

Mindful “Servants:” Reflective Practices in a High School Service-Learning Classroom

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Abstract

Increasingly, public school teachers, administrators, and students are turning towards including reflective practices, such as “mindfulness” activities, in their daily teaching and learning experiences. This article shows the importance of how practitioners and students use and experience these practices, especially in a service-learning program aimed at pushing students to change habits and ways of thinking. This qualitative study explores reflective techniques applied to a high school service-learning course that was created and maintained to push students out of their “comfort zones” and further into community exploration and self-reflection. Results of the study conclude that reflective activities were effective in class and service contexts, supported personal growth and connection, and that students experienced “buy-in,” embracing weekly journal assignments, one-on-one-conversations, and meditation.

Keywords: Mindfulness, service-learning, reflection, meditation, adolescents, high school

1. Introduction

Increasingly, public school teachers, administrators, and students are including reflective practices, such as mindfulness activities, in their daily teaching and learning experiences (Semple, Droutman, & Reid, 2017). According to the Mindful Schools organization, there are over 14,000 teachers trained in mindfulness techniques and 750,000 students who take part in mindfulness activities throughout the school year (Mindful Schools, 2017). Practices such as meditation, journaling and written reflection, one-on-one conversations, and increased attention to allotted times for thoughtful interactions, have all been suggested as ways for students and teachers to deal with stresses or to focus on teaching and learning by “zoning in” through mindful practice (Burnett, 2009; Hobby & Jenkins, 2014). Incorporating mindfulness practices have increasingly shown decreases in stress levels, increased sense of self-worth, and willingness to interact across social and cultural lines in schools and communities (Garrison Institute, n.d.; Kuyken, Weare, Ukoumunne, Vicary, Motton, Burnett, & Huppert, 2013). With such powerful findings in place, it is important to understand what teachers and students think of mindfulness activities in the classroom, including how it affects their teaching and learning, as well as their communication abilities, social interactions, and sense of self-worth. In addition to these areas, this paper explores mindfulness techniques as applied to an academic course that was created and maintained to push students out of their “comfort zones” and into further community exploration and self-reflection, a high schools service-learning course. To study and explore student and teacher conceptions of mindfulness, through practices, experiences, thoughts, and interactions, within the framework of service-learning, can provide a window into how mindfulness can influence a course designed to teach students to be reflective, aware, and engaged.

In the research context of a larger dissertation study conducted in 2015-2016, there was a strong current of mindfulness and reflective practice throughout the data collection period (Author, 2017). The inclusion of reflective activities including journaling, one-on-one discussions, and mediation piqued my interest and I wanted to find out more about what students thought of the practices as they participated. This current manuscript is the result of a concerted effort to explore student experiences in a reflective service-learning classroom as the “servants,” as they call themselves in this program, incorporated mindfulness activities into their service and academic work. The aim of this paper is to better understand how mindfulness practices are thought of by students with hopes that teachers and school districts can be more informed about including these valuable practices in the classroom.

2. Reflective Practices in Schools

Reflective practices such as mediation and journaling have long been studied as important and successful paths towards social and emotional bonding, stress relief, community formation, and personal growth (Donofrio & Klesse, 1990; Edwards, Adams, Waldo, Hadfield, & Biegel, 2014; Leoni, 2006; Rockefeller, 2006; Sibinga, Kerrigan, Stewart, Johnson, Magyari, Ellen, 2011). As more and more teachers engage in mindfulness activities in their social studies classrooms, it is important to understand how teachers and students experience these reflective practices, and how the community of the classroom shifts and changes as a result.

The Willow Falls service-learning program was built with these practices in mind and has been active in the district for almost twenty years. The state of Ohio, where Willow Falls is located, has also included reflective

practices as part of the state service-learning standards, which the Willow Falls program utilizes (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). The teachers, students, and the local community highly value this program and understand the focus on reflection as well as the expectation that students contribute to the democratic classroom structure. Students, teachers and community members interact many times throughout the course of the nine-month school year, defining community beyond typical high school classroom activities and physical space.

There have been a myriad of studies surrounding meditation and reflective practice in schools in recent years and it is viewed as an “emergent field” (Burke, 2010). For adolescents meditation has been used in schools and been shown to decrease stress-levels and regulating emotional issues (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010) while journaling has been shown to provide therapeutic outlets for adolescents (Utley & Garza, 2011). Broadening the scope of meditation, contemplative education (CE) has been used as an umbrella term for a variety of reflective practices in schools. In addition to meditation studies cited before, CE is viewed as a way to enable personal growth and improved social interactions through building awareness (Roeser & Peck, 2009).

Within the field, there are few qualitative studies focused on student perceptions of mindfulness or reflective practices, especially involving mediation. One qualitative study focused on adolescent health and wellness, though not in schools, through reflective practices (Monshat, Khong, Hased, Vella-Broderick, Norish, Burns, & Herman, 2013). In a recent analysis of CE studies, Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen (2010) reviewed 15 studies involving interventions in schools which included three with qualitative designs. Of these studies, Champion & Rocco (2009) and Rosaen & Benn (2006) reported student statements that supported experiences of mediation had helped with student perceptions of social skills and feelings. In Burke (2010)’s preliminary research review, none of the studies included formal qualitative approaches or analysis.

This study aims to contribute to the lack of qualitative studies incorporating student and voice in schools or programs where reflective practices occur. Specifically in this study, how reflective practices are utilized and encouraged in a service-learning setting, where students are expected to move outside of their comfort zones to challenge their worldviews, and how these practices influence participant experiences and thoughts. Within this program, students combine service activities, targeted coursework in English and Government, reflective practices, and challenging social expectations to form a unique setting for further expanding their learning experiences. The role of meditation, journaling, and one-on-one conversations are integral to the Willow Falls program’s community support and success. This article explores the teaching and learning that occurs within these reflective spaces and provides insight into how teachers can think of their own classes as realms of reflective practice and mindfulness activities.

3. Study Methodology

This article is part of a larger study that included an expansive data collection process, further research questions regarding identity and community, and a more detailed, layered, methodology section (Author, 2017). The larger study looked at various forms of community and identity formation in a service-learning classroom in a privileged, suburban public high school, while this article is specifically focused on the role reflective practices played in the research context. This study includes a subset of the participants in the larger study and utilized an interpretive qualitative design.

I collected data related to three different components of this research study; context data, participant interviews and journals, and participant-generated data. Each component was selected to address each of the research questions with regards to student experiences in the program. I approached data collection with the aim of interacting with students to gather data on experiences in the service-learning program over a nine-month service-learning course. My main focus was to use the data collection process to reflect about our work *together* in the class as well as to project a “scholarship of commitment” towards working with students as a service-learning partner (Bourdieu, 2000).

Data Collection

Using an interpretive qualitative design and collection approach, the data for this study focused mostly on student interviews but also included multiple layers of observation, program documents, student documents, and researcher participation. Individual interviews, class observations, site observations and participation, class discussions, and individual journal entries were collected from these twelve students throughout the traditional nine-month school year. Students were individually interviewed three times throughout the school year following Seidman’s (2013) qualitative structure and style which included service-focused interviews addressing a focused life history (Fall 2015), details of experience (Winter 2015/2016), and reflection on meaning (Spring 2016).

Regarding student-generated data, I was granted access to student journals and photographs, which were a part of the service-learning course expectations. Students were expected to send weekly photograph updates, via cellphone and email, to the teachers as they worked at their service sites. Utilizing these student-produced

images and written reflections about their sites and work, students were also asked to co-create/collect data for use in recall and discussion (with the researcher) during interviews as well as prompts for their journal writing. This process was based loosely on *photovoice* methodology, prevalent in health care fields (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 2006). Weekly journals were also a mandatory assignment in class and required written entries and reflections for credit as well as a tally of the weekly service hours students accrued. This approach, along with quarterly site supervisor evaluations, was how the instructors were kept track of student hours at their service sites. Student journals are numbered as the students did, as they did not date the journals in a traditional way.

Data Analysis

I approached data analysis through the creation of a data analysis design (Maxwell, 2012). To do this, I created an analysis structure based on the general procedure for qualitative data analysis outlined in Creswell (2014), utilizing grounded theory analysis procedures from Charmaz (2014). Although described as “hierarchical” and structured in theory, Creswell emphasizes the interactive nature of analyzing the data, describing the process by stating “the various stages are interrelated and not always visited in the order presented” allowing for an iterative and transactional approach to the analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 196). The approach is laid out in Table 1 in a step-by-step manner (from top to bottom) in order to provide a simplified visualization of the process:

See Table 1. *Data Analysis Approach*

Within the structure and analysis design outlined above, and specifically relating to the research questions of this study, I chose a grounded theory analysis approach to analyze data as a way to ground my work and findings in the wide array of data collected (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this research, data was analyzed, coded, and categorized using the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software.

Program Context

The design of the service-learning program was meant to be a structured, academic, approach towards goals personal growth and service experiences for accepted students. The service-learning course selects students from the senior class through an interview-centered application process; in selecting students for the program, special attention was given to personality, volunteer history, and family involvement and is widely considered to be an important part of the school and community.

The Community and School

Deeply embedded in the city of Willow Falls, the service-learning program, and the experiences of the participants in this study are layers of privilege. Willow Falls is the wealthiest city in the county and far above the national and state averages in median household income and education level. The average annual household income in the town of this public high school is around \$118,000 and the poverty rate is 1.3%, far above/below the Ohio state averages of \$48,000 and 16% (U.S. Census Data, 2013). Research on community (and school) re-segregation based on economic and racial lines, falling in line with data suggesting the local metro of Cleveland, near this district, is one of the most economically, and educationally, segregated in the country (Cook, 2015; Florida & Melander, 2015; Gross, 2015). Lastly, students in Willow Falls are expected to be highly successful, academically motivated, and to attend a four-year college (US News and World Reports, 2017). The school prides itself on offering highly rigorous coursework and opportunities including two capstone senior-level course, the service-learning program and Horizons, a philosophy/sociology/literature course that high performing academic students apply to take.

The Service-learning Course

Students in the program engage in yearlong service-learning experiences, consisting of local sites in surrounding urban, suburban, and rural settings. The program culminates with a trip, ASP, to a small, rural town in Appalachia where students do service work in a community. This same community has been hosting this program for over a decade.

The service-learning course selected students from the senior class through an interview and application process. During the admission process teachers paid special attention to student personality, volunteer history, and family involvement. The program was highly valued in the district by administrators, teachers, students, and families, but as recently as four years ago had been the subject of possible cuts or re-workings as the school was dealing with staffing/budgetary concerns.

There were two class periods of service-learning students in Willow Falls. “AM” which met for a double period (100 minutes) from 8:50 am-10:45 am, and “PM” which also met for a double period from 11:40 am-1:15 pm. There was also a shared period, with all 65 students from 10:45 am-11:40 pm. This time was often used for journaling, documentary films, large group discussions about current events/issues in service, and generally social and educational activities, took place. Each section (AM or PM) was divided into two parts each day (~50 minutes each) when students met for class; one for English and one for Government.

Participants

Through purposeful selection and a three-stage participant narrowing process I was able to choose study student participants who would be able to provide rich data and details, telling of their experiences in the service-learning program. Despite lengthy consideration, no one signifier was weighted heavier or was used to determine who would be asked to participate in the study.

Students

The service-learning students were high school seniors, ages 17-18 and attended a public high school in Ohio. The entire service-learning program consisted of 65 students in total. For the purpose of the qualitative study and to focus on participant experiences, a narrowing process was designed. With parental and student permission recorded through the IRB process, 46 students signed up for the initial study. Participant selection began with the administration of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to all 46 students, an intercultural cultural inventory which was used in this study to gauge influence of past student experiences with cultural variation and difference (Hammer, Bennett, & Wisemen, 2003; Hammer, 2011). Participants were identified using IDI scores to locate students who scored low on the intercultural survey, in the middle, and scored high. Along with the IDI scores teacher participants and I discussed student schedules, program requirements, and possible student experiences at various service sites.

In total, twelve participants were selected for full data collection, of which the following five were included in this study. In order to accomplish this aim the narrowing process occurred as data collection was finished and data were organized, twelve student dossiers, one for each participant, were constructed consisting of short summaries of all three audio interviews, journal entries, research memos and field notes. I analyzed each dossier (roughly 6-8 pages) for intriguing details and experiences and compared with both rounds of IDI survey results and course-related journal entries. In this last stage, identifiers such as sex, race, academic performance, site experiences and location, and the richness of qualitative data and descriptions factored into this the narrowing of the participant field. In total, five final participants were selected:

See Table 2. *Student Participant Snapshot*

Bernice. Bernice was 17, an African-American female, and motivated academically, taking some AP courses in her schedule. However, she saw herself more attuned to social interactions and leadership experiences, enjoying her time in summer leadership camps and school clubs. Bernice had moderate leadership and volunteer opportunities with church and family (citing her grandmother's influence) and enjoyed them immensely. Bernice enjoyed school and learning, and considers herself a good student but she was also dyslexic and struggles at times with reading and writing. She was a longtime Willow Falls resident and has attended school in the district K-12. Bernice's sites included a local charitable foundation that funneled donations to local causes in Willow Falls and an elementary school for refugee children in a nearby metro area.

Justin. A lacrosse player, 17, well-spoken and popular, and well known for his athletic exploits. He was very organized and when we scheduled interviews was always punctual to class and our interviews. He was pleasant and he described himself as an average student who liked school but did not get the best grades. Justin mentioned ADHD issues in class and how being able to get out of school was a major part of his desire to apply to the service-learning program. He attended Willow Falls schools for his entire education and views the schools as excellent. Justin was in the AM section of the service-learning program and reported that his experiences in the class and at his site were very positive. Justin's sites were an elementary school in a large metro area neighboring Willow Falls and at an adult developmental disabilities center in a nearby college town.

Sarah. A quiet, intelligent, and measured 17 year old, white female. She was often mentioned by the service-learning teachers as one of the students they loved and was pointed out by the teachers as example of someone who "gets it." Sarah described herself as not academic and more hands on and interested in the arts, and as someone who was not interested in academic competition or upper level/AP classes. Her family is very well known and had as strong presence in the city and her grandfather/mother run the international organization to combat hemophilia (a disease which runs in her family) and is a 2nd-12th grade attendee of Willow Falls schools. Sarah's service sites included a Montessori school in Willow Falls with Kindergarten students, and two hospice care centers (she was one of few students with three sites), one in Willow Falls and one in a nearby town.

Samantha. Samantha is a white female, age 17, a cheerleader, active marching band member, and rugby player. Samantha has extensive prior service experience, the most of any of the participants in this study, and spent a vast majority of her time before enrolling in the program working at her church in Willow Falls. Samantha was in the AM section of the service-learning program and described herself as highly motivated and academically focused. Samantha received very high grades during her high school career and viewed herself as a competitive student. Samantha was the only participant who was added to this study later in the semester as she was identified as one of the students who were struggling with their service and coursework (Research Memo, November 20, 2015). Prior to Willow Falls, she had attended schools in other local suburbs and a school within a nearby city. Samantha's service sites included an animal sanctuary for abused and neglected animals of all types (goats, pigs, horses, etc.) and an elementary school in Willow Falls.

Vincent. An 18 year old male from a large family and during our interviews he was proud to talk about his mother who had just had a newborn son, his new little brother. Vincent is a football star and well-known athlete in the community. He is well liked and social with friends but very reserved and hesitant to talk in the classroom during projects and site debriefs on Thursdays. Vincent described himself as uninterested in academics and with average to poor grades. Vincent had worked for the last two years in his own landscaping business with another senior at Willow Falls, and was well known in the community due to this business and his athletic exploits. Vincent moved to Willow Falls in 3rd grade and viewed the town as his home. Vincent's site placements included a Willow Falls elementary school, working with special needs and students with disabilities and a large Children's hospital in a large nearby metro area.

The Service-learning Teachers

In addition to the student participants, I interviewed the two experienced service-learning teachers, with the pseudonyms of Ms. Ananda (English certified) and Mr. Johnson (Social Studies certified), once during the school year to provide context into the aims and objectives of the service program, as well as to explore the teaching approach and pedagogical methods used to achieve these aims. I also had many short discussions with each teacher throughout the year, resulting in a series of research memos and field notes. Although not the focus of this study, I wanted to interview the teachers not only to better understand the context and approach to the course, but also to identify the key moments and purposes of the course.

Ms. Ananda. The lead teacher in the service-learning course, Ms. Ananda, has been teaching in this program for fifteen years. She has been the driving organizer, teacher, and curriculum writer for the course and utilizes her experiences in college in a similar program to inform how she thinks about schooling, service and the link to community and citizenship. Ms. Ananda is in her late thirties, a white female, and she considers herself as politically liberal. She is National Board Certified, and holds a Master's Degree in English from a large, rural, Midwestern university. Her experiences with a professor there, as well as her work as a Girl Scout in the women's community, resonated with her and her teaching and drove her to seek out a teaching position that would allow her to continue her service teaching and learning. Students, administrators, and fellow teachers in the Willow Falls district view the service-learning program as nearly synonymous with Ms. Ananda.

Mr. Johnson. Most responsible for teaching social studies/government standards, site visits, scheduling, and sharing of grading and service evaluations, Mr. Johnson was a highly respected teacher in the district, and like Ms. Ananda, is also Nationally Board Certified, and holds a Master's Degree. His master's is in History from a prestigious Midwestern university. Mr. Johnson considers himself a moderate conservative, a practicing Catholic, and has been teaching in the district for fifteen years. He has been the social studies teacher in the service-learning program for a total of seven years (this is his second stint with Ms. Ananda due to scheduling changes) and according to Ms. Ananda, he is known as a good-natured, highly intelligent, and caring teacher. He teaches service-learning (the government periods) and AP U.S. History, he was well liked by his students in service-learning. Program students affectionately referred to him as their "awkward dad" and valued his approach to class and his general enthusiasm for learning and service.

4. Results

Program Expectations

The school district, high school administrators, and service-learning teachers had high expectations and respect for the program and the students involved. The program was constructed to provide outlets for experiential learning with specific foci on emotional experiences, cultural and community experiences, varied literature and art, in-class challenges, and a social or communal formation of a service-learning "family." The emotional and social changes that students were expected to embrace required the teachers, students, and program aims to be flexible and open. Mr. Johnson, the government teacher in the program, believed that emotional experience was one of the keystones in the program. He viewed his role as part of creating an emotional safe space for students to allow themselves to say what they feel, and to be vulnerable. Mr. Johnson explained:

I think about it in terms of emotions, a class ending with tears, or for example, one of our students talking about one of her hospice patients that she lost breaking into tears. Where that same student, only four months early, was having a hard time like 'what do I do with hospice' it was very strange for her.... Four months earlier she was having a hard time with it... now she is in tears over it? When I walk into my AP US class you are not seeing tears, unless they got a bad test back [laughs]. (Mr. Johnson, Interview 1, May 25, 2016)

As a teacher, this course represents an opportunity to reach students on a deeper, more personal, level. Both Mr. Johnson and Ms. Ananda value the relationships that are formed in the program and being able to teach something "more" than a typical class allows for a fulfilling and emotional journey each year. These expectations are reinforced throughout the year, during classroom activities or assignments, service site visits, large group briefings and debriefings, and in official course documents.

For example, the course syllabus was laid out, as a typical college/high school syllabus would be; the document

included contact information, a course description, and assignment protocols as well as rules and acceptance policies and important course expectations. For example, in the syllabus, two major emergent themes of this dissertation, specifically “service-learning as family” and “comfort zone challenges” are explicitly mentioned and addressed. Regarding “family,” the syllabus outright states this is a major aim of the course:

Furthermore, you will have the opportunity to be working alongside all of your classmates – not just the ones that you currently know. Service Learning seeks to create a “family like” atmosphere – and it is through working with all persons, that this bond is created. Therefore, now is the time to let go of the stereotypes that you may have of some of the classmates. Now is the time to accept your new brothers and sisters for who they are, where they are, and know that they will do the same for you. Everyone is given a fresh start within this room – take advantage of it. (Service-Learning Course Syllabus, 2015, p. 1)

Ms. Ananda is explicit about expectations of togetherness, it was expected to be familial in nature, and she viewed this aim as a requirement that was far beyond a typical classroom. Referring to the service-learning community as a “family” was a key way Ms. Ananda differentiated the program from other classes and programs at Willow Falls.

First, the fact that “family” was named outright in the syllabus as a course goal reverberated through student documents and interviews; students readily talk about “family” in the classroom and in passing with each other. This concept was used as a binding term, one that made the program of exclusive belonging, and enabled the idea that like families, there would be disagreements and emotional times, but families must stick together due to their familial bonds and responsibilities. This was a profoundly present concept in the course documents and assignments in the program.

Second, the idea that student comfort zones must be challenged through personal and emotional growth, was a major component of the syllabus. Teaching and learning was referred to as “in process” and recursive in the syllabus, and key challenges to student expectations and norms, openness to new things, personal growth and exploration, must occur in exciting ways according to the syllabus. For example:

I wish for you to keep a beginner’s mind in all that you do for this (and hopefully other) course(s). A *beginner’s* mind is characterized by openness, a questioning, and a quest for answers and experiences – with a congruent attitude of trust and doubt, along with a sense of simplicity. *Learning is a state of excitement* – as you will learn not only about yourself, but also about all of your fellow classmates. Each of you will have an opportunity to be both student and educator in this course [emphasis in the original]. (Service-Learning Course Syllabus, 2015, p. 1)

The “beginner’s mind” metaphor is one that allows us to see how the program expects students to approach their service work, but specifically their openness to new things, to difference. Continuing in the syllabus:

I truly believe in making the educational experience one that is challenging, and yet, at the same time, entertaining. I really want you to be able to grow as a student and a human being – and I know that I will be learning and growing alongside you. (Service-Learning Course Syllabus, 2015, p. 3)

The challenge that Ms. Ananda illustrates in the syllabus excerpt above shows that students and teachers are linked in the learning process; the community of the program is to be formed through these challenges.

The idea that students not only must accept this as part of the course, but to also readily embrace this process of challenge, was a constant theme. Students were expected to be open and willing to dive into uncomfortable situations and not only tolerate, but also actively work to fight the urges to avoid or hang back. Ms. Ananda and Mr. Johnson discussed this aim often, sometimes daily, and made sure to try to model their expectations. For example, Ms. Ananda, a longtime vegan/vegetarian, went with students on their service trip to a slaughterhouse, to see where meat is manufactured. Students viewed her actions, like the slaughterhouse example, as a blueprint for their own struggles with times when they had to expand their experiences and comfort zones. One student specifically mentioned Ms. Ananda, and her own struggles, in a large group discussion at the end of a day of service on their trip in April;

I was at the slaughterhouse... I think it was a really memorable experience. Ananda was out of her comfort zone [laughs]. And Wednesday I was at the recycling station and honestly it was the worst experience... I saw a lot of things there that can’t be recycled and it made me want to not [throw unrecyclable items into the bin]. (Student, ASP Debrief: Full Group Discussion, April 28, 2016)

The student’s recognition of Ms. Ananda’s ability to step outside of her comfort zone shows that students noticed; the teachers were expected to model servant qualities and when they did, students were able to see teacher and classmate behaviors, and were expected to reflect about their own work, as Lyla did in this excerpt.

“One-on-Ones”

On Thursdays there was time in class set aside for weekly site debriefings in respective sections. There were 10-40 minutes set aside for large group discussions and questions about site, including time to show student pictures taken at sites, as well as to address any key moments or struggles that individuals had at their sites that week. Often the debriefing times were focused on major events at the sites; for example, a death in a retirement community that affected a student, or perhaps struggling to get children to pay attention in a Head Start

classroom. Each time a student brought up an issue, Ms. Ananda asked for feedback or suggestions from the group, hopefully engaging enough students to get multiple ideas or approaches for the issue at hand.

Each debriefing started with a “one-on-one” random student pairing in which one student talked about their site work that week as the partner listened. This process left an indelible mark on the students as they made their way through the program. At first viewed as uncomfortable or “awkward,” students eventually fell into a certain comfort-level with the one-on-ones and referenced their effectiveness frequently in our interviews. One-on-ones were an incredibly important part of the course:

Starting today discussing the past week’s site work. Students start in pairs with one talking about what they experienced, while the other listens silently. This is an extension of the listen activities that have been going on for the last few weeks. Students seem much more comfortable after three weeks of this listening exercise and are happily talking. Loud, engaged, fast talking as they are timed for two min. “Ok swap, and remember check that ‘me’ voice, the goal is truly hear what they say, to really focus on their experiences and site,” Ms. Ananda says. Students listening usually nod or smile, some look intent or concerned, and that awkwardness of the first few times trying this exercise seems much reduced. . . . Students sit in chairs, knee to knee looking into each other’s faces. Ms. Ananda sets and alarm [a yoga bell] and after two more minutes, students head back to their assigned [mixed up daily by Ms. Ananda] seats. (Field Notes, September 10, 2015)

In this description of the one-on-ones, reflection and personal connection were important. Ms. Ananda as making sure students mimic a site interaction with someone they are serving, with the idea that being present was the most important part. According to Ms. Ananda, this taught skills students would need at their sites (Class Observation, September 10, 2015).

Some students struggled with this part of the course and having participated in a few one-on-ones myself (paired randomly with a student, and I talked about my own service work in the program along with theirs), it was important not to discount how much value Ms. Ananda places on this exercise. Justin explained:

I think the biggest thing that brought us all together, were the one-on-ones that we did. In my opinion, those are huge. . . . ‘Cause there would be people that you’re uncomfortable with in the class, that you don’t, never really talked to before, and you’re just like going in, and then you’re like. (Justin, Interview 2, March 17, 2016)

Justin talked about one-on-ones as community building exercises, times when classmates they did not know would be someone they had ended up talking and sharing with. Although the one on ones were meant for practice and to work on speaking skills with another person, the community building effects of the practice were another intention, so that each student spoke with others in the class about their site work as often as they could. Sarah expanded on this process:

I think when we sat down to do those one on one’s, that’s when I realized this would be a different kind of class because. . . . You just realized oh so this isn’t gonna be like a regular English and Government class. This is gonna be, like you’re gonna be family with these people. And that’s when it happened. (Sarah, Interview 2, April 6, 2016)

Sarah saw the one on ones much like Justin, as a way to challenge her communication skills and build towards her site interactions. She also directly linked the idea of a service-learning “family” to the one-on-one processes, speaking above, that’s “when it happened.” The community of the program, the “family,” emerged out of these interactions and allowed for bonding interactions among the program participants even while they engaged in very different service sites and experiences.

Journaling

Student journals provided specific quotes and experiences as context for the interviews for me as a researcher, as well as provide an arena for student reflection as individuals. One of the most overlooked elements of service-learning work and can be critical in developing reflective students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Popok, 2007). The journals allowed me to access reflections regarding community, citizenship, site experiences, and self-efficacy.

Weekly student journals and reflective art activities were mandatory assignments in class and required written entries and reflections for credit as well as a tally of the weekly service hours students accrued. This approach, along with quarterly site supervisor evaluations, was how the instructors were kept track of student hours at their service sites. Student journals were numbered as the students did, as they did not date the journals in a traditional way. Journal labeling examples included a coded number, for example “4/1,” referring to the fourth journal entry of the first nine weeks, or grading period.

Journal topics ranged from current events, to service site problem-solving questions, to exploring personal beliefs and ideals related to the program and its expectations. Students often wrote about critiques, attributes, or concerns regarding the class that they wanted teachers to read. This democratic approach gave teachers immediate feedback as they workshopped assignments, trips, and expectations with students during journal writing sessions. For instance, there were some complaints about a reading focused on a single mother and her

experiences, as students felt defensive, and even angry about the assignment. Obviously this was hitting a personal chord for some students and one of the journaling students giving critique felt that further explanation of why would help the class avoid the anger and disillusionment. Ms. Ananda termed the student as a representative of the class, met with the student to talk through some of the key journal points to get a better feel for what the student was alluding to. (Field Notes, September 13, 2015).

Other journal entries focused on key words, phrases, or concepts that the teachers wanted to students to explore further in a personal entry. For example, during the week of the Thanksgiving holiday, the word “gratitude” was a theme for the service-learning program. The journal prompt that week asked the following:

Since we are entering the season of Thanksgiving, what are you grateful for?

Students responded with a variety of answers, but most centered on family and friends. For example, Justin and Samantha’s examples were similar to other responses during this week:

I am so so thankful for my whole family. My Mom and Dad are always there for me and supporting me.

Also, I'm really close with my step siblings and they make my life so much fuller. Also thankful for all my great friends (Justin, Journal 3rd Entry/2nd Quarter).

I'm really thankful for my friends. I think there's something special about really good friendships and I believe in the saying that friends are the family you choose to love. I have a lot of friends that I've known for a long time but also some I just met this year and I'm not at all ready to leave any of them for college. I don't know how I could survive everything without the support of the people around me (Samantha, Journal, 3rd Entry/2nd Quarter).

The second prompt that week, also related to gratitude, focused more on student service activities, especially in regards to those they were serving in the program. The following prompt, and Samantha’s response, show how students used the journal to reflect on their service work and their role as a “servant” in that context:

Prompt: Discuss either one of these topics, the impact of gratitude At Your Service site, or the effect of being self-directed at your service site.

Response: I think gratitude at my service site has had a big impact. Working with special-needs kids really makes you thankful for being born healthy but also background the kids who are struggling with things that are so basic, like spelling the word “and” and not mixing up the letters b and d. It makes me really thankful for Learning and education. All the gratitude for that makes that much more special to be there (Samantha, Journal, 4th Entry/4th Quarter).

Samantha’s response shows deeper thinking about her own role, abilities, and connection to those at her site and encourages her to take ownership of her site work, through asking about self-direction or through discussing gratitude. Samantha’s response echoed other participants in that “being fortunate” for their situations and station in life were a common theme in their answers. The privileged background of the service-learning participants was a constant theme in their reflection as well as how they viewed themselves and those they served, often in diametrically opposed ways. Samantha’s view of herself as someone who can “do,” and those at her service site as those that “can’t,” shows how important reflection and challenging assumptions can be, as well as the inherent hierarchy within service-learning programs, and it’s influence on student growth and reflective practice success.

In-Class Meditation

Students also spent English class-time on Fridays in a variety of personally reflective activities. Students wrote in their personal journals during English every Friday (notebooks were provided by the school, program) and also engaged in specific activities that gave the students time to reflect.

The most consistent reflective activity was meditation. Local community groups donated money to the program to purchase meditation cushions and most Friday’s Ms. Ananda facilitated the meditation time (roughly 10-12 minutes). These Friday activities often involved a positive visualization of self and others and encouraged students to reflect on their service sites in their journals afterwards. Ms. Ananda prompted the meditation and reflection activities and her approach was meant to provide time for reducing stress and balancing personal well-being with student work in the program and rest of their secondary coursework (Ms. Ananda, Interview 1, May 25, 2016).

I participated in meditation time four times during the year, and each time Ms. Ananda followed a similar pattern; lights off, soothing music playing in the background, and Ms. Ananda directed positive visualizations of self, friends and family, people in the service learning program, and student sites. Meditation often looked like this:

Starting with breathing exercises, and some very relaxing, smooth music. LB led these exercises which led to visualizations of self and loved ones bathed in light... the last visualizations were of the self, students had to visualize themselves in an uncomfortable position at their sites at some point this week and were instructed to say the mantra “its ok” regarding their discomfort. This final visualization was the longest of the three visualizations. Students sat on meditation pillows or on the edge of their seats in a meditation position. Lights were off, incense was burning in the morning as the students arrived to school. After 5-6

minutes of meditation and music, the lights were turned back on and students were asked to describe their feelings and experiences of the past week, LB asked if they were tired and almost all of them raised their hands. (Field Notes, September 4, 2015)

Much like the one-on-ones, students had strong reactions to the inclusion of meditation in English class, when asked how classmates have changed over the course of the program, Bernice specifically brought up meditation, saying, "I think I've seen a definite shift. We were all gung-ho on the meditation train, for sure, meditations are no joke... it helps with stress" (Bernice, Interview 2, March 14, 2016).

Regarding visualization, stress levels, and perspective shift, Bernice viewed the meditations on Fridays as an important component to the week. By week four of my observations, most students readily embraced their meditation times. Ms. Ananda would often talk about meditation and focus, and if a thought arrived during meditation, acknowledge it and come back to focus on the meditative state. This impacted Sarah's thinking about life stresses and service, mentioning it in response to a question about her mental health and her life experiences. Sarah's explained:

And when we did meditation [Ms. Ananda] always said- 'cause we wanted to think about one thing, you know- she said, "If you have another thought, acknowledge it and move on." And everyone- I think she said that the first week- but ever since she said that, I've reminded myself of that, even when I'm just trying to go to bed or I'm trying to focus on something. I usually acknowledge that and I move on, and I think that's a really good way to go about things. Because it's good to acknowledge what you're thinking; acknowledge the feelings that you're having; but that doesn't mean you should let that hold you back from what's happening in real life. (Sarah, Interview 3, May 20, 2016)

Meditation and other reflective exercises played a key role in the course. Besides fulfilling a state service-learning standard, Ms. Ananda viewed meditation as an important health activity. Sarah obviously saw it as a way to level and to de-stress when many thoughts or lists of things to do got in the way. The idea of being focused also had practical uses when students and teachers talked of "being present" at their sites and with people they were serving. A "servant" approach required students to meet those they serve where they were and to engage with them in their service work authentically. Meditation was a way to practice this focus and attention.

5. Discussion

Reflective practices played a major role in the Willow Falls service-learning program. Cultivated from the beginning of the course in August, teachers and students expected to be asked tough questions, face challenging moments, and to participate in the course within the framework of the expectations laid out by teachers and students alike. In this study, there are three main threads that emerged from the research; 1) there was an expectation of reflection, or "buy-in" for all students; 2) by and large, students embraced the reflective practices in the program and felt they were valuable to their work; 3) personal growth, through challenge and reflection, was the main expectation of the course, requiring student presence and engagement.

Regarding "buy-in," teachers and students had a specific model of how to engage with reflective practices and become a part of the service-learning "family" in the right way. There was an undercurrent of social norms and hierarchy during the process as students felt that some of their peers exuded the service-learning ethos, while others, through action or lack of reflective practice, did not. One of the key ways that participants tracked "buy-in" was through group work and one-on-ones. Students often talked of the "buy-in" process as a way of forming a "family." This idea, that the program exuded a "family"-like social structure was born out of student descriptions of the teachers as "Mom and Dad" as well as their classmates as "family" members, complete with problems, co-operation, arguments, and success. Cultivating this community in the classroom was the work of explicit language, continual reflection activities focused on the "family" aspect of the program, and acceptance of the programmatic ethos.

Sarah was very specific in that she saw classroom atmosphere as a "family." The sense of belonging that she felt in the class was important for how she saw her service work and her classmates. In our second interview, Sarah talked about how the "family" environment formed through conversations, and how it became the most important part of service-learning. Sarah describe the class:

It's more of a family than fellow students and that's something you can't- you know- you can't wish for, I think that's pretty special. I think that's probably what the teachers wanted us to do. I think that those one-on-one conversations when we first started, you know- everyone was like- ugh we do this such a weird thing but even then those conversations, [are meaningful] when you're asking someone what's going on. (Sarah, Interview 1, February 27, 2016)

Referring to the structure of the course and teacher intent, Sarah expanded on a key finding in this study; forming a "family," or community atmosphere through one-on-ones or meditation, was one of the most important components of the program. The idea that students would enter the program as strangers and leave as family members was entrenched in documents, assignments, discussions, and day-to-day conversation.

Next, participants embraced their reflective practices as part of the program, the teacher expectations, and

with interactions with one another. The one-on-ones specifically intrigued the participants at the beginning of the year as something new, important, and challenging. For Justin, the one-on-ones were key to group cohesion, and valued their role in forming the class into an active community of service-learning students. According to Justin:

I think the biggest thing that brought us all together, were the two one-on-ones that we did [during the first week of classes in August]. In my opinion, those are huge. 'Cause there would be people that you're uncomfortable with in the class, that you don't, never really talked to before, and you're just like going in, and then you're like (Justin, Interview 2, March 17, 2016).

The reflective practice of the one-on-one conversations, as well as the expectation of interacting and really talking with another person, was. Both uncomfortable and highly valuable to the participants. These interactions allowed for community bonding and individual connection.

Mixing meditation, one-on-ones, and journaling every week, students were accustomed to the repeated requests for reflection and worked in a variety of different arenas to express themselves and their concerns or successes in their service work. The conversations and reflective activities students took part in not only influenced their approach in the program, but also in other aspects of their lives. Participants felt they were thinking clearer, less stressed, and more attuned to the needs of their friends, families, and those at their service sites. In this quote, Vincent talks specifically about using meditative practices while connecting with others during his service work. When asked about how reflection has changed his interactions with people at his service site, Vincent said :

Just like skills and like talking to people, like we practice all the time- we'll spend like 2 minutes just staring someone down, looking, and um- like little visual meditating- Like the projections. You just take it down a level and realize what's important [the personal connection]... and everything else is just irrelevant (Vincent, Interview 3, May 31, 2016).

For Vincent and other participants, reflective practices, like meditation, allowed them to focus, slow down, and concentrate on the moment. A common. Refrain in class, being "in the moment" with another classmate, teacher, friend, or person at their service sites was an incredibly important part of the reflection component in the program. The teachers and students used reflection to move out into their service sites and to think, express ideas, and interact with others in meaningful ways.

Finally, participants believed that reflective practices were inextricably linked to personal growth. Students felt they would grow as a result of their work in service-learning, and by the end of the program, felt that they had grown in some capacity. The idea that learning service meant pushing outside of one's comfort zone into a new boundary, as the path towards becoming a more reflective person, was a major component of the program at Willow Falls. Again we hear from Vincent, about his feelings of growth and connection due to the reflective practices and ethos of the program. Vincent maintained that:

I would say service learning is a lot about getting outside of your comfort zone and really learning more about yourself that you never thought you knew, um, I learned a lot about myself... I've matured a lot. (Vincent, Interview 3, May 31, 2016)

Like Vincent's example, students felt more empowered and confident in their abilities to communicate with new people in new situations as well as how their experiences shaped their perspectives and prior judgments of people. Students and teachers also spoke of being a servant throughout the study duration, and specifically how experiencing discomfort was the main path toward this aim. Students were expected to demonstrate their reflective journey in a variety of ways; through journal entries, in-class sharing about site work (every Thursday), and in informal conversations with Ms. Ananda and Mr. Johnson (Johnson, Interview 1, May 25, 2016). This perceived growth allowed for a tool-kit that enabled the adherence to program ideals of what a good "servant" would be and how they would act and think. This "servant" identity was encouraged by the program and adopted as an ethos by the teachers and students to show personal growth through reflection and experience.

One main idea, that to buy into the servant mentality is a rejection of "normal" or "comforting," was an important opening into the process that students went through on their servant journeys. Wrestling with discomfort was the most cited finding that contributed to what students perceived as their own personal growth and it was a major feature of the program and expectations set forth by both the teachers and students involved.

6. Conclusion

One-on-ones, mediation, journaling, and debriefings were utilized consistently in the class to setup time for student reflection and mindfulness. This approach was critical for teachers and students to truly engage with their service and coursework, while striving to connect as a "family" and to grow personally throughout the year. Teachers can utilize reflective activities and spaces in their classrooms in a variety of ways and in this study, students embraced the process and approach in order to further their experiences.

Regarding future research, there are multiple avenues to explore qualitative experiences in the varied sub-practices within a mindfulness approach in the classroom. Administrators, teachers, and students consistently

report positive effects of mindfulness activities in their schools and classes, but qualitative studies are needed to further explore “how” this process occurs. I am especially interested in future research that explores mindfulness in other experiential education structures such as study abroad, action research, or place-based learning coursework. And as educational settings become based in information and communication technology and more personalized, computer-based, and data/information driven, studying the use of mindfulness activities in these contexts may provide important findings.

There are multiple organizations that are interested in expanded reflective practices and mindfulness approaches into schools and classrooms and the research surveyed for this article shows that these activities and methods are important and lead to improvements in many areas for adolescent participants. Termed as an “emerging field” by Burke (2010), educational and health researchers can engage with teachers and students engaged in reflective practice to explore what students and teachers see as they work, and reflect, on how interventions like meditation, one-on-one conversations, and journaling can influence and support student learning and experiences.

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Table 1: *Data Analysis Approach*

1. <i>Organization and Preparation of data</i> : Reading and getting a more nuanced sense of the data, seeing initial emergent categories/themes and organizing into the analysis design stages.
2. <i>Initial Coding</i> (utilizing Charmaz, 2014, Maxwell, 2012): Using organizational and etic codes based on data readings and emerging code categories.
3. <i>Description of data</i> : Utilized codes to describe, in specific detail, key themes, categories.
4. <i>Representation of data</i> : Using a narrative approach allowed for direct links to research questions and codes/themes within the data.
5. <i>Interpretation of data</i> : What major takeaways were found in the data, how did this connect with the initial research questions? What are the findings “saying?”

Table 2: *Student Participant Snapshot*

Name	Section	Service Hours (class avg: 232)	Service Sites (Fall semester is above, Spring, below)
Bernice	PM	266	WF Charity Organization Urban Refugee School
Justin	AM	218	Urban Elementary School Urban UDS
Sarah	AM	210	WF Montessori School Hospice Care (two sites)
Samantha	AM	193.25	Animal Rescue Farm WF Elementary School
Vincent	PM	194	WF Elementary School Children’s Hospital