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Essay

Mindfulness: A Missing Integral Component of Leadership Preparation Programs

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Abstract: This essay argues for the inclusion of mindfulness training in educational leadership preparation programs in the United States. Educational leaders have a determining influence on school effectiveness, and their success depends on the quality of the preparation they receive. As such, increased attention to school leadership and school leader preparation has emerged, and important efforts to improve the preparation of school leaders have been undertaken, including the development of the National Educational Leadership Preparation standards. However, while the standards are extremely valuable, they concentrate on what leaders know and do for others, not on their well-being, who they are, or how they determine what to do. Hence, the standards may contribute to the increasingly technocratic orientation in the narrative about and preparation of educational leaders. While such orientation supports the development of necessary knowledge and skills, it may leave gaps in relational and internal capacities; capacities that have been identified as increasingly important for today's school leaders, not just for their job performance, but also for their well-being and longevity on the job. This essay highlights some of the ways in which mindfulness can support the preparation of school leaders while enhancing their relational, internal, and standards-based capacities.

Keywords: mindfulness; educational leadership; leadership preparation programs

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1. Introduction

The pivotal role of school leaders in achieving student and teacher success, leading school improvement, setting the direction of school efforts, and shaping the school environment has been firmly established by academic research [1–5]. According to researchers, the influence of school leaders on student success is only second to that of teachers [6,7]. Indeed, drawing on both preliminary reviews and extensive empirical research, Leithwood et al. (2011) posited that "to date we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" [6] (p. 3). Similarly, according to Grissom et al. (2021), "it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership" [2] (p. 43).

Educational leaders have a determining influence on school effectiveness, and their success has been linked to the quality of the preparation they receive [8–10]. New principals in districts that engage in "comprehensive, strategic efforts intended to improve the quality of school leaders" realize higher student achievement and job longevity than new principals in districts that do not engage in such efforts [11] (p. 1). However, for decades, authors have maintained that there is a large gap between educational leadership work and the preparation many school leaders receive [10,12,13]. For example, according

to a 2007 study, "a staggering 80 percent of superintendents and 69 percent of principals think that leadership training in schools of education is out of touch with the realities of today's districts" [8] (n. p.). More recently, in a nationally representative study of school districts, Gates et al. (2020) found that less than 50% of school districts with more than 10,000 students were satisfied with available candidates for principal positions [11]. Similarly, in a study reviewing and synthesizing peer-reviewed research from the years 2000 to 2021, and analyzing data from a nationally representative sample of school principals, Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) concluded that "few principals have had access to the kinds of comprehensive programs or learning structures that support their success, and access is variable across states due to differences in policies and available resources" [14] (p. 81).

Consequently, increased attention to school leadership and school leader preparation has emerged at federal, state, and district levels [15–17], and important efforts to improve the preparation of school leaders have been undertaken by researchers and national organizations. For example, through the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, the U.S. federal government now provides new avenues for the use of federal funds in the preparation of school leaders, and many states have begun emphasizing school leadership in their state education plans [17]. Additionally, national organizations including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) have joined forces to develop the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards. These standards aim to articulate the knowledge and skills expected of educational leaders and guide the development of educational leadership preparation programs.

However, the preparation necessary for effective school leadership goes beyond acquiring specific knowledge and skills. Inter- and intrapersonal skills are of paramount importance for the development of leaders who can sustainably improve schools and stay on a job with increasingly high levels of intrinsic stress [18,19]. These high levels of stress, in turn, place school leaders at high risk of suffering from anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease. This is not to say that knowledge and skills are not necessary—they are—but should be complemented by mindfulness-based training aimed at enhancing stress management, stakeholder relationships, trust-building, self-awareness, and reflection, in order to ensure that aspiring leaders learn to respond, rather than react, to stressors, that they become reflective and adaptive practitioners, and that they are able to achieve longevity as educational leaders.

Mindfulness training is a missing, yet necessary component for the preparation of school leaders, one that could support leaders to thrive within increasingly changing and ambiguous contexts. However, no empirical research on the effects of mindfulness training on aspiring educational leaders was found by the authors. Therefore, this essay aims to illuminate some of the ways in which mindfulness can support the preparation of school leaders for the benefit of both our schools and our leaders. It begins with a general discussion of the educational leadership standards and of stress as it relates to the work of educational leaders. Furthermore, it discusses mindfulness as a lever for meeting the standards while simultaneously supporting the well-being and sustained effectiveness of school leaders. The discussion culminates with proposed future directions and key conclusions.

2. Standards and Stress in Educational Leadership

2.1. The Standards (PSEL and NELP)

The PSEL were approved in 2015 to communicate what educational leaders should know and be able to do in U.S. schools [3]. They are based on previous standards published by CCSSO and on an extensive development process led by CCSSO and the NPBEA [19].

The PSEL concentrate on—in fact, every standard includes the phrase "each student's academic success and well-being" [3] (pp. 9–18). This is an important change in emphasis from the previous standards, as it places the well-being (physical and emotional) of students on the same level as their academic success. Additionally, a new standard focusing on equity and cultural responsiveness was included, understanding the need for school leaders to attend to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations [3]. According to Prociw and Eberle (2016), "these standards more accurately reflect the public and professional expectations for principals" [20] (n. p.).

In order to guide the preparation of school leaders in alignment with the PSEL, the NELP Standards were created. While aligned to the PSEL, they "specify what novice leaders and program graduates should know and be able to do as a result of their completion of a high-quality educational leadership preparation program" [21] (p. 3). They are based on the former ELCC standards, on academic research, and on a collaborative creation process led by CCSSO, NPBEA, and UCEA.

While two sets of NELP standards were created, one for building-level school leaders and one for district leaders, this paper focuses on the building-level standards, as, in most instances, district-level leaders are required to have first served as building-level leaders. Like the PSEL, the building-level NELP standards (NELP standards from now on) highlight the importance of equity and cultural responsiveness. Additionally, each standard includes the phrase "to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult" [21] (pp. 11–30). The overall emphasis of each of the eight standards is as follows: (1) Mission, Vision, and Improvement; (2) Ethics and Professional Norms; (3) Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness; (4) Learning and Instruction; (5) Community and External Leadership; (6) Operations and Management; (7) Building Professional Capacity; and (8) Internship.

While the introduction of the PSEL and NELP standards in the United States, their adoption by most states, and the alignment of many educational leadership programs to such standards marked an important and necessary advancement in the preparation of educational leaders in the nation, they concentrate on what leaders know and do for others, not on their well-being, who they are, or how they determine what to do. This makes sense given that we can only measure that which is observable and, in addition to guiding program design, the standards were developed to be used in program accreditation review and for state program approval [21]. As such, they provide clear guidance on the measurable knowledge and skills that are expected of graduates of programs seeking accreditation and state approval. Additionally, in an attempt to address the need to "connect, embed, and transcend explicit leadership skill within authentic contexts" (p. 8), NPBEA (2018) requires preparation programs to include three dimensions: (1) awareness, (2) understanding, and (3) application (p. 8).

However, as important as the guidance provided by the standards for educational leadership preparation programs is, it still leaves unanswered questions about how these programs can best prepare aspiring leaders for the intrinsic pressures of the job, particularly for the documented increasing stress levels faced by educational leaders [18]. In other words, the standards provide valuable, albeit incomplete, support for educational leadership preparation programs. Guidance that is informed by both the standards and proven approaches to manage the known intrinsic pressures of the profession may provide

a more complete grounding for the preparation of school leaders who are able to promote the success and well-being of each student and adult, including themselves.

2.2. Stress

Stress is a response to stimuli that disrupts homeostasis [22]. Stress functions as a survival mechanism that allows our bodies to react quickly (even before we are mentally aware of the situation) to perceived threats in a process (often called fight–flight–freeze) that includes quickly injecting adrenaline into our bloodstream, increasing the heartbeat, pushing blood to the muscles and heart, allowing the lungs to take in more oxygen, and focusing our hearing and vision [23]. This process is very useful in situations when we need to, for example, move out of the way of a quickly approaching vehicle. However, it is not very useful when we are not in dangerous or life-threatening situations, such as when we are summoned to our supervisor's office, when we must respond to an email from an angry customer, or when we are dealing with a child experiencing a tantrum. Notably, the body often reacts in similar ways to both types of situations, and studies have shown that repeated and/or prolonged exposure to stress can have increasingly negative effects on one's mental and physical health, including anxiety, depression, rumination, perfectionism, gastrointestinal issues, and cardiovascular disease [22,24].

A major cause of stress in life is work or job-related activities. Studies on job-related stress, defined as "the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker" [25] (p. 6), have found that more than four out of five U.S. workers experience stress at work, and more than half report job-related stress as affecting their home lives [26] (n. d.). This situation is even more dire for school principals. According to the "state of the American teacher and state of the American principal surveys" [18], among school principals:

- 98% find work stressful
- 30% find work always stressful
- 64% find little interest or pleasure in doing things at least "several days"
- 27% find little interest or pleasure in doing things "more than half the days" or "nearly every day"
- 60% feel "down, depressed or hopeless" at least several days
- 20% feel "down, depressed or hopeless" "more than half the days" or "nearly every day"
- 39% somewhat or strongly agree that the "stress and disappointment" of being a principal is not worth the effort.

In other words, due to the stress of the work, school principals are at a higher risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, cardiovascular disease, and other stress-related conditions than the average U.S. worker. This state of events may partly account for the incredibly low, 5-year, average longevity on the job of principals [27]. Quoted in a 2022 EdSurge article, a superintendent's special advisor explained: "The reason principal mental health is so concerning today is principals pour into the vessels of everyone else—students, teachers, central office staff. But who is meeting the needs of the principal?" [28].

However, as a response to stimuli, it is important to understand that stress is not external, but rather an internal reaction. This is good news, as individuals are rarely able to control the external environment, but they can use proven methods, such as mindfulness, to not only manage their response to stressors, but also to thrive under circumstances replete with them, such as those experienced by educational leaders.

3. Mindfulness

3.1. Mindfulness

Defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" [29] (p. xxvii), researchers have found that mindfulness is an effective way to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, among other ailments [30–34]. Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist psychology, but it has been secularized and popularized in the West through the development of programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn (JKZ) developed the MBSR program, one of the first mindfulness-based interventions introduced to Western society. JKZ's intention for developing MBSR were, first, to use it "as a training vehicle for the relief of suffering" of medical patients through mindfulness meditation practices [29] (p. 148), and second, to use it as a model to be used in different medical establishments and in "different contexts in which stress, emotional and physical pain, or illness and disease were primary concerns" (p. 149). According to various reports and research on MBSR, both intentions have been successfully met. The success of the MBSR program on the "relief of suffering" was first accounted for through personal anecdotes and eventually through rigorous research studies demonstrating how regular mindfulness and meditation practices help individuals suffering from a variety of ailments, including chronic pain, depression, anxiety, and stress [35–37].

Similarly, the intention of using MBSR as a model to be used in different contexts has also been met as evidenced by the fact that thousands of medical establishments around the world provide MBSR and other mindfulness-based interventions; as well as by the number of mindfulness-based/informed interventions (MBIs) that have been developed and are now being offered in schools, prisons, therapy centers, workplaces, and professional training settings, among others [30,35,38].

Some of the most prominent MBIs that have been developed for specific contexts include Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which helps prevent relapse for individuals suffering from depression and anxiety [39], Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which has been shown to help individuals suffering from depression, chronic pain, and anxiety [40,41], and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), which has shown effectiveness in helping individuals with borderline personality disorder [42]. However, the most extensively researched MBI is the original MBSR, with overwhelming evidence supporting its ability to improve psychological health and well-being [31–34].

According to Kabat-Zinn (2013), the major pillars of mindfulness practice are: (1) non-judging, (2) patience, (3) beginner's mind, (4) trust, (5) non-striving, (6) acceptance, and (7) letting go [43]. These pillars increase our capacity to clearly see and understand life and its events as they take place both outwardly and inwardly. Mindfulness develops our ability to see things as if for the first time, with curiosity and an open mind that allows us to take in their rich details, with a clarity that is not distorted by our opinions or by whether or how we may want to change them, and with an understanding that things happen at their own pace and time. Mindfulness also allows us to get to know ourselves better by really listening to what our bodies, thoughts, and emotions tell us; by opening up our abilities to recognize when our minds elevate or minimize different aspects of our experience and understanding how those tendencies affect our lives; and by understanding how and why we may want to change things. These enhanced capacities ultimately give us the ability to make wise decisions about how to live and respond to life from a place of clarity and reflective purpose [29].

The benefits of mindfulness have not gone unnoticed, as MBSR and MBI programs have been implemented by professionals in many fields to support decision-making, stress-management, and overall well-being, including business executives, physicians, medical

and premedical students, mental health counseling, human resource managers, healthcare workers, and educators [27,34,44]. Additionally, many large organizations have begun implementing MBIs for their employees and in their leadership preparation programs, including Google, Apple, IBM, the U.S. military, Mayo Clinic, General Electric, AT&T, Microsoft, Ford, American Express, LinkedIn, Capital One, and Goldman Sachs [45].

In an integrative review of mindfulness and its potential in the field of management, Good et al. (2016) explored the effects of mindfulness on the attention, cognition, emotion, behavior, and physiology domains. They posited that as mindfulness affects those domains, they in turn affect outcomes in work performance, relationships, and well-being. While admitting the existence of unanswered questions regarding why and how mindfulness works, they presented evidence indicating that "mindfulness may be a single lever for beneficially influencing many variables" in a range of occupations and contexts [46] (p. 134), including: performance levels and variability, performance in disruptive contexts, motivation and purposeful behavior, communication and relationship quality, empathy and compassion, workplace processes including leadership and teamwork, stress and burnout, job satisfaction, self-compassion, and resilience.

While the capacities that mindfulness practice provides are tremendously beneficial for any and every human being, they become a necessity for leaders, such as educational leaders, whose decisions deeply affect the lives of countless students, families, education professionals, and school stakeholders.

3.2. Mindfulness in Educational Leadership

Given the research-supported benefits of mindfulness, it would be understandable to assume that mindfulness training is a common feature in the preparation of both practicing and aspiring educational leaders. Unfortunately, the reality is quite different. According to Mahfouz and Richardson (2021), most aspiring leaders do not regularly engage in any type of self-care activity (including mindfulness and meditation) on a weekly basis. Agreeing with previous research, they posited that "principal preparation programs are disconnected with the real needs of their candidates" [47] (p. 378); and acknowledged gaps specifically in the preparation of leaders who can "cultivate a caring and welcoming environment at their respective schools while addressing the daily stress of the job in a healthy and mindful way" (p. 379). Furthermore, they emphasized that as aspiring leaders experience challenges to their well-being during their preparation programs, the absence of training on how to productively handle such challenges may lead them to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, which they then bring to their leadership practice. In other words, not only does the lack of mindfulness/well-being training in educational leadership preparation programs fail to meet the future needs of aspiring leaders, but it also contributes to the development of harmful practices that affect them both during and after their training.

However, research findings reveal that school leaders who practice mindfulness enjoy a myriad of personal and job-related benefits. For example, in "A Systematic Review of Mindfulness in School Principals", Partin (2022) reviewed 14 peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2021 and found that principals who practice mindfulness enjoy better relationships and higher trust from stakeholders, reduced stress, increased self-awareness and reflection, increased ability to listen to others, increased emotional control, and increased ability to act equitably [48].

Similarly, in a study exploring the effect of an MBI program on 13 school administrators in rural Pennsylvania, Mahfouz (2018) found that participants reported "improved leadership skills through increased self-reflection, better relationships and attendance to self-care" [49] (p. 610). Additionally, in a conceptual article [27], researchers reviewed school leaders' stress and, in agreement with NIOSH (1999), suggested that school leaders'

stress may arise as a result of a mismatch between the challenges they encounter and the resources they have to manage them, rather than solely from the demands themselves. They posited that internal coping mechanisms, including mindfulness, could be "the key to the development of resilience in principals in an era of high-stakes accountability and unparalleled expectations" [27] (p. 161).

Unfortunately, while researchers have proposed the integration of mindfulness in the preparation and support of educational leaders, no empirical research findings on the effects of mindfulness on aspiring educational leaders were found by the authors.

4. Integrating Mindfulness in Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

4.1. Mindfulness in Support of Educational Leadership Standards

The NELP standards document specifies "what" the graduates of educational leadership programs should be able to do, as well as provide a general formula for how that "what" should be developed; namely by becoming aware of "concepts, information, definitions, and procedures," by "interpreting, integrating, and using knowledge and skills," and by "applying knowledge and skills to new or specific opportunities or problems" [21] (p. 8). While this practical formula allows for much flexibility in terms of preparation program design and implementation, the lack of explicit reference to the deeper, so-called "soft" skills necessary for successful and sustainable leadership, including present-moment awareness, resilience, emotional intelligence, empathy, and reflectiveness, may contribute to the increasingly technocratic orientation in the narrative and preparation of leaders [50–52]. In other words, the standards are not inherently flawed, but rather incomplete in addressing intrapersonal capacities. While a technocratic orientation supports the development of necessary knowledge and skills (what leaders know and do), "possessing knowledge and skills in the realm of educational leadership is not enough to ensure an effective leader" [53] (p. 56), nor is it anywhere near enough to ensure the longevity and well-being of individuals stepping into documented high-stress positions. In fact, in a comparative survey study, Klocko and Wells (2015) posited that while technical skills are necessary for educational leaders, personal stressors are responsible for causing the most significant issues in their performance and longevity [54].

Furthermore, while it is commendable that the standards emphasize the "success and well-being of each student and adult" as a requirement of what leadership program graduates should be able to know and do, it seems to imply an outwardly directed ability—what program graduates should be able to do for others—as opposed to an inclusive (outward AND inward) ability—what program graduates should be able to do for themselves and for others. Such an inclusive lens may highlight the importance of leadership programs ensuring that program graduates learn the self-care necessary not only for longevity as a leader, but also to be able to truly ensure the success and well-being of each student and adult. After all, it is unlikely for someone who does not know how to care for their own success and well-being to be able to sustainably do so for others.

Mindfulness might very well be the most significantly underused leverage point for the preparation of effective school leaders. As previously stated, research findings overwhelmingly find mindfulness to be an effective way to increase well-being and address stress, anxiety, and depression—major ailments disproportionately affecting educational leaders. However, mindfulness can also support educational leaders in meeting the standards-based requirements of the profession. Utilizing the NELP standards components with the strongest direct research evidence support as an example [21], Table 1 demonstrates how mindfulness training can support educational leaders and their practice.

Table 1. NELP standard components and how mindfulness supports them.

NELP Standard and Component [1]	Mindfulness Contribution	Research Support
Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement Component 1.1: Mission and vision reflecting a set of core values and priorities	Being present allows leaders and team members to focus, which improves their ability to reflect on and connect deeply with their values, as well as with their organizational purpose and goals. The resilience that mindfulness practices engender enables leaders to simultaneously maintain a "balcony" and "dancefloor" perspective, which serve as an anchor to act in accordance with their vision and mission, even in times of uncertainty.	Boyatzis, R. E.; McKee [55] Kabat-Zinn, J. [56] Heifetz, R. A.; Linsky, M. [57] Reb, J.; Narayanan, J.; Ho, Z. W.; Chaturvedi, S. [58] Fredrickson, B. L.; Cohn, M. A.; Coffey, K. A.; Pek, J.; Finkel, S. M. [59]
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms Component 2.1: Professional norms	Through mindfulness practices, leaders are able to become more reflective about and intentional in their actions and interactions, which allows them to align their actions with their values. By being fully present during interactions, leaders inspire a sense of transparency, trust, and well-being that enhances collaboration, curiosity, lifelong learning, and collective purpose.	Boyatzis, R. E.; McKee, A. [55] Neff, K. D. [60] Kang, Y.; Gray, J. R.; Dovidio, J. F.; Gauthier, I. [61] Shapiro, S. L.; Carlson, L. E.; Astin, J. A.; Freedman, B. [62] Jennings, P. A. [63] Shapiro, S. L. [64] Siegel, D. J. [65]
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms Component 2.3: Ethical behavior	Through non-judgmental awareness, mindfulness practices support ethical behavior and decision-making. The clarity that arises from mindfulness practice allows practitioners to see through the fog of "how we've always done things" and to deeply analyze whether practices or specific events represent ethical and values-based behavior.	Jennings, P. A. [63] Shapiro, S. L. [64] Shapiro, S. L.; Schwartz, G. E.; Santerre, C. [66]
Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness Component 3.1: Supportive and inclusive culture	Mindfulness practices support growth in emotional intelligence, empathy, and inclusive communication capacities. They promote awareness of bias, and nurture the realization of interconnectedness amongst individuals, which leads to care for others and inclusivity.	Fredrickson, B. L.; Cohn, M. A.; Coffey, K. A.; Pek, J.; Finkel, S. M. [59] Neff, K. D. [60] Kang, Y.; Gray, J. R.; Dovidio, J. F.; Gauthier, I. [61] Shapiro, S. L. [64]
Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness Component 3.2: Equitable Access	Mindfulness practices increase individuals' listening skills and support the development of equicentric and compassionate worldviews toward the self and others, particularly those others who need the most support. By supporting a clear view of situations and contexts, mindfulness practitioners are able to identify inequities in access and challenge the "status quo".	Shapiro, S. L.; Schwartz, G. E.; Bonner, G. [34] Kang, Y.; Gray, J. R.; Dovidio, J. F.; Gauthier, I. [61] Langer, E. J. [67]
Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness Component 3.3: Equitable Instructional and Behavior Support Practices	Mindfulness helps individuals question assumptions and recognize contextual factors, which are the first steps in evaluating the level of equity and cultural responsiveness of instructional and disciplinary practices. The emotional attunement that mindfulness promotes enables individuals to empathize with different perspectives and cultures, which allows leaders to promote inclusive practices.	Siegel, D. J. [65] Langer, E. J. [67]

Table 1. *Cont.*

NELP Standard and Component [1]	Mindfulness Contribution	Research Support
Standard 5: Community and External Leadership Component 5.1: Engage Families	Mindfulness practices support leaders' abilities to relate to and engage with others, including families, through better listening, lowered emotional reactivity, and increased awareness of others' needs.	Mahfouz, J.; Richardson, J. W. [47] Partin, J. M [48]
Standard 7: Building Professional Capacity Component 7.1: Collaborative professional culture	By reducing stress and reactivity, mindfulness practices foster a calm and open mindset that supports deeply listening to others and speaking from our deepest values. As leaders practice deep listening and speaking from their deepest values, they enhance schoolwide collaboration, respect, and creativity, and engender a positive and affirming school culture.	Good, D. J.; Lyddy, C. J.; Glomb, T. M.; Bono, J. E.; Brown, K. W.; Duffy, M. K.; Baer, R. A.; Brewer, J. A.; Lazar, S. W. [46] Kabat-Zinn, J. [56]

[1] For brevity, only the standard components with the strongest direct research evidence have been included.

4.2. Examples Incorporating Mindfulness in Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

While the specific details of how mindfulness can be incorporated into different educational leadership preparation programs depend on the needs of the students and the capacities of the program and its faculty, we have included two examples/opportunities below that should be applicable to many programs within their current structures.

The first opportunity to incorporate mindfulness into ELP programs is the development of an enhanced MBSR program for aspiring leaders. The format and structure of the well-researched and highly effective MBSR program fit well within the structure of most semester-based university courses. Most three-credit semester-based university graduate courses meet once per week for 2.5 h for a total of 15 weeks. Similarly, the MBSR program meets for 2.5 h per week for nine weeks (eight weeks for instruction and practice plus one week for orientation). Additionally, there is a full day (usually around seven hours) meeting, which makes the MBSR program equivalent in time requirements to 11 to 12 weeks of semester-based university course meetings. The additional three to four meetings could be utilized to enhance the traditional MBSR program to specifically connect it to the practice of educational leadership. This could be achieved by engaging in deep discussions and reflections about readings and work experiences. The seminal book "Full catastrophe living" by JKZ could be used as an important resource for these sessions [42]. Additionally, research articles explicitly exploring the application of mindfulness in educational leadership, including the works of Klocko and Wells [27,54], Brendel and Bennett [45], Partin [48], Mahfouz [49], and Boyatzis and McKee [55], could be included. In terms of instructor qualifications, this class could be taught either by a certified MBSR instructor in partnership with an educational leadership instructor/faculty member, or it could be taught by an educational leadership instructor/faculty member who has been trained to teach MBSR.

Another salient opportunity to include mindfulness in the preparation of educational leadership preparation programs is within the internship in which most aspiring leaders engage. As an experience intended to provide aspiring leaders with "coherent, authentic, and sustained opportunities to synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills identified in NELP standards 1–7" [21] (p. 30), the internship provides a practical connection between the work of the educational leader and the standards. This connection can be further enhanced by explicitly utilizing mindfulness practices both during engagement in internship activities (e.g., being present, recognizing contextual factors, questioning assumptions, observing events from different perspectives, demonstrating empathy, acting from a clear

understanding of personal and organizational values) and through reflection about specific activities (e.g., becoming aware of patterns of reactivity, recognizing inconsistencies between expressed values and behaviors both in ourselves and in others, exploring and identifying values in order to act accordingly). Ideally, aspiring leaders would receive training on MBSR either before or concurrently with the internship in order to have a basic understanding of the mindfulness practices in which they will engage. Through mindfulness practices, aspiring leaders can deepen their understanding of not just what the standards say, but what their essence is (or can be) in particular contexts, given personal and organizational values. Instructors can guide aspiring leaders by posing appropriate questions (preferably in writing) regarding their experiences, such as: (1) What was the activity in which you engaged? (2) How present/grounded were you during this activity (please explain)? (3) What contextual factors did you find important (or not)? (4) What were the balcony and dancefloor perspectives in this situation? (5) How did this activity connect to personal and/or organizational values? Naturally, the questions would depend on both the activity and on the specific areas in which the aspiring leader is currently working. This level of reflection could serve both as a way to practically develop mindfulness capacities, as well as to make meaning and derive enduring understandings regarding the work of the educational leader. For this option, an educational leadership instructor/faculty member with a robust mindfulness practice could guide aspiring leaders.

As previously mentioned, while engaging in mindfulness practices is increasingly becoming more commonplace [27,34,44,45], it is still not a regular practice in educational leadership circles [47]. Indeed, the expectation of having educational leadership faculty members who are either certified as MBSR teachers or who have a robust mindfulness practice may seem far-fetched to some. In those situations, the answer may be found by developing partnerships with organizations that already provide mindfulness programs. For example, there may be pre-existing wellness programs on campus with qualified mindfulness instructors. Additionally, partnerships with outside mindfulness providers could be explored. Such partnerships could be used to develop bespoke training opportunities, such as the ones presented above, as well as to begin increasing institutional capacity through the training of faculty members so that they become mindfulness practitioners and trainers themselves.

5. Future Directions

While the high levels of stress faced by educational leaders are well-documented, perhaps preparation programs are not addressing this need because it is not stated on or mandated by documents specifically intended to guide preparation programs, such as the NELP standards. The inclusion of ways in which educational leadership preparation programs may prepare aspiring leaders for the stress of the job, such as mindfulness, in such documents could provide the incentive needed for mindfulness to become a staple of educational leadership preparation programs, and it is recommended here as a productive future direction.

The impetus for writing this paper was not to provide a step-by-step guide on using mindfulness in educational leadership preparation programs; instead, it was to highlight some of the ways in which mindfulness can support the preparation of school leaders. Development of step-by-step programs or courses, including mindfulness for aspiring leaders, is a clear next step in the actualization of these ideas.

As previously mentioned, no empirical studies on the effects of mindfulness on aspiring educational leaders were found by the authors—this is acknowledged as a limitation in this essay. Some ideas on how to begin addressing this research gap, as mindfulness-based approaches are implemented, include the administration of pre- and post-intervention

surveys, analysis of aspiring leaders' responses to mindfulness-related questions during their internship (both early and toward the end of the internship experience), and analysis of students' responses to questions regarding their mindfulness practice and its effects both on their practice as aspiring educational leaders and on their overall well-being. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to determine the long-term effects of the integration of mindfulness in ELP programs on practicing school administrators' practices, approaches to leadership, and longevity on the job. The implementation of step-by-step programs or courses, including mindfulness for aspiring leaders (such as the ones presented in the section above), combined with well-developed research studying their effects, would provide the empirical grounding necessary to better guide future directions of application and empirical research in this field of study.

6. Conclusions

In agreement with previous research, this paper calls for the inclusion of mindfulness training for educational leaders [68]. Mindfulness training represents a missing, yet necessary, component of educational leadership preparation programs; one that could support leaders in meeting the stated standards of the profession while simultaneously providing the internal tools needed to thrive within increasingly stressful contexts. This paper emphasizes the need for such training to take place early, during their leadership preparation programs—before educational leaders take the helm of our schools, and before they learn maladaptive coping mechanisms and bring those to the practice of educational leadership. In a quote widely attributed to John Kabat-Zinn, he stated: "Make sure you weave your parachute every day, rather than leave it to the time you have to jump out of the plane." We must avoid asking our school leaders to weave their parachutes (to build their mindfulness capacities) after they have assumed their roles and jumped out of the metaphorical plane. Let us develop mindfulness-based courses and modules, implement mindfulness practices throughout our preparation programs, and conduct empirical research to measure their impact on leader well-being and retention. Educational leadership preparation programs have an opportunity, a responsibility, to ensure that those who lead our schools are not only prepared with the knowledge and skills required to support others, but also to support themselves so that they can sustainably enjoy the myriad of benefits associated with mindfulness practice, including better relationships and trust, less stress, improved self-awareness and reflection, and increased ability to act equitably.

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