School Slacklining Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper explores the creation and facilitation of a twelve-week, bi-weekly afterschool program in slacklining and mindfulness, which is taking place at Asheville Middle School (AMS). The program is made possible through Asheville City School Foundation's In Real Life (IRL) program. Slacklining is a newly emerging sport that involves learning to balance on a dynamic piece of webbing that is tensioned between two points. Once balance is achieved, various tricks and static poses can be incorporated. Mindfulness is a mental state or attitude that can be achieved by intentionally and non-judgmentally focusing one's attention on the present moment. Slacklining requires one-pointed focus and a seamless connection between body and mind, essentially making the sport a physical mindfulness practice. This public service project (psp) involves the administration of this program and the development of a curriculum document for future use by facilitators and students. This paper, along with the accompanying document, explores the connections between slacklining and mindfulness and details the activities conducted in the program, as well as the effects of the program measured both anecdotally and through the administration of pre and post evaluations. The paper also presents a discussion of the various challenges that were faced throughout the facilitation of this program and some ways in which the program could potentially improve in the future. The development of slacklining and mindfulness curricula has the potential to offer students opportunities for new and exciting forms of physical exercise, a chance to begin cultivating the ability to sustain their attention for longer periods of time despite distractions, and a chance to develop greater self-awareness skills as well as relaxation and stress-management techniques.

Key Words: Mindfulness, Slacklining, After-School Program, Curriculum Development, Middle School, Sports & Recreation

Origins of the Project

Students growing up in the United States today are living in a much faster-paced world than the one in which their parents grew up. They are expected to do more within the same amount of time as students growing up just a few decades earlier. Much of this is due to our rapid advancements in technology and communications, which have brought many benefits to society but have also fundamentally changed the way we interact with our society and with ourselves, speeding up the pace of all our interactions. This increased pace of life has led to a number of troubling mental health concerns for students, who are being diagnosed with depression, anxiety, ADHD, eating disorders, and other self-destructive behaviors at epidemic rates. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). While our world continues to speed up, our bodies are simultaneously slowing down as we spend more time in front of our computers and less time being physically active. Physical inactivity is recognized as a major public health concern in the U.S., mainly because of its association with leading causes of death such as heart disease, stroke, respiratory disease, diabetes, etc. Approximately 250,000 premature deaths a year in the U.S. are attributed to physical inactivity, and studies consistently show that physical activity declines sharply during adolescence. (Kenneth R. Allison) There is a need for interventions to address the mental, emotional, and physical needs of young people in today's society.

The In Real Life (IRL) program is a result of the Asheville City School Foundation's Listening to Our Teens summit, held in June of 2009, which brought together 85 community service providers and representatives from Asheville in order to discuss and learn more about the needs of teens and their families during out-of-school hours. The summit's accompanying report found that over 500 middle school students from Asheville Middle School and the connected Randolph Learning center did not have consistent access to after school programming throughout the year. Barriers to participation named by students and parents included cost, transportation, lack of information, and program schedules that conflict with parents' work schedules. Students also said that they lacked interest in after-school programs that were available. (Listening to Our Teens)

This is troublesome for a number of reasons. Recent studies have shown an increase in crime committed by youth between the hours when school ends and their parents get home from work. In 2008, 100 youth between the ages of 11 and 14 were committed to youth detention centers in Buncombe County (Buncombe County Department of Juvenile Justice, 2008). Conversely, quality after-school programming can have a multitude of benefits for students including improvements in academic performance, work habits, and task persistence. (Vandell, D., Reisner, E., & Pierce, K. 2007). The Listening to Our Teens report concluded that the safety and academic success of AMS students is dependent on the out-of-school opportunities that are available to them. Middle School is a crucial developmental stage for many students, which can determine whether or not they will ever choose to attend after-school or extra-curricular

programs. Out of these results, the In Real Life (IRL) program was born with the intention of providing safe, high quality, and fun learning opportunities to all Asheville City Schools middle school students. The goals of the slacklining and mindfulness program that I developed are in line with IRL's mission.

Students have been shown to accumulate at least twenty minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) during after-school programming, which accounts for one-third of the daily 60-minute physical activity requirement for youth suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Trost). With the short amount of time during the school week devoted to physical education and exercise, students are in need of structured opportunities for physical activity. Slacklining is a new, fun, and exciting activity that can provide healthy exercise for students, and creating an after-school program centered on slacklining provides a specific time and place for students to engage in this exercise.

Although mindfulness education is a newly emerging field that is in need of more research, the research that has been done on mindfulness in K-12 education so far is incredibly promising and offers potential solutions to dealing with student stress, anxiety, short attention spans, etc. A study conducted by Maria Napoli, Ph.D., involving first, second, and third graders who participated in a bi-weekly, 12-session integrative program of mindfulness and relaxation showed significant increases in attention and social skills and decreases in test anxiety and ADHD behaviors. (Napoli, M) In a study conducted by the Mindfulness Awareness Research Center at UCLA, second and third graders who began with poor executive function and did Mindfulness Awareness Practices for 30 minutes twice a week for 8 weeks showed gains in behavioral regulation, meta-cognition, and overall global executive control (Flook, L.). Mindfulness education has clearly shown a potential to provide beneficial and necessary skills to young students. A slacklining and mindfulness program at AMS could potentially provide these same benefits while adding to the growing number of studies on this type of education that are beginning to become available.

Slacklining and mindfulness are a natural combination, which complement each other perfectly for the purposes of education. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the inventor of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Therapy, describes mindfulness as, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, J.). The cultivation of this type of awareness has a multitude of benefits that are aligned with the stated goals of this slacklining and mindfulness program. The type of experiential education that mindfulness provides allows students to see for themselves new ways of self-directed learning, other than the traditional cognitive learning employed by most schools, that can be integrated into their lives. Discussing the benefits of this new perspective that mindfulness education offers, Dr. Anne Klein of Rice University stated,

This in turn means that the types of identities they may have around being an "intellectual" or "smart" can be integrated with identities formed around presence, immediacy of attention, sensory experience, and so on. (Coburn T. 167)

Mindfulness education is a way to teach students the basic skills of self-observation and analysis that will enable them to learn more easily. Instead of teaching them a specific piece of

knowledge, mindfulness education offers students a method and framework for approaching the process of learning itself, allowing them to integrate knowledge and techniques that they are taught into their own lives. We consistently expect students to pay attention during class, but we rarely if ever devote time to teaching children how to pay attention. Mindfulness education focuses on the “how” of learning, rather than the “what.” When students realize that they actually do know *how* to succeed, the potential for a change in the way they view their own intelligence arises.

In Dr. Charles P. Gabel’s paper, “Slacklining for Lower Extremity Rehabilitation and Injury Prevention,” published in the *International Journal of Athletic Therapy and Training*, he describes the three-phase motor learning process for becoming proficient in slacklining.

*The **cognitive** phase involves rejection of ineffective strategies and adoption of effective strategies, which usually produces rapid improvement. The **associate** phase lasts for weeks to months, during which skills are acquired and consolidated, and performance consistency improves. The **autonomous** phase lasts for months to years, during which skills can be executed without conscious effort.* (Gabel, Charles P. 14)

In many ways slacklining is a physical manifestation of mindfulness and viewing it as such can help students plainly see the value of techniques such as rejecting ineffective strategies and adopting effective strategies. In most cases, students have a natural desire to learn how to slackline after seeing someone who is skilled use one. It is a much more appealing activity than, say, doing math homework. By using mindfulness techniques to teach slacklining to students, the opportunity arises to instill in them a process and framework for learning that can be applied to literally any task, including their homework. They are able to see for themselves how they move from the cognitive phase of figuring out what strategy is best for them, to the associate phase of acquiring and improving their skills, to finally the autonomous phase of perfecting their skills. For young students, achieving success in slacklining may be more satisfying than learning how to solve a math problem. However, understanding that the process they use to achieve those goals is the same could be a huge breakthrough for them.

Both slacklining and mindfulness brought me to my community engaged scholar project through a multi-step process over the past few years. I first learned about and became committed to both slacklining and mindfulness within the first week of my freshman year at UNC Asheville. My friend Patrick Green set up a slackline on the quad, which is the first time in my life that I had ever seen one. He was very skilled at the activity and able to do tricks ranging from sitting down to jumping around on the line. I was immediately intrigued and gave it a try. At first, like most people, I couldn’t even stand up for more than a second. Patrick encouraged me to keep trying though and I became determined to learn how to slackline. As someone who did not have an interest in participating in sports or spending time at the gym, slacklining offered me an opportunity for enjoyable physical exercise. After the first semester of college I was given the opportunity to teach a slackline workshop with Patrick at a small gathering in South Carolina. The experience was incredibly inspiring and shortly after returning from it I formed an organization called Slack-Librium in order to continue teaching slacklining workshops. This led to setting up slackline parks and teaching workshops at dozens of music and arts festivals around the country, allowing me to gain experience in the field.

I started exploring mindfulness at the same time as I began slacklining. The professor for my required freshman seminar class, Dr. Richard Chess, introduced us to contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation on the very first day of the semester. I greatly enjoyed the academic perspective on mindfulness that Dr. Chess provided, as well as the mental relaxation and stress reduction that came along with it, and have been committed in pursuing the study and practice of it since that first semester of college. Since the beginning of 2013 I have been setting aside 20 minutes every morning for mindfulness meditation. At the beginning of my sophomore year at UNCA I founded the Mindfulness Club, which meets weekly to share in various mindfulness exercises and practices and discuss related topics. We also organize occasional events such as the Mindfulness Festival on the University quad last April. My relationship with Dr. Chess has also continued, both through taking more of his classes and in helping to plan and organize University events such as the Creating a Mindful Campus Conference. Through this work I have also been introduced to an incredibly supportive group of faculty at UNCA who all actively experiment with integrating mindfulness and contemplative practices into their teaching pedagogy.

One of the professors who I met through this community was Dr. Ameena Batada. I wanted to take a class with Dr. Batada so I registered for her course, *Health Parity: Domestic and Global Contexts*, thinking it would offer me an interesting perspective on health problems that I could relate to my Political Science education. The course did indeed offer an interesting and valuable perspective, delving into the health problems that we face both in this country, and globally, as well as exploring various potential solutions to these problems. This was a Service Learning designated class, which means it includes a community service component. Because of my passion for both slacklining and mindfulness education, and the urgent need for this type of education among young students that became apparent during Dr. Batada's class, I wanted to teach slacklining and mindfulness workshops at a local public school in order to fulfill this component. I began sending emails to a variety of local schools in Asheville to see if that would be possible. Cynthia Sellinger, the principal of Asheville Middle School (AMS) responded to my email and was receptive to the idea so I set up a meeting with Teresa Carter, a physical education teacher at AMS, in order to discuss it further. Teresa liked the idea, so we tested the slacklines out in the gym and then made plans to host one full week of slacklining classes during PE for students in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. This program was a tremendous success and received much positive feedback after its completion. After this experience one of my professors who was familiar with the IRL afterschool program encouraged me to apply to become a service provider and lead a program.

Having seen the effects that both mindfulness and slacklining have had in my own life, I believed passionately in the ability of this type of education to benefit students and given my experience working in AMS during Dr. Batada's Service Learning course I saw the opportunity to create this type of educational program. The IRL program seeks to address the problems for students mentioned above; lack of adequate physical activity, increases in stress and anxiety, increases in mental health concerns such as depression and ADHD, inability to sustain attention, and lack of quality after-school programs, and the organizers were keen on having me create an after-school slacklining and mindfulness program that could be sustained for the students in the coming years.

Methods and Work Undertaken

Slacklining & Mindfulness Program: Logistics

For this public service project I designed a 12-week, bi-weekly slacklining and mindfulness after-school program and facilitated the program at Asheville Middle School. I created and administered pre and post-evaluations for the students in order to try to understand the effects of the program. I have also developed a slacklining and mindfulness curriculum document for other students, teachers, and facilitators to learn from and use for programs at AMS as well as other schools. The slacklining and mindfulness program that I created and administered took place during IRL's Fall 2014 programming session, on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30 to 5:00 pm. A 12-week curriculum was prepared along with pre and post student evaluations in order to measure the effectiveness of the program. I developed the following goals for the program:

- Students will be able to slackline, feel as if they have made noticeable progress in improving their skills, and have an understanding of safety precautions that should be taken while slacklining.
- Students will develop self-awareness skills that teach them to become aware of their thoughts and feelings on a more consistent basis, and develop relaxation techniques that will empower them with greater control over these thoughts and feelings.
- Students will be able to sustain their attention on tasks that they choose to, and will learn techniques to deal with any distractions that may arise.
- Students will understand the concept of self-limiting beliefs.

There were 16 students placed into my slacklining and mindfulness program at the beginning of the fall session but numbers fluctuated slightly throughout the program as some students dropped out and other students joined the program. Some students also have poor attendance records. A few students participate in the program on both Tuesdays and Thursdays but a significant amount of the students only signed up for one day or the other. Ten students in total remained enrolled for the duration of the fall session and completed both pre and post surveys. I recruited two of my own volunteers with previous knowledge of both slacklining and mindfulness in order to assist with the facilitation of the program; Amelia Rosenberg who is a freshman at UNC Asheville, and Patrick Green who originally taught me how to slackline when I first moved to Asheville two years ago. IRL also operates a volunteer program and assigned additional volunteers to help with program facilitation. On Tuesday we had one extra volunteer, making our adult to student ratio roughly 1:4. On Thursdays an entire class from Warren Wilson College volunteered to help assist with IRL programming. Five students from this class helped to facilitate my slacklining and mindfulness program, making our adult to student ratio roughly 1:2.

I was solely responsible for the creation of the program curriculum and the leading of the program, but the volunteers were able to assist with tasks such as supervising the students, taking them to the bathroom when needed, spending time with students who had a problem or needed special attention, etc. The volunteers that I recruited myself were especially helpful as they brought actual knowledge of both slacklining and mindfulness into the program with them. This enabled me to plan lessons that I normally wouldn't be able to, including activities where we break into smaller groups and rotate through different stations, each teaching different skills. The

volunteers were absolutely essential to the facilitation of the program and the supervision of the students, especially given the programs public and chaotic location. The program took place outside, directly in front of AMS, in a grassy area filled with trees in between the school's parking lot and South French Broad Avenue. In this space we were able to set up 5 slacklines using the trees and one freestanding slackline that I provided. This left us with a slackline to student ratio of roughly 1:3. We put rugs underneath some of the slacklines and also provided foam squares, which we arranged into a circle where we would gather at the beginning of the session and that the students could sit on while waiting to slackline. In the case of rain or bad weather, which only happened two or three times, the program would take place inside the cafeteria where we were able to set up two slacklines using available structures as well as one freestanding slackline that I provided. This left us with a slackline to student ratio of roughly 1:5.

Although I was responsible for creating and facilitating the slackline and mindfulness program, it operated within the larger framework of IRL, which hosts 5 or 6 after-school programs per day, Monday through Friday. In order to fully understand how IRL operates, it is helpful to walk through a typical day of programming. I would typically arrive at AMS with Patrick and Amelia around 2:30 or 2:45 and begin setting up the slacklines, rugs, and foam squares. At first we set up all of the slacklines for the students, but over time we began teaching them how to set up the slacklines and allowing them to do it themselves, which saved us preparation time. By 3:10 we would have finished setting up and would have signed in at the front desk. IRL meets in the cafeteria, which is right at the front of the school. The main IRL staff consists of Erin Cotter, Campus Director, Angel Redmond, Program Manger, and Meg Granfield, Volunteer Coordinator. At 3:15 the IRL staff would gather all of the different service providers together in order to give any necessary information about IRL, talk about any specific problems or concerns with programming, and share some technique or piece of knowledge about working with middle school students in order to help improve our programs. At 3:30 classes end and students begin entering the cafeteria. They are given a snack and a drink when they enter and they walk to whatever table their program is assigned. We talk to the students informally and take attendance as they walk in. The IRL team then talks to all of the students, providing announcements and going over rules and words of the week, such as mindset, grit, optimism, etc. Between 3:40 and 3:55 (more time is taken for announcements towards the beginning of programming and very little towards the end), the programs are dismissed and leave the cafeteria to go to their respective locations. Programming runs until 5:00 pm when students must return to the cafeteria to either stay for study hall, ride the bus home or get picked up by their parents.

My program would stay in the cafeteria at dismissal as all of the other programs leave. After the students finished their snacks, they would throw out their trash and line their back packs up against the wall. We would then sit in a circle on a rug on the floor in order to begin our programming. During this circle time students received an opportunity to ask any questions they may have, provide suggestions for the program, voice any concerns that they may have, or simply share something about their day with us. We would occasionally watch slacklining videos in order to inspire the students, help them learn more about slacklining, and promote a discussion about the contents of the video. We would always begin our program with a brief period of mindfulness meditation. Throughout the length of the program we experimented with different types of mindfulness exercises, which would typically only last for 2 to 3 minutes. After the mindfulness exercise we would walk to the bathrooms in an attempt to cut down on bathroom

breaks during programming time. We would then walk outside to the slacklines, sit down in a circle on our foam mats, and go over the lesson plan for the day. By 4:00 at the latest we would be ready to begin slacklining. Since the students needed to share the slacklines I attempted to emphasize slackline etiquette and waiting patiently while others take their turn on the line. The structure of the slacklining portion of the program varied by week. Sometimes we would engage in highly structured activities with the students in order to teach them specific tricks or techniques but we would often provide less structure during this point of the program and instead emphasize individual goal setting in order to allow students a chance to explore and spend time alone figuring out the slackline. Of course we would always be there to offer help and advice when needed. At first we set up all of the slacklines for the students, but over time they began setting them up themselves. We would typically circle up again outside around 4:30 for another minute or two of mindfulness meditation, to review the goals of the programming, and to deal with any potential problems or concerns that students had. The students would then be given free time on the slacklines until around 4:50 when we would take down the slacklines and make our way back to the cafeteria for dismissal at 5:00 pm. This is a rough outline of a typical day of slacklining and mindfulness programming at IRL.

Slacklining & Mindfulness Program: Curriculum

I employed four themes at the beginning of our programming session, which we have been using for the entirety of the programming: Relaxation, Concentration, Balance, and Patience. I ask the students to keep these in mind as we work through activities, emphasizing how they would help them to become better at slacklining while improving their lives in other ways as well.

Relaxation is the ability to take a step back from our fast-paced lives, calm ourselves down if we are feeling anxious or upset, and live peacefully within the present moment. We practiced a variety of relaxation techniques throughout the program in order to empower students with this skill. Concentration is the ability to focus our attention on a specific task for an extended period of time. This focus can range from keeping your eyes locked on the end of the slackline while trying to balance to staying committed to finishing your homework. Concentration is a skill that can be trained and improved through mental exercise, similar to the way in which physical exercise can build your muscles. We engaged in various forms of concentration and focus practices in order to help students cultivate this skill. Balance is the ability to consistently bring yourself back to your focus even after becoming distracted. We can see this manifested physically on the slackline through the process of losing balance, falling to one side or the other, and then bringing yourself back up to center. We can also think of balance in another way; concentrating on one task, becoming distracted, realizing that you became distracted, and then bringing your focus back to the task at hand. My program emphasized the development of both physical and mental forms of balance. The final theme, Patience, is perhaps the most straight forward. I encouraged students to be patient with themselves as well as others. When most people step onto a slackline for the first time it is incredibly hard and they aren't able to balance at all. This can become discouraging for some, but if we are patient with ourselves our skills will improve rather quickly. Middle School is also an excellent time to begin developing patience with others. This was accomplished in various ways. Students are required to share the slacklines and wait patiently for their turn. Their patience is also tested with many of the mindfulness exercises that we engage in.

Throughout the course of this program I have developed a slacklining and mindfulness curriculum document, which includes in-depth descriptions of all of the activities that we engaged in throughout the program as well as a discussion of the various challenges that were faced during administration of the program and potential changes that could improve these activities in the future. I will briefly describe a few of these activities here but more information can be found in the slacklining and mindfulness curriculum document.

One of the central mindfulness practices that we engaged in was centered on the four themes of the program: Relaxation, Concentration, Balance, and Patience. The exercise involved sitting quietly with eyes closed for one to two minutes. The students were instructed to choose one of the four themes and silently repeat it to themselves during every inhale. The word that they chose would be the object of their concentration. If they noticed their attention wandering to other thoughts, sounds, or physical sensations during this time, they were instructed to notice what they were distracted by, and then gently bring their focus back to the word that they chose. After the meditation was over, students were encouraged to try to bring this focus with them throughout the course of the day's lesson. If they ever noticed themselves getting distracted or becoming worked up, they were instructed to return their focus to their breathing and the word that they chose at the beginning of the day in order to help relax and remember their goals.

The hope is that through repeated practice of this technique, students would begin to become more aware of their subconscious mind and their tendency to become distracted. As this awareness of the subconscious mind increases and they continue to return to a point of focus after noticing a distraction, the student's ability to intentionally sustain their attention on specific tasks will improve. We began with just one minute of this practice a day, but as the program progressed we attempted to increase the time to two or three minutes, or even longer during some guided exercises. This technique is in alignment with much of the current research on mindfulness that is being done. In a report titled "Nurturing Mindfulness in Children and Youth: Current State of Research" published in the journal *Child and Development Perspectives* in October of 2011, the authors succinctly explain a common goal of meditative practices that my program shares:

In meditative practices, a common goal is to sustain the focus of attention on mental contents or particular objects, such as the breath, a sound, or a visual percept... A central goal of these practices is to fully become aware of the moment-to-moment fluctuations in the "stream of consciousness" and to adopt an open and accepting stance toward these experiences. Although different techniques have different goals, they share a focus on sharpening concentration or attention, building emotion regulation skills to effectively manage stress, and gaining self-knowledge... With sustained practice, these skills are hypothesized to become routinized at neural or mental levels and subsequently to regulate behavior in relatively automatic ways. (Greenberg, M. 162)

One variation of this mindfulness exercise that we used with the students is called breath-counting meditation. In this exercise, instead of focusing on repeating a word, students are instructed to count to ten, increasing their count during each inhalation. Once they reach ten, they are instructed to start over at one and try to reach ten again. If their mind wanders and they lose

count they are instructed to become aware of the fact that they lost focus and then begin counting again, starting at one. If they forget to start over again after ten and end up counting past ten, they are instructed to notice that they lost their focus and begin counting again, starting at one. This exercise contains the same general idea as the mindfulness exercise that I developed centered on the four program themes, but offers other benefits as well, including making multiple forms of mindfulness available to students, some of whom may prefer one over the other or relate much more strongly to a particular exercise. An article titled “A Mind You Can Count On: Validating Breath Counting as a Behavioral Measure of Mindfulness” published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* in October of 2014 explains how the breath counting exercise is particularly good for empirically studying mindfulness levels.

Accurately counting breaths operationalizes mindfulness because it depends on (1) directly perceiving the experience of breathing in the present and (2) awareness of that experience (such as mind wandering) is happening, which enables a return to of attention to the breath whenever attention drifts. Therefore, although counting is not necessary for mindfulness, we propose mindfulness contributes to accurate breath counting. (Levinson DB 2)

The breath-counting exercise is slightly more complicated than the exercise that is focused on the four themes, and with this extra complication comes an additional level of focus that is required. It is also easier to effectively judge the ability of students to successfully complete the breath-counting practice because it is easier to judge how often they were distracted and how long they were able to sustain their focus for. While some students may prefer the four themes exercise, some students may find the concepts of mindfulness easier to understand through the breath counting technique. Another mindfulness exercise that I facilitated during the program is called a body-scan meditation, which is adapted from Dr. Reginald A. Ray’s “Ten-Points Practice,” described in his book, *Touching Enlightenment: Finding Realization in the Body*. Dr. Ray proposes a way of looking at the body that includes ten-points; the two feet, the two sides of the buttocks, the mid-back, the shoulders, the elbows, and the head. The exercise that he describes involves mentally becoming aware of the sensations of different parts of the body and then trying to relax those body parts (Ray, Reginald A.).

Although I did not follow Ray’s practice exactly, the same general principles applied. The students laid down on their backs, closed their eyes, and became as comfortable as possible. I then led them through the process of becoming aware of their body parts, from their feet up to their heads, and instructed them to send a command from the brain to that specific body part telling it to relax. Once reaching the waist, we stopped for a moment to notice any differences between the upper and lower body, and to see if the students were successful in relaxing their lower body. I reminded them that this exercise was entirely dependent on the mental effort that they put into and that if they didn’t participate nothing would happen, but if they did actually try to mentally relax their body parts the physical relaxation would follow. This guided exercise lasted approximately 10 minutes. At its completion, I encouraged the students to try this exercise at home when needed and to attempt to relate it to slacklining. I asked them to try focusing their attention on different parts of their body while slacklining in order to see what they can learn about balance from the observation of their bodies. Ultimately, I used this exercise as a way to show the students that they always have the power to direct their attention towards whatever they

want to in any situation. There are always so many different things going on at once, and it is up to the individual to choose how and where to direct their attention. The ability to intentionally direct your attention towards an object or task of your choosing at any time is one of the main benefits of mindfulness practice.

In addition to the mindfulness exercises students also received slackline instruction. Throughout the program they have learned how a slackline mechanically operates, safety precautions that must be taken while slacklining, how to set up and take down slacklines, and how to balance and do tricks on the slackline. They have also been encouraged to think about the connections between slacklining and mindfulness and how they can relate to the program and to their lives. The structure of the slacklining and mindfulness program allows for time to be spent on both activities during every session. The following example of one of the lesson plans I created for the program will offer more information into how the program is structured. Once we have finished our daily few minutes of mindfulness meditation, either breath counting or focusing on one of the four themes, we spend some time in the cafeteria reviewing some of the tricks and skills we have learned on the slackline. The students are asked to sit for a few minutes and choose a couple of skills that they would really like to focus on today and set that as a goal. Once the students have finished deciding we leave the cafeteria to go outside. I split up the children into four groups of roughly three to four students per group. The groups would then move through four stations with roughly 10-minute rotations, for a total of 40 minutes of programming. The four stations included: 1. Learning how to set up and take down a slackline, 2. Slackline fitness Exercises, 3. A body scan meditation, 4. Supervised free time on slacklines focusing on goals. The volunteers that I recruited myself, because of their prior knowledge of slacklining and mindfulness, were invaluable for the facilitation of this lesson. While I facilitated the body scan meditation, Amelia facilitated the slackline fitness, and Patrick taught the students how to set up and take down slacklines. Additional program volunteers supervised the fourth station.

The structure of the program varied week-to-week but kept the basic formula in mind:

1. Starting in a circle in the cafeteria, spending a few minutes on mindfulness meditation
2. Introducing some new information or techniques related to mindfulness
3. Bathroom Break
4. Walking outside to the slacklines, sitting in a circle to review goals for the day
5. Setting up slacklines (once I began letting the students set up slacklines themselves)
5. Introducing slackline activity or skills to focus on
6. A second period of mindfulness meditation for a few minutes
7. Possibly more free time on the slacklines
8. Taking down the slacklines and cleaning up
9. Walking back inside for dismissal at 5:00 pm.

The slacklining curriculum document that I have created offers more in-depth analysis of the structure and facilitation of the various slackline and mindfulness activities that we engaged in throughout the program. Structured in a lesson-plan format that provides activities and exercises to be facilitated, it also includes a discussion of the various challenges that were faced during the facilitation of the program and offers potential options for improvement of the program in the future. This document can be utilized by future students, teachers, and program facilitators who have an interest in learning more about the creation of after-school programming, mindfulness

education, or slacklining curriculum. Future facilitators of this slacklining and mindfulness IRL program can also use the document if the program is to continue once I have stopped facilitating it myself. Furthermore, this document can be utilized as a resource for students, teachers, or program providers who wish to create similar programs in their schools or communities.

Ties to Academia

This public service project relates to my academic and intellectual pursuits in many ways. As a political science major, one of my main interests has been the study of the structure, function, and implications of institutions. My academic advisor within the major, Dr. Dwight Mullen, specializes in teaching about institutions, and much of my perspective on the subject is a result of his mentorship. Working in the IRL program within Asheville Middle School has provided me with an incredibly unique inside perspective on the structure and function of some of our local educational institutions in Asheville. Consistently working within AMS and being in contact with students, faculty, and administrators has allowed me to observe what goes on behind the scenes in operating a middle school. Throughout the course of this project I have also learned about the history of the IRL program and have learned about the process that led to its creation. Fortunately for me, the main IRL staff this year consisted of an entirely new team who is running the program for the first time, so I was able to observe the transition of leadership within an institution and witness first hand how institutions continue to function despite changes in individual leadership.

The process of creating and facilitating this slacklining and mindfulness program and offering it through IRL also provided me with first-hand experience and insight into how to communicate with public education institutions as an outsider in order to create new types of experimental curriculum and policies. One example of the potential for policy changes within IRL arose when I mentioned to the IRL staff that I thought it would be helpful for service providers to meet with students and their parents together in order to ensure that parents were aware of the intentions of the after-school programming and to create a larger, more meaningful dialogue between service providers, students, and parents. While we didn't meet directly with parents during this session of IRL, the staff is now actively looking into hosting a family night for the families of students who are participating in the winter IRL session beginning January 20th.

Another fundamental part of my political science education has involved looking into cultures other than my own, specifically the culture of African Americans. Last fall I took a class titled, *The State of Black Asheville*, with Dr. Mullen where we explored the inequalities between whites and blacks in Asheville through the lens of public policy areas such as housing, criminal justice, education, etc. My research focused mainly on the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program within Asheville Middle School, which is designed to help struggling students succeed in high school and attend college. A large part of my research involved learning about culturally relevant teaching styles and how to bridge racial and cultural divides within the classroom. AMS is an incredibly diverse school with a large number of minorities and students of different cultural backgrounds. Many students also come from families that are struggling with issues such as poverty or food security. Getting to work within the IRL program has allowed me to put a human face on the research that I participated in last fall, and has offered me

an opportunity to work directly with some of these students and develop personal relationships with them. It has been incredibly interesting for me to pay attention to the racial dynamics that have become apparent throughout the facilitation of this program, and it is definitely something that I have kept in mind as the program has progressed. My experience as a political science major has had an enormous impact on the way that I've interpreted my experiences throughout this project, and getting to work within this institutional environment has been an invaluable addition to my education and perspective.

This project also relates in many ways to the material that I studied in Dr. Batada's *Health Parity* class last spring. In that class we explored many of the social factors that contribute to racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender disparities in health. I have kept the information from this class in mind while facilitating the slacklining and mindfulness program and have incorporated much of the information from the class into my program, such as my knowledge of behavior change models. Of course, the program is also a natural outgrowth of the service learning work that I began in Dr. Batada's class, and the work I have done is an example of a practical application of much of the material we covered in class and how it can lead to positive health changes, such as preventing childhood obesity, increasing student's capacities for emotional self-regulation, etc.

Although I am a political science major, much of the work that I have focused on throughout my time at UNCA has been related to mindfulness and contemplative practices. If it were available, I probably would have majored in Mindfulness and Contemplative Studies. This project has given me the opportunity to apply many of the mindfulness/contemplative practices and techniques that I have learned throughout my time at UNCA to an actual real-world program. I hope to continue in this field of work upon graduation from UNCA, and my experience creating this slacklining and mindfulness program and working within IRL has provided me with a wealth of experience to learn and grow from.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

I faced many challenges throughout the facilitation of this program, and out of these challenges came incredible learning experiences for myself. One early challenge was figuring out the balance between structured and unstructured activities. Although the program curriculum that I created seemed great on paper, in practice I realized that there were factors I hadn't accounted for, such as how long students would remain focused on one task. The first two program sessions were somewhat unorganized as I overestimated how long students would remain engaged with the activities I had planned. Because of this, the students received a lot of free time to play on the slacklines. At the beginning of the program this ended up working out fine because slacklining was new to the students and they needed some time to figure it out for themselves. However, by the second week of programming it became apparent that I would need to include more structured activities. After realizing this, I had a conversation with Erin Cotter, the IRL Campus Director and my Community Advisor, about how to improve my program. We talked about some specific concerns that had arisen and she left me with four pieces of advice to keep in mind while continuing programming.

1. Plan/ Stay three steps ahead of the kids.
2. Assign tasks to other adults.

3. Avoid lagtimes.
4. YOU are the leader.

After having run the program a few times, I began to get a much better feel for IRL and the students within my program. I realized that times of transition in between activities provided the greatest opportunity for distractions to arise that would take programming off track. In order to respond to this, I followed Erin's advice and always tried to be three steps ahead of the students in my program. Since I knew transition times were a difficult point for the students, I decided to treat them as opportunities for growth, really emphasizing mindful transitions from one task to another. I also began assigning more responsibilities to my volunteers, and as I did this I began feeling more and more comfortable with this new situation of giving directions to my peers, which can at times feel awkward.

Perhaps the largest challenge I faced was with a few individual students who consistently caused disruptions during programming. When trying to address a group of 16, all it takes is one student who is misbehaving to completely throw off the entire flow of the programming. At first I responded angrily, reprimanding the student and reporting them to the IRL staff. I realized that this only served to push the students further away from me and didn't do much to help with minimizing the disruptions, which seemed to be a reoccurring problem with the individual students throughout all aspects of their lives and not just within IRL. I realized that I would need to try a different method. By doing my own research I discovered a technique called the Two-by-Ten Strategy, developed by the researcher Raymond Wlodkowski. This strategy was designed in order to deal with specific students who continually caused disruptions during class.

Wlodkowski recommends spending two minutes each day for ten days in a row having a personal conversation with any student who is causing major disruptions. The conversation can be about anything that the student is interested in as long as it is appropriate for school. Using this technique, Wlodkowski found an 85 % improvement in the targeted students behavior as well as behavior improvements in all of the other students in class ("Assuming the Best").

I found this method very interesting, and although the structure of this after-school program is slightly different from teaching a class during school every day, I attempted to adapt the method for use in my program. My previous strategy was to ignore the students who caused disruptions and instead focus my time on the students who actually had an interest in learning the material and participating in the activities. Now, though, I began spending extra time with the students who consistently caused disruptions. I noticed that during the time in which I spent with them individually, the students behavior greatly improved and they were able to sustain their attention on the task at hand, as long as I was doing it with them. As soon as I walked away to talk to another student though, the disruptive behavior returned fairly quickly. Although I did not empirically measure the results of this technique, through my own observations I feel like it had a positive impact. I began implementing this technique about half-way through the program, and I feel like I didn't start early enough in order to see its full effects, but this is something that I will keep in mind when facilitating this program or programs like this in the future.

One challenge that could have arisen is ensuring that my schedule is in line with IRL's schedule. I was expected to have arrived at AMS by 3:15 for briefing by the IRL staff, before students begin entering the cafeteria for programming at 3:30. Programs run until 5:00 pm. My program also involved extra time for set up and take down, which added an extra 15 to 20 minutes before

and after programming. Fortunately, I had created my schedule for the semester with the intention of participating in this IRL program, so I did not have conflicts between IRL and other obligations. Another potential challenge arises in the conceptual development of the course curriculum. Fortunately I had spent time prior to the beginning of the program thinking about what types of information and activities I would include in programming. IRL require all service providers to submit a curriculum plan, outlining activities for each week, prior to beginning the program. This is only a rough outline, however, and still involves fleshing out particular details about program facilitation. There were times throughout the facilitation of this program where I became very busy with other projects and struggled to commit an adequate amount of time to my program. Having never facilitated the program before, there were also an abundance of unaccounted for variables that caused the program to look slightly differently than I had originally planned. Having facilitated this program once already, though, and having learned from the various challenges that arose during the programming, I am highly confident in my ability to make huge improvements the next time around. The creation of the slacklining curriculum document will serve as a huge help as I will already have tested, ready-made lesson plans ready for facilitation.

Results

In order to measure whether or not the program goals (stated in the methods & work undertaken section) were accomplished I developed a pre and post student evaluation. The evaluations consisted of 5 questions:

1. Have you ever slacklined before? (Post Survey: Please rate your perceived level of improvement in slacklining during this program)
2. Please define “mindfulness” in your own words.
3. Give three examples of using mindfulness in your ordinary life.
4. Question four consisted of six scaled questions intended to measure student’s levels of mindfulness. These questions were adapted for my program using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) as a guide. For each question, students were instructed to choose one of the following answers: Almost Always, Sometimes, Hardly Ever, or Never. The questions were as follows:
 - a. When faced with a task I haven’t done before, I feel confident in my ability to do it.
 - b. When I don’t immediately succeed at something new, I tend to give up.
 - c. I notice when I am feeling anxious or uncomfortable.
 - d. If I notice that I am feeling anxious or uncomfortable, I am able to make myself relax.
 - e. It’s hard for me to pay attention to only one thing at a time.
 - f. At school, I walk from class to class without noticing what I’m doing.
5. Why did you sign up for this program? What are some things you think we may do?

I designed the questions with the intention of evaluating the stated goals for the slacklining and mindfulness program. Question number 1 provides insight into whether or not the students in the program have had experience slacklining prior to the start of the program and what their perceived level of improvement in slacklining during the program was. Question number 2 provides insight into student’s levels of familiarity with and knowledge of mindfulness prior to

the start of the program and after the programs completion. Question number 3 provides insight into the ability of students to apply mindfulness concepts and practices into their lives. Question 4 attempts to measure student's levels of mindfulness by asking questions about student behaviors. Question 5 is an open-ended question that is intended to give students a chance to share their thoughts and feelings about the program and discover what about the program made students want to sign up. Students' answers to these questions should be able to provide us with an effective measurement of whether or not the program goals were met.

It is important to note that IRB approval was not obtained for this project. Data is collected in-house for IRL and is used to improve programming. While some aggregate data can be made publically available, much of the data cannot be released. It is my intention to pursue IRB approval for future work with IRL in order to produce more publishable research on the effects of this program. Out of 16 initial enrolles, 10 students remained enrolled throughout my entire first program session in Fall 2014 and completed pre and post surveys. By assigning numerical values to each question and grading the surveys in totality we were able to measure aggregate results. Five students increased their scores while five students showed decreased or static scores. Since many of the questions are related to mental awareness, it is possible that after participating in mindfulness activities some students realized they were less aware than they previously thought they were, leading to a decrease in scores at the end of programming. In general, students showed improvements in slacklining and in their level of familiarity with mindfulness.

In addition to the data from pre and post surveys, I have also been provided with a wealth of anecdotal results. I have had the pleasure of witnessing with my own eyes an incredible improvement in slacklining in many of these students. During the first session, none of the students were able to walk across the line or balance for very long. At this point most students feel comfortable with standing and walking and are beginning to incorporate tricks such as jumping, crouching, and sitting on the line. Most students are also able to set up and take down the slacklines by themselves at this point. This has been an incredible process to watch, and when I talk to the students they also feel like they have made great improvements.

I have also seen a huge improvement in behaviors that I believe is a result of our daily mindfulness meditation practices. Before we start the exercise the students are usually very riled up and talking a lot. As soon as we ring the bell and begin the exercise, however, a total silence penetrates the space we're occupying. These few minutes of silence are probably the quietest time these students experience all day, and I can see behavior improvements that occur directly after ending the exercise, although the students usually get riled up again before the program ends. While interest in the mindfulness exercises varies between students, I have noticed that some of them really enjoy the exercises and look forward to them each day. Most students loved the physical feeling that they experienced after participating in the body scan exercise, and some of the students ask me every week if we can do it again. I have also been able to successfully increase the amount of time that we do our mindfulness exercises for from one to three minutes, providing some indication of student's being able to sustain their attention for longer periods of time.

Of course, all of these results are anecdotal but they are still highly meaningful to me. I look forward to refining this program along with the pre/post surveys, gaining IRB research approval, and analyzing future surveys in more depth. Even with the small amount of research data available for the program, the initial anecdotal program results show that the curriculum is meeting the program goals; students are learning how to slackline, showing increased abilities to sustain attention, improved self-awareness of thoughts and feelings, and increased confidence when attempting new activities. It is incredible to see results like this in such a short amount of time. With further curriculum improvement and refinement these results are likely to improve, signaling long-term potential for the sustainability of this program. I look at this work as a pilot project. This was a great opportunity to form connections with AMS students and staff, experiment with constructing a curriculum, learn what is effective and what is not, as well as gain experience in program leadership and pre/post survey creation and analysis. In future projects, all aspects of the work can and will be improved upon.

This paper is focused on the 12-week biweekly afterschool program that was completed in fall of 2014. Since then, I have completed another 8-week IRL program in the winter of 2015 and am in the process of facilitating another 8-week program for the Spring 2015 session. In the Winter 2015 session, five students remained enrolled throughout the entire program and completed pre and post surveys. All five students showed improvement in their scores. I was initially disappointed by my smaller group size for the winter session, but I quickly learned that smaller group sizes lead to more one-on-one interaction with students and increased personal connection and learning. It is much easier to work with a smaller group of students and I believe it leads to more effective programming, especially with a limited amount of programming time. I have had seven students sign up for sessions again with me and three of my students have stayed in the program since the very beginning. Personally, I have become vastly more confident in my ability to work with youth as a program leader. I have watched as my students have shown more respect to myself and to each other throughout the course of programming. I believe the willingness of students to enroll in the program two or even three times is evidence of the program's effectiveness as well as the relationships I have formed with AMS students. The pre/post survey that I created for the Fall 2014 session has undergone small revisions in order to more accurately capture the results of the program and will continue to be revised as needed. In future work with IRL, much more emphasis will be put on obtaining reliable program data with IRB approval so that it can be analyzed and released publically.

Sustainability

The likelihood of this program continuing into the foreseeable future is extremely high. I will continue to facilitate this program but I also see possibilities for others to take over eventually. This is one reason why I have created the slacklining and mindfulness curriculum document; so that the program can be successfully facilitated by someone other than myself, much in the same way that IRL can still operate effectively under different leadership. Separate from this project but similar in scope, I have completed a project supported by the North Carolina Center for Health and Wellness with Dr. Batada, and two other UNCA students, Sydney McGary and Mary Ellen Phillips. This project involved facilitating two weeklong slackline and mindfulness interventions during gym classes at AMS. Using funding from the project, we have been able to

purchase seven slacklines for AMS, which I hope can continue to be used for this program and others like it that may take place at AMS in the future.

In addition to the IRL program and this project supported by the NC Center for Health and Wellness, I have also gained approval to teach weekly slackline fitness classes at UNCA through the Campus Recreation department. These are the first official slackline classes to be offered from a University in this region that I am aware of. I also plan on securing funding to purchase slacklines for UNCA and creating a slackline club (in addition to the mindfulness club that I already founded) before I graduate, which will be directed by a UNCA student other than myself. By creating a slackline club at UNCA, a new institution will be developed that will ensure that opportunities exist at this school for students to learn how to slackline and participate in a slacklining community. My thinking is that UNCA students who join the slacklining club will have opportunities to apply to teach slackline group fitness classes at the University, and if our relationship with IRL continues, then UNCA will always have students who are qualified to run the slacklining and mindfulness program. This will not only ensure the stability of the program at AMS, but it will create amazing opportunities for the coming generations of UNCA students to be involved in something that is truly beneficial and meaningful. I believe that the combination of the slacklining and mindfulness curriculum document, slacklining equipment that has been purchased for both AMS and UNCA, the creation of a slackline club at UNCA, and the existence of a slackline group fitness class at UNCA that students will be able to teach will ensure the sustainability of this public service project, allowing it to continue for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Working on this public service project has been an incredibly beneficial experience for myself, and I hope, everyone who has been involved. My work involved designing a 12-week, bi-weekly slacklining and mindfulness curriculum along with pre and post-evaluations to measure the effectiveness of the program. I then facilitated the program within the In Real Life (IRL) after-school program, which takes place at Asheville Middle School (AMS). Working on this project has not only offered me valuable experience in designing and facilitating an educational curriculum for two subjects that I have passionately studied, slacklining and mindfulness, it has also given me the opportunity to learn first-hand about how educational institutions are structured and function, through my direct experience working with IRL and AMS. My academic background in political science, health and wellness, and mindfulness and contemplative practices has greatly informed and benefitted the service work that I completed for this project. Conversely, this service work has also greatly informed and benefitted my academic studies, offering new perspectives on the material that I work with in class every week. I believe this project, and the accompanying paper, offers a strong example of how our academic work within the University has the potential to translate into real-world benefits. The interdisciplinary nature of this project could also serve as a model for other students who are interested in pursuing projects that may fall slightly outside the realms of their chosen field of study.

I am interested in and committed to continuing to refine and improve this program as well as working to develop and facilitate similar programs of this nature in the future, both within AMS and other settings. The experience that I have gained working on this project has been invaluable to me, and will continue to benefit me as I move forward in the pursuit of my academic and

vocational interests. In addition to the benefits that I have received, the students that I am working with have also been given the opportunity to deepen their mental and physical education through participation in a fun, new, and exciting activity. This project has also created opportunities for other UNCA students, as well as students from Warren Wilson College, to experience working within the IRL program as volunteers for my program. IRL has also benefitted from this project in numerous ways, and they are particularly excited about the collaboration between AMS, UNCA, and Warren Wilson College that was formed. If I am successful in ensuring the sustainability of this program, these opportunities will be able to benefit future generations of IRL staff, as well as students from AMS, UNCA, and Warren Wilson. This has been the most in-depth work on a project that I have completed so far in my studies at UNCA, and I am incredibly grateful to everyone who has helped me along the way. I look forward to continuing this work throughout my time at UNCA and beyond.

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