

Trauma-Informed Mindfulness for Justice-Involved Youth

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Program Description

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and other meditation-based curricula have been shown to reduce stress and promote well-being in youth. Recently there has been a push to create trauma-informed mindfulness (TIM) practices that can be widely disseminated and address the disproportionate burden of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) within marginalized communities. Through both personal experiences with my faith-based meditation and my research experiences with Dr. Richard Davidson in the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin – I understood the neurocognitive and behavioral benefits of mindfulness. Recognizing this personal expertise, I sought out an organization that could benefit from my strengths. That is when I found Heather Martin and the Youth Arts Alliance (YAA). YAA is a nonprofit that offers creative arts programming in youth correctional facilities, community centers, and alternative high schools across Southeast Michigan.

The primary goal of the TIM project is to promote overall well-being by creating a trauma-informed curriculum that centers the specific needs of community youth members and builds a peer learning community. Initially, I intended to run a community-based program in the Parkridge Community Center in Ypsilanti using a "teach the teacher" model. In this model, there would be three phases:

1. Teach mindfulness to engaged and interested youth leaders.
2. Co-teach mindfulness with youth leaders to other members of the Parkridge community.
3. Evaluate and supervise as youth leaders take-on the primary teaching role.

These plans were quickly revised after we saw the lack of infrastructure and resources needed to support youth leaders. Many regular youth leaders who have been involved in Parkridge's leadership couldn't regularly attend with their other familial, academic, and work obligations. Although we had the finances to pay youth leaders for their time and transportation, we couldn't eliminate enough barriers for the regular attendance needed. Learning a truly trauma-informed practice requires time and consistent participation – two luxuries we simply didn't have at the Parkridge Community Center.

Recognizing these needs – we shifted our model. I would maintain the TIM "teach the teacher" model but focus on training current teaching artists. YAA has a group of dedicated and trained teaching artists that were eager to incorporate mindfulness into their own teaching practices. One of the true benefits of mindfulness is that there are multiple avenues for achieving it. My personal running definition of mindfulness is "noticing your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations in the present moment without judgment in as many moments in your life as possible." With this basic definition, there are many ways to achieve that mental state intentionally. Arts, like ceramics or painting, and sports, like yoga or running, can help foster this mental state. Therefore, I started teaching mindfulness to teaching artists along with tips on how they can incorporate it into their teaching practice. In addition, I started teaching mindfulness and creative expressive arts in youth correctional facilities. Last fall, I held two 12-week workshops at Monroe County Youth Center and Washtenaw County Youth Center. This spring, I held an additional two 12-week workshops at Vista Maria residential center in Dearborn and Jackson County Youth Center. These direct engagement opportunities allowed me to serve while learning how I could tailor my TIM curriculum to their specific needs. The workshops split evenly between mindfulness and creative writing. I also worked with both treatment groups, where

youth are placed for long-term confinement, and I can build up a mindfulness practice and detention groups, where youth cycle through, and we built up less but introduced more.

We were smooth sailing until the next big boulder hit – COVID-19. On March 12th, YAA, after consultation with facilities, community partners, and teaching artists, decided to suspend programming indefinitely for the spring. We quickly transitioned to support remote digital engagement, which involved creating a YouTube video series, shipping Creativity Booklets and accompanying art supplies to facilities, and using Zoom to teleconference into workshops at facilities that had the capacity. Starting early April, I started video conferencing into Monroe County Youth Center, Jackson County Youth Center, and Washtenaw County Youth Center to teach mindfulness and creative writing workshop. The youth and facility supervisors are incredibly grateful to have YAA supporting continued creative engagement in time, where all other programming has also been suspended.

Despite these challenges, I feel comfortable with my accomplishments. My primary goal was to create a TIM project that centers the needs of community youth and builds a peer learning community. I feel comfortable I have met both of these aims – I've worked with over 50 youth across four facilities in Southeast Michigan and built out a TIM curriculum that teaching artists can incorporate into their own teaching practice.

Population Served

The American criminal justice system, or my preferred language "criminal punishment system," is inherently anti-poor, anti-black, and anti-immigrant. One of the manifestations of this structural and institutional racism is the disproportionate incarceration of black and brown youth. In Michigan, for every one white youth placed in a residential facility approximately 3.2 minority youth are placed in facilities (1). This disparity represents both the impact of racist

policing, where poor and minority communities are over-policed for small offenses and under policed for severe offenses (2), and disparities in sentencing decisions, where personal biases impact the perspective of prosecutors and judges while legislative discrimination limits discretion (3,4). These practices ultimately lead to disproportionate minority contact and incarceration in the juvenile justice system (5, 6). These known facts bore out in my personal experiences in correctional facilities as well.

Evaluation and Impact

In the spring cycle, we started rolling out our quantitative evaluation framework. We intended to use a pre-/post-test paradigm using the 25-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale and the Emotional Self-Efficacy Scale for Adolescents. We completed pre-testing with all treatment and alternative high school groups, both populations that remain steady over an entire 12-week workshop. However, with COVID-19, we have been unable to implement post-testing. Furthermore, many facilities are thankfully scaling down capacity, so many of the youth from the pre-test are no longer there.

In addition to this quantitative evaluation, YAA has always used a weekly qualitative feedback form that measures interest, engagement, and learning. However, the most significant testament to the TIM programming has been the unsolicited thank-you notes from youth. In this report, I'll share just a few from youth at Monroe County Youth Center who I taught in the fall.

"Thank you for giving me an opportunity to share my art in a safe place and learn new things. You guys encouraged me to grow and I appreciate that so much" – S

"Since January 2019, I've thankfully had the chance to participate with your groups n was able to do really pleasing activities. Recording my raps, meditation, fun outgoing art activities, pictures out of tin cans! Youth Art's Alliance, y'all are my favorite. N even on a cloud day for me, you guys let me comfortable let my sun shine. I appreciate everyone I've worked with N the group in general! Thank you!" – R

"Thank you for helping me learn things even about myself. And it made me feel good when we were all together" – N

Although these are anecdotal, they reflect the true impact of TIM and creative arts programming.

We successfully created space and taught skills that bolstered community and well-being – my primary goals for this project.

Sustainability

I have worked to build out and document my entire curriculum and have shared that with YAA and teaching staff. This way, the work I've done this past year will stay within YAA's institutional memory. Similarly, the teaching artists that I have trained will continue using the mindfulness practices I built up in their own teaching practices. This may not be the sustainability I hoped for, but I am confident YAA will continue incorporating TIM into their training and arts curricula. I am also working part-time for YAA this upcoming year as I apply for medical schools. This way, I can continue entrenching mindfulness in YAA programming.

Reflection

The Schweitzer Fellowship and working with YAA has been the highlight of my graduate career. I pursue public health and medicine to serve marginalized communities – like my own. I spent my formative years on the North, predominantly black, side of Milwaukee, where I saw the impact of policing on my neighbors. This project offered me the opportunity to serve a community I have deep empathy for while learning the nuances and complexities of Southeast Michigan. Yes, Milwaukee and Detroit are both midwestern manufacturing cities; they still differ in their history and context. However, one thing that undoubtedly remains the same is the resilience of disadvantaged communities. The youth I work with are inspiring. They dare to be vulnerable and express their emotions when the world is consistently telling them to stay quiet. These youth have overcome incredible adversity and trauma yet remain eternally hopeful.

In the Sikh faith, we have an idea of "Charhdi Kala," which challenges Sikhs to maintain a mental state of eternal optimism and joy. The youth I've worked with are the personification of "charhdi kala."

Throughout this process I have also gained a newfound understanding of the challenges in nonprofit work. Throughout our fellowship seminars and supporting YAA as they apply for funding or report to stakeholders, I've seen the financial and logistic barriers that can inhibit impact. I've also seen the importance of genuine long-term community. YAA has been in many of these facilities for many years, and Heather, the founder, has long-standing relationships with supervisors and facility managers. These connections are invaluable in this type of project. I could not have done what I did without the network YAA, and Heather built. These lessons, among many more, will be invaluable as I move forward in humanitarian service.

Recommendations

For anyone interested in working with youth in Southeast Michigan, I have two recommendations. First and foremost, engage in critical self-evaluation. We all enter spaces with our own personal baggage, but you need to address that beforehand. You need to truly understand why you are there and what you're trying to achieve. If the goal is true humanitarian service, you need to center the needs of those you serve and be responsive to their needs. Second, as valuable as it is to recognize and document marginalization when in community, focus on sources of resilience. When I'm with youth, I know the statistics and research showing the prevalence of trauma, but I never let that be known. I focus on sources of resilience and community. In humanitarian service, our goal should always be to humanize and uplift, not dehumanize, and criticize coping behaviors. There is much more I could say, but these two recommendations are the synthesis of my experiences in community.

Works Cited

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