

Conference Proceedings

Mindfulness to Support Diverse Learners:

An Inclusive, Culturally Affirming Approach for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Individuals with Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive Adversities

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Chavis On The Go

Abstract

This paper highlights evidence-based mindfulness practices for diverse learners with emotional, behavioral, or cognitive adversities. It emphasizes inclusive, culturally affirming environments and introduces the 3 R's—Rise, Rejuvenate, Reoccur—and the ABC's—Awareness, Breath, Compassion—as an adaptable framework that promotes regulation, healing, and empowerment to support equitable outcomes for success among marginalized students.

Keywords: mindfulness, regulation, diverse

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Introduction and Positionality

As a Black woman raised in a low-income, single-parent household and educated in predominantly white institutions, I have experienced firsthand the inequities embedded within our educational systems. Although I was not formally identified for special education, my own diverse learning needs went unmet, reflecting a broader trend of systemic neglect. Over the past 34 years, I have worked in special education spaces as an advocate, clinician, and educator. My practice, grounded in mindfulness, is guided by a commitment to supporting those silenced by systems that often have ignored their needs. I developed the ABC's of mindfulness—Awareness, Breath, and Compassion within the 3 R's framework—Rise, Rejuvenate, Reoccur—to empower learners, particularly BIPOC individuals, facing emotional, behavioral, or cognitive adversities.

Disparities in Special Education and the Urgent Need for Inclusive, Strength-Based, and Culturally Affirming Environments

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are disproportionately represented in special education and are more frequently labeled with stigmatizing classifications such as emotional or intellectual disabilities (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Cavendish et al., 2018; Morgan, 2020). In the 2020-2021 school year, 84% of students in special education were students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), again highlighting the disparities that continue to exist within the educational system. In addition, Black and Brown students were suspended or expelled at twice the rate of White students (Ash et al., 2023; Heidelberg et al., 2022). Despite protections under the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA), BIPOC students continue to experience lower academic achievement, higher rates of grade retention, disruptive behavioral referrals, increased dropout and incarceration rates, and fewer postsecondary opportunities (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Gage et al., 2021; Mahabbati et al., 2022) as compared to non-BIPOC students (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Morgan, 2020; St. Mary et al., 2018). Additionally, zero-tolerance policies (Ceballos et al., 2021; Stiefel et al., 2022) and evaluators assessments of their needs have perpetuated these inequities (Bean, 2013; Cooc, 2017; Fish, 2019; Morgan, 2020) as their biases and values may not have cultural considerations. These practices result in BIPOC students being more closely monitored (Ash et al., 2023; Viano & Truong, 2022), with lower expectations from educators (Hines et al., 2022), especially for Black boys (Ash et al., 2023; Ura & d'Abreu, 2022). These practices created a lack of physical and emotional safety in school for these students (Heidelberg et al., 2022; Perzigian & Braun, 2020; Viano & Truong, 2022).

Mindfulness is a well-established, evidence-based intervention shown to support the well-being of individuals with disabilities across a range of domains, including stress reduction, emotional regulation, and improved focus (Călin & Ginara, 2023; Gabriely et al., 2020; Heidelberg et al., 2022; Nagy et al., 2022; van de Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012). Despite the widespread application of mindfulness in educational and clinical settings, there is a research-to-practice gap in its use with individuals experiencing emotional, behavioral, or cognitive adversities (de Bruin et al., 2015; Gandía-Abellán et al., 2023; Haydicky et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2023; McFall & Jolivette, 2024; Ridderinkhof et al., 2020; Sibinga et al., 2013). Importantly, most of these individuals are Black and Brown students, who continue to face systemic barriers to accessing a supportive intervention (Morgan, 2020).

The compound effect of these disparities and the limited access to culturally

responsive, evidence-based mindfulness practices contribute to a vastly different educational experience for Black and Brown students compared to their non-diverse peers. These students are more likely to be exposed to factors that can result in enduring negative outcomes (Appling & Robinson, 2021; Gage et al., 2021; Mahabbati et al., 2022). These include not only immediate academic setbacks but also long-term life trajectories and even generational impacts (Cartledge & Robinson-Ervin, 2016; Fish, 2019; Heidelberg et al., 2022; Roeser et al., 2022).

Creating Inclusive and Culturally Affirming Learning Spaces

An inclusive and culturally affirming environment prioritizes psychological safety (Collins et al., 2022; Darling-Hammond & Depaoli, 2020; Garran & Rasmussen, 2014), shared power (Daftary, 2018; Dyer & Gushwa, 2023), and the affirmation of diverse ways of knowing (Bhambhani & Gallo, 2022; Duane et al., 2021; Nagy et al., 2022). Practices include interactive, culturally tailored activities that promote connection (Lee et al., 2023; McFall & Jolivette, 2024) and self-awareness (Black & Fernando, 2014) through breathing exercises (Gabriely et al., 2020; Hatfield et al., 2023; McFall & Jolivette, 2024); visualization (Lee et al., 2023); community-oriented compassion mindfulness techniques (Gandía-Abellán et al., 2023; Gitterman & Knight, 2016; Iacono et al., 2022; Ion, 2023; Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020); and storytelling (Ion, 2023). Creating a story helps participants connect with those positive feelings or emotions from previous experience. Stories also tell about us, our experiences and how we cope, and help us to be understood (Holmes & Sealock, 2019; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017), thus building a culturally affirming space. Lastly, including brave space agreements (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Simon et al., 2022) acknowledge the discomfort of growing together as a community, while fostering empathy and dialogue around identity, authenticity, acceptance of differences, and equity. Materials that reflect

participant identities and diverse facilitator representation (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Duane et al., 2021; Iacono et al., 2022) are crucial to increasing student engagement and counteracting systemic biases.

The ABC's of Mindfulness: Awareness, Breath, and Compassion

Mindfulness is an adaptable, evidence-based strategy proven to improve emotional regulation (Hill & Updegraff, 2012; Mahabbati et al., 2022); stress reduction (Ion, 2023; Roeser et al., 2022); focus (Black & Fernando, 2014; Harmony & Woodard, 2020); positive connections (Collins et al., 2022; McFall & Jolivette, 2024; Phan & Renshaw, 2021); and well-being among students with disabilities (Cardinal, 2020; Ceballos et al., 2021; Hwang & Kearney, 2013; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2017; Leland, 2015; Roeser et al., 2022).

Mindfulness, at its core, is the intentional practice of being fully present—attuned to one's surroundings, bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions in the current moment (Bishara, 2022; Hwang & Kearney, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This state of awareness is cultivated through the conscious connection of mind and body, a nonjudgmental acceptance of one's feelings and experiences, and the development of skills that supports the letting go of current feelings to support being present in the moment (Fuchs et al., 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kaczmarek & Steffens, 2019; Phan & Renshaw, 2021). As individuals engage in this process, they begin to foster greater self-compassion, extend empathy toward others, and contribute to the emergence of a supportive, caring community. The outcomes of mindfulness practice are well-documented and include reduced stress, enhanced focus, and emotional resilience (Ion, 2023; Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020).

The ABC's framework (Chavis, 2024) includes:

- A – Awareness: practices like sound awareness (Sekhon, 2023), mindful walking (Iacono et al., 2022), guided meditation (Lee et al., 2023), body scans

(Sekhon, 2023), and grounding all help learners connect mind and body, increase patience and tolerance, process sensory input, and develop present-moment focus (Ion, 2023; Lee et al., 2023)

- B – Breath: breathing exercises such as 4-7-8 breath (McFall & Jolivette, 2024), cupcake breathing (Gabriely et al., 2020), and five-finger breaths (Hatfield et al., 2023) calm the nervous system, improve energy, reduce stress (Roeser et al., 2022), improve concentration, and regulate mood (Sekhon, 2023).
- C – Compassion: through gratitude practices, storytelling, and micro self-care, participants build self-love, appreciation for others, greater happiness, peace (Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020), and a caring community (Cardinal, 2020; McFall & Jolivette, 2024).

Mindful Movements

Mindful movements offer a powerful, embodied approach to supporting regulation, focus, and emotional well-being (Robert-McComb et al., 2015), particularly for learners with emotional, behavioral, or cognitive adversities (Clark et al., 2015). These gentle, intentional physical practices help integrate mind and body awareness while promoting calmness, energy, and resilience (Fuchs et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2023; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2017; McFall & Jolivette, 2024).

Each of these movements can be useful for individuals with emotional, behavioral, or cognitive adversities as they support building connected communities (Collins et al., 2022; Ion, 2023; Leland, 2015; McFall & Jolivette, 2024). They also help support an inclusive space where Black and Brown students can experience a sense of belonging (Fisher et al., 2020). The facilitator of inclusive spaces, being flexible and accepting of cultural

considerations (Fuchs et al., 2013), will also support these practices. Supporting participants in this way includes welcoming all to participate, participating with eyes open or closed, opting in instead of opting out, and practicing the movements in their own way. This could include choosing to just breathe naturally and with the exclusion of the movements.

Mindful movements when incorporated with mindful breathing have many benefits:

- Mountain Pose: encourages grounding, improves posture and stability, strengthens the legs, and calms the mind, fostering focus and vitality (James-Palmer et al., 2020; Hagen & Nayar, 2014; McFall & Jolivette, 2024).
- Palm Tree Side Bends: enhance circulation, reduce fatigue, relieve stress, and support digestion while improving concentration and mental clarity (James-Palmer et al., 2020).
- Shoulder Shrugs: release upper body tension and calm the nervous system during moments of emotional stress (McFall & Jolivette, 2024; Passy, 2014).
- Seated Twists: relieve stress, contribute to overall well-being, relax and calm; connect the body and breath (McFall & Jolivette, 2024); soothe the nervous system and gently stimulate the spine, aiding both physical and emotional flexibility (Hagen & Nayar, 2014).
- Bear Hug: promotes self-compassion, emotional balance, sense of well-being and relaxation; increases flexibility in the upper back and supports respiratory health through chest expansion (Hagen & Nayar, 2014). These hugs can give you the same sensations as receiving a hug from another person (Dueren et al., 2021).

- Goddess Pose: elevates mood, improves focus, supports cardiovascular health, and enhances digestion while fostering a sense of strength and empowerment (James-Palmer et al., 2020; McFall & Jolivette, 2024).
- Cat/Cow Flow: opens the lungs and chest, reduces anxiety, enhances focus and creativity, and brings calm through rhythmic movement of the spine and breath (James-Palmer et al., 2020).

These practices are accessible in both seated and standing positions, making them inclusive for a wide range of abilities and settings. Regular integration of mindful movement can foster resilience, emotional regulation, and a deeper sense of connectedness within learning environments (Hagen & Nayar, 2014; James-Palmer et al., 2020; Passy, 2014).

Implementing the 3 R's: Rise, Rejuvenate, Reoccur

The 3 R's framework (Chavis, 2024) serves as a holistic approach for student empowerment while using mindfulness as an evidence-based intervention. This process helps individuals to mindfully RISE to be their best authentic self, build skills so they feel REJUVENATED, promoting a positive well-being, and provide interventions to support positive outcomes to REOCCUR, building their success in school and in the workplace.

Using this method, individuals will:

- Rise: acknowledge the systemic barriers and prepare learners to elevate their voices.
- Rejuvenate: use mindfulness to restore self-regulation, confidence, and community.
- Reoccur: Create sustainable, recurring practices and systems that reinforce equity and healing.

Conclusion

In closing, my journey has been one of navigating and challenging systems that often place limits on BIPOC learners. The integration of culturally affirming mindfulness practices can serve as a tool of resistance and restoration. By adopting inclusive frameworks like the ABC's and the 3R's (Chavis, 2024), educators and practitioners can build environments that not only support diverse learning needs but actively disrupt cycles of inequity. Let us rise, rejuvenate, and allow positive change to reoccur.

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