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Paul M. Wright & Marissa Fetters

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Aligning Mindfulness-Based Practices with the New SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards

Paul M. Wright and Marissa Feters

According to the Office of the Surgeon General (OSG, 2021), as rates of mental health struggles like depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal ideation among children and adolescents continue to climb, it is crucial that school systems take a comprehensive approach to supporting student well-being. Mindfulness-based practices can support physical, social, emotional, and mental health (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Khalsa & Cope, 2016; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). For example, practices like yoga, breathwork, meditation, tai chi, and martial arts develop one's ability to focus attention on the body's movement and/or physical sensations (e.g., breathing). Having a tangible focal point for one's attention gives the individual something to return to when they realize their thoughts have strayed. In this way, mindfulness-based practices help individuals develop a greater awareness of their thoughts and emotions. This awareness is achieved in part by cultivating a sense of patience and nonjudgment toward oneself. According to Williams and Penman (2011):

Over time, mindfulness brings about long-term changes in mood and levels of happiness and well-being. Scientific studies have shown that mindfulness not only prevents depression, but that it also positively affects the brain patterns underlying day-to-day anxiety, stress, depression, and irritability so that when they arise, they dissolve away again more easily. (p. 5)

But who is teaching mindfulness-based practices to preK-12 students? How can we create a space for young people to develop these skills and dispositions? We propose that physical education is one important setting in the school system where mindfulness-based practice should be taught.

The idea of integrating mindfulness-based practices into the physical education

curriculum is not new. Such calls have been made in the literature for years. In fact, research and program descriptions have made the potential benefits and feasibility of this idea clear (Knothe & Flores Marti, 2018; Mulhearn, Kulinna & Lorenz, 2017). The purpose of this article is to address the alignment of such activities with the recently revised 2024 SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2024). We support the increased use of mindfulness-based practices in preK-12 physical education by illustrating how direct alignments can be made across all four of the new National Standards, as well as all four of the associated grade bands (grades preK-2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12).

In the following sections, we address each standard in turn. After pointing out general connections between a standard and mindfulness-based practice, we share examples of specific practices that can be directly aligned with indicators under that standard when crossed with a particular grade band. This list of activities is not meant to be exhaustive nor to indicate that any given practice can be aligned with only one standard. We merely hope to illustrate through selected examples how teachers can find connections to support the integration of mindfulness-based practices into their classes.

Standard 1: Develops a Variety of Motor Skills

Many mindfulness-based practices develop a range of motor skills that contribute to an individual's physical literacy journey. Yoga and tai chi, for example, involve a wide range of movements and static postures that focus on the integration of the body's action, with mental focus and

breath control. While these practices have been successfully integrated into physical education (Szekeres, Adams & Bogota, 2022; Wright & Burton, 2008), for our example we cross Standard 1: "Develops a variety of motor skills" with the preK-2 grade band to highlight animal movements, a playful and developmentally appropriate way to introduce such practices to young learners.

The general term *animal movements* may refer to locomotor, non-locomotor, jumping and landing, and weight transferring skills that imitate the postures, shapes, and ambulation of various animals. Locomotor skills that require space, effort, and relationship awareness (Indicator 1.2.1) might include walking facing downward on all fours with relatively straight arms to imitate a bear (i.e., bear walk) or doing the same facing upward to imitate a crab (i.e., crab walk). These examples also involve transferring weight on multiple body parts (Indicator 1.2.3) and balancing on different body parts (Indicator 1.2.5). Indicator 1.2.2, which involves jumping and landing, could be addressed by imitating a frog's jump from a deep squat with palms on the floor in between jumps whereas hopping like a bunny involves staying more upright with arms held close to the body and hands in front of the chest. Non-locomotor skills (Indicator 1.2.4), such as holding the shape of an animal like a snake or a mouse, can also be integrated. Teachers can emphasize not just the shape, but the feeling and quality of the different animals (e.g., moving slowly like a turtle or fast like a cheetah). Throughout the flow of these activities there are teachable moments for students to be aware of their energy levels, attention, and breathing while practicing a variety of motor skills.

Standard 2: Applies Knowledge Related to Movement and Fitness Concepts

All physical education activities should address cognitive learning objectives. Mindfulness-based practices are no exception. Those that are more physically demanding present opportunities for students to apply knowledge of movement concepts, health-related fitness (e.g., flexibility, muscular strength, and endurance), and skill-related fitness (e.g., balance, coordination, agility). For our example, we align Standard 2: “Applies knowledge related to movement and fitness concepts” with the 3–5 grade band and yoga.

Although yoga is most widely known for its physical postures, the traditional practice includes other facets such as breathing exercises, meditation, and nutrition. Introducing students to these concepts and the documented benefits of yoga as a form of physical activity addresses Indicator 2.5.13. As teachers introduce classic yoga postures such as downward dog, they can highlight health-related fitness components (Indicator 2.5.7) by highlighting which muscles are being strengthened and which are being stretched. Skill-related fitness components (Indicator 2.5.10) such as balance and coordination can be highlighted when practicing balance poses or sequences such as tree pose or sun salutation. Students can be taught to recognize the critical elements (Indicator 2.5.15) involved in the proper execution of yoga postures because they are the guidelines to both maximize benefits and minimize the potential for injury. Particularly aligned with the notion of mindfulness is Indicator 2.5.14, which relates to recognizing physiological changes in the body. Throughout yoga practice and especially in resting poses like the corpse pose, teachers can create space and structure for students to focus inward on their breathing, their heartbeat, and other sensations throughout their body, as well as in their mind (e.g., relaxation, peacefulness).

Standard 3: Develops Social Skills Through Movement

While mindfulness-based practices often highlight inward focus and self-awareness,

these practices can be promoted through activities and structures that intentionally integrate social skills. To cross Standard 3: “Develops social skills through movement” with grades 6–8, we highlight martial arts content which presents many opportunities for students to demonstrate empathy, respect for others, and a wide range of relationship skills. We chose martial arts practices as an example because, in addition to communication and leadership skills, it creates an opportunity for students to increase cultural awareness and discuss concepts related to conflict resolution (Lee & Wright, 2024).

Whether through their own physical education teacher or a guest instructor, introducing students to well-known Asian martial arts (e.g., karate, taekwondo) presents an opportunity to discuss the important role they play in the history and culture (Indicator 3.8.5) of their home country. Connected to Indicator 3.8.9, the teacher can highlight ways this physical activity conveys traditional values (e.g., respect, self-control, honesty) and etiquette (e.g., bowing before and after practice). Because martial arts skills (e.g., kicks and punches) will be new to many students and challenge their balance and coordination, their practice provides teachable moments to highlight the need to respect and accept others’ abilities (Indicator 3.8.1). Practicing such skills can be made more interactive by using strategies like reciprocal teaching and peer assessment, which allow students to cooperate, communicate positively, and provide each other with constructive feedback (Indicators 3.8.4 and 3.8.10). If some students have previous experience and/or demonstrate sufficient physical and social skills, they can be given opportunities to lead group skill practice, which expands on the idea of leadership development from Indicator 3.8.10.

Standard 4: Develops Personal Skills, Identifies Personal Benefits of Movement, and Chooses to Engage in Physical Activity

A well-rounded physical education curriculum can expose students to a wide range of physical activities with opportunities to explore personal meaning, self-expression, and life-skill development. Many high

schools have courses focused on wellness and lifetime activities that would be an ideal space to infuse mindfulness-based practices as students near the end of their school-based physical literacy journey (Wright & Burton, 2008). Yoga is even mentioned as an example in Indicator 4.12.1. of a physical activity that may meet the need for self-expression. With this in mind, we cross Standard 4: “Develops personal skills, identifies personal benefits of movement, and chooses to engage in physical activity” with grades 9–12 and the idea of breathwork, which can be viewed as a form of meditation with varying degrees of movement.

Breathwork and meditation are central to mindfulness practice (Williams & Penman, 2011), yet they may be quite subtle in terms of physical activity. Even if there is little obvious movement, most techniques foster body–mind connection through focusing on posture, deep breathing (e.g., with abdominal movement), and awareness of sensations within the body, such as tension, relaxation, warmth, or the beating of the heart. While other activities can develop psychomotor skill and physical fitness, breathwork contributes positively to other aspects of health (Indicator 4.12.3) that may connect more with some students’ personal interests (Indicator 4.12.4) and sense of meaning (Indicator 4.12.9). Finally, a direct connection can be made to Indicator 4.12.8, which refers to students analyzing and applying self-selected techniques to manage their own emotions in a physical activity setting. We contend that mindfulness-based practices such as breathwork and meditation are techniques that can benefit students in physical activity settings and beyond. Being aware of and managing emotions are generalizable life skills we should be teaching students to use beyond the preK–12 physical education curriculum (Wright & Burton, 2008).

Conclusion

The new SHAPE America (2024) National Physical Education Standards balance cognitive, psychomotor, affective, and behavioral learning objectives. As illustrated in this article, a variety of mindfulness-based practices can be aligned with the new standards to address specific indicators in the various grade bands. These examples

should not limit teachers but rather spark creativity. Teachers who care about promoting mindfulness-based practices through physical education are encouraged to make their own connections. This brief article underscores the relevance of mindfulness-based practices in physical education and illustrates the ease with which teachers can integrate such content. These practices can add variety to the curriculum, promote holistic development, and benefit students at every grade level.

Disclosure Statement

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Paul M. Wright (pwright@niu.edu) is a distinguished engagement professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL. Marissa Fetters is graduate student in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.

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