

Mind, body and bow: A mindfulness study in grades 6-8 orchestra

by

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A REPORT

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Abstract

Student engagement in the middle school orchestra classroom presents unique challenges. Not only are students navigating the technical demands of playing their instrument and performing; they are also navigating the social and emotional complexities of being a pre-teen. This study explores the implementation of mindfulness-based strategies as resources for the teacher and student to help navigate through these challenges.

My approach to this study was uncertain at first, with many ideas and directions to consider. I have a core concept: I just needed to find a way to put it all in motion. I quickly realized that I needed to keep it simple. In this report you will see the implementation of five basic mindfulness exercises — box breathing, "melting" grounding, focused listening, tension release (body scan), and re-center (visualization). These lessons were designed for 6th–8th grade orchestras to create a safe environment that allows students to improve concentration, in-the-moment awareness, self-control, self-efficacy, acceptance, and compassion.

To implement these lessons, I first had to establish an environment that was safe enough for students to fully engage in mindfulness exercises. I was new to the district and new to the school; with 6th–8th graders, some of whom had a different teacher before me, I had to earn their trust. Drawing on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943, 1954) and expanding on the framework presented in "6 Mindfulness Techniques for Music Teachers" (Baird, 2018), I felt I had a solid foundation as an educator and facilitator.

My time in the Master of Music program at Kansas State University has shaped me in ways that extend well beyond this project. Two developments stand out most. The first is intentionality — I have become more deliberate and purposeful in my planning, not only in how I design instruction, but in how I show up as an educator and as a person. The practice of taking

a beat, of pausing before acting, of choosing presence over reaction, has quietly transformed both my classroom and my life. The second is finding and owning my voice as a teacher. The Master's program gave me the space and the challenge to develop a clearer sense of who I am as an educator — what I believe, what I value, and how I want to lead. This project is, in many ways, an expression of both.

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my students. Their willingness and growth as young human beings is inspirational.

Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

There is a moment that happens in almost every orchestra rehearsal, usually when you least expect it. The room is noisy, students are tuning, someone is tapping on the stand, and then you step up on the podium, and everything settles. You raise your baton, and for a moment, forty middle school students are breathing together, adjusting to each other, and listening to each other. That moment is one of the most naturally mindful experiences I know.

I became a teacher because I wanted to be an example of “it does not matter where you come from, but where you want to be.” I remembered what it felt like to need an adult who truly showed up. That memory lives at the center of everything I do in the orchestra room. My teaching is grounded in these core values: community, connection, perseverance, and equity and opportunity. I believe students need to feel safe, seen, and capable, before any learning can happen. This is not separate from music education. It is music education.

Music education is an expression of schooling’s deepest purposes. Formal education exists to develop whole human beings capable of critical thinking, civic participation, and meaningful connection with others. Music education, at its best, does exactly that. This paper examines why formal education matters, why music is a crucial part of it, how the two connect, and what the orchestra classroom specifically reveals about music education grounded in the belief that every student belongs and every student is capable of growth.

Why formal education? John Dewey argued that education is not preparation for life, it is life itself. That idea resonated with me. Our responsibility as teachers is to prepare our students to be good citizens, collaborators, and learners. Dewey (1938) believed experience was the engine of genuine learning, and that education should be rooted in active engagement rather than passive reception of information. The best classrooms I have been in are the ones where students

are doing something, not just receiving something. Community is built through shared experience. Connections happen when students feel genuinely seen and safe. Perseverance develops when the work is hard enough to matter and students are supported enough to stay with it.

Not every student enters school with the same advantages, resources, or support at home. The school system is, for many students, a great equalizer, where access to knowledge and opportunity is not determined by circumstance. Perseverance, community, critical thinking, and civic responsibility are not luxuries reserved for certain students; they are the foundation every child deserves.

Why music education? As a musician and music educator, I believe that music is a personal and vital part of who I am as a person, and what I do. Music is one of the oldest and most universal forms of human expression. Every culture across every period of history has made music, to celebrate, to mourn, to worship, to protest, to connect. As discussed in Hodges (2016), Susan Langer believed music is a symbolic form that expresses the inner life of human feeling in ways ordinary language cannot, offering not communication but insight into how feelings go. Music education, then, is not simply the teaching of notes and rhythms, it is the intentional cultivation of that human capacity, helping students develop a relation with music that is active rather than passive. My cello is my best friend, music is my true love, my safe place, and the symphony is my community. I believe that students need to feel safe, seen, and capable. And when those needs are met then beautiful things can happen in a music room. Elliott's praxial philosophy supports this: music is not an object to be contemplated but a practice to be engaged in, and it is through that engagement that students grow as musicians and as people (Hodges, 2016).

Music education develops the whole person in ways hard to replicate elsewhere. In orchestra, students learn to listen with precision and empathy simultaneously, tracking their own part while remaining aware of everyone around them. That sustained listening is a form of mindfulness; it requires students to set aside distraction and inhabit the moment fully, a skill that extends far beyond rehearsal. When students breathe together before we begin, there is a shift. They arrive in their bodies, in the room, in the ensemble. That shared breath is already music. It is already community.

Music education builds community and identity in ways unique to the ensemble experience. When students work towards a shared musical goal over weeks and months, they struggle together, they succeed together, they develop bonds hard to manufacture elsewhere. They learn each other's strengths and limitations. They learn to depend on one another and show up for each other. When the concert arrives and the music comes together, there is a collective pride. That pride is the same sense of shared purpose I want my students to carry forward as citizens, collaborators, and learners, the understanding that showing up for one another produces something no one person could build alone.

Finally, music education is a matter of equity and opportunity. Not every student's family can afford private lessons, instruments, or concert tickets. The school music program is, for many children, their first and only entry point into music-making. If music is a fundamental human experience worth having, we have a responsibility to make sure it is available to every student.

The orchestra classroom is unlike any other space in a school building. Loud and quiet, structured and spontaneous, holding thirty plus students in close proximity, all producing sound simultaneously, all expected to listen and respond in real time. That environment creates unique

responsibilities for the music educator, and how we cultivate that space is a direct reflection of our philosophy.

I believe the orchestra classroom must hold high expectations inside a culture of safety. The two depend on each other. Students cannot take musical risks if they fear being judged, and they cannot persevere through difficult passages if they do not feel supported when they struggle. Building that culture means modeling vulnerability, treating errors as information rather than failure, making clear that we are all still learning, and there is power in the word YET. What I witnessed in my classroom confirmed what I have believed all along: When students feel safe enough to be present, they become musicians who can truly play together. The eye rolls gave way to requests. The resistance softened into ownership.

Mindfulness is central in building that environment. Hodges (2016) noted that music engages the whole body, that musical experience is fundamentally physical and neurological, not just intellectual. This matches what I have observed: Students who are dysregulated are not in the mindset of learning or receiving anything. The grounding exercises are tools to help students listen to their bodies, advocate for themselves, and give them permission to pause and become more present musicians, and more present people.

The orchestra classroom is a space where diversity must be actively honored and where identity is formed. My students bring different backgrounds and different relationships to music into the room with them. Repertoire choices and the stories we tell about music and musicians should reflect the full range of human musical experience. We are not abandoning tradition; it is about expanding the table so every student can find themselves in the music we make together. For many of my students, being an orchestra kid is one of the most defining things about who they are during some of the most formative years of their lives, and the music we choose, the

culture we build, and the way we show up for each other every day, all communicate whose growth we are invested in. My answer: everyone's.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

Every concert my orchestras give is living proof of this philosophy. What the audience sees in those final minutes, students walking out with confidence, settling into their seats, finding each other across the ensemble before a single note is played, is the result of weeks of work that had very little to do with notes and everything to do with people. We breathed together at the start of every rehearsal. We paused when the room felt dysregulated and name it out loud. We celebrated with the students who finally nailed the hard passage and the students who showed up on a hard day and played anyway. We argued, in the kindest sense of the word, about how a phrase should feel, and in doing so, we learned to listen to each other. We were intentional about what we were practicing. By the time we walked onto that stage, community had already been built. Connections had been made. Perseverance had already been practiced. The concert was not the goal; it was the evidence. Every student on that stage belonged there, had earned their place, and knew it. That is what I am always working toward.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan(s)

The following three lesson plans represent a condensed mindfulness unit developed and implemented within my 6th–8th grade orchestra program during the 2025–2026 school year. The decision to design this unit grew out of a persistent observation: that students were arriving to rehearsal carrying the weight of their days — anxious, distracted, emotionally activated — and that those unmet needs were creating invisible walls between them and the music.

I had long believed that a student who does not feel safe cannot take musical risks, and that a student who is emotionally dysregulated cannot truly listen, respond, or express. This belief is grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943, 1954), which holds that human beings must first have their foundational needs — safety, belonging, and esteem — met before they can reach their highest potential. In an orchestra rehearsal room, that means the path to beautiful, expressive music runs through the inner lives of the young people holding the instruments.

Drawing also on Baird's (2018) framework of mindfulness techniques for music teachers, I set out to design a unit that was practical, brief, and sustainable — something that could be woven into the natural structure of rehearsal rather than added on top of it. I made deliberate choices about which techniques to include based on what I had observed my students needing most: tools for calming the nervous system, releasing physical tension, sharpening focused listening, and building confidence through visualization. I also made a deliberate choice to give students ownership in the process, including the option to participate in exercises in the way that felt most comfortable to them. That decision, as it turned out, changed everything.

The three lessons that follow — Arrive, Breathe & Listen; Body, Breath & Vision; and The Whole Musician — are sequenced intentionally. Each builds on the one before it, moving students from introduction and guided practice toward independent application and personal

ownership. The unit was designed not as a wellness detour from the rehearsal, but as a structural support that makes the rehearsal itself more possible.

Lesson Plan 1: Arrive, Breathe & Listen

This introductory lesson establishes the foundation of mindfulness in the orchestra setting. Students are introduced to mindfulness through breathing and intentional listening. The class opens with an "Arrival Breath" to help students transition into the musical space, followed by a discussion on what it truly means to listen. Students apply body awareness during scales and long tones, engage in a guided soundscape activity using a recorded musical excerpt, and close with a journal reflection or open reflection, starting the habit of self-awareness.

Music National Standards (2014)

- MU:Re7.1 — Perceive and analyze music to support understanding and personal connection.
- MU:Cn10.0 & MU:Cn11.0 — Synthesizing and relating music to broader personal and cultural contexts.

Prior Knowledge/Skills

During lesson 1, students will have already established a routine for getting their materials and will have basic information on mindfulness exercises.

Rehearsal Objective

- Students will define mindfulness and connect it to their identity as musicians.
- Students will practice breathing as a tool for focus and tone support.
- Students will engage in intentional listening to sharpen ensemble awareness.

Assessment of the Rehearsal

- Observation: Teacher observes engagement during exercises. Are students settling and tracking?
- Discussion/Exit Reflection: Students respond to closing prompt and/or informally share out. What did you notice during and after the exercises?

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications/Accommodations Needed

Something I observed quickly was that the implementation of the reflection journal was difficult. Students struggle with writing in complete sentences and putting their feelings into words; paper and pen feels like a thing of the past. So, I created reflection surveys that I sent out to students throughout the school year, to get feedback on their experience with the mindfulness exercises in the classroom.

Instructional Materials, Resources and Technologies

- Instruments (tuned and ready).
- Whiteboard or display for cues.

Lesson Sequence: Arrive, Breathe & Listen

Time	Activity	Purpose of Activity	Sequence	Assessment
5 min	Arrival Breath	Breathing: settle the nervous system, signal musical focus	3 slow diaphragmatic breaths before starting class. Teacher models/observes.	Teachers observes

5 min	Discussion	“What does it mean to really listen?” Focused Listening: introduce intentional attention	Discussion	Informal share-out: What did you notice during the listening exercise?
8 min	Warm-Up	Body Awareness: anchor attention while playing.	Scales/long tones with teachers cues: “Notice your bow arm”/ “Feel your feet.”	Observation/Discussion/Exit Journal
8 min	Listening Activity	Soundscape: nonjudgmental observation of music.	Play recorded excerpt, eyes closed. Discuss: What did you notice? What surprised you?	Observation/Discussion. Informal share-out.
7 min	Repertoire	Ensemble Listening: hear beyond your part	Drone warmup by section. Blend and tune by ear. Then play one familiar piece as if hearing it for the first time.	Observation: are students settling and tracking?
5 min	Reflection/Journal	Journaling: consolidate awareness, build reflection habit.	“What is one thing you noticed today, in the music or in yourself?”	Exit Journal/Discussion.

Table 2.1 Rehearsal Plan

Reflection

My primary goal for this lesson was to create a safe entry point into mindfulness — one that felt accessible rather than intimidating for middle school students encountering these practices for the first time. I wanted students to leave with a working understanding of what mindfulness means in the context of their musical lives, and with at least one tool — intentional breathing — they could carry with them. What students learned in this lesson was perhaps more foundational than technical: they learned that the rehearsal room could hold stillness. For many of them, that was a new and unfamiliar experience, and watching them begin to settle into it, even imperfectly, was meaningful evidence of early learning.

Lesson Plan 2: Body, Breath & Vision

This lesson deepens the mindfulness practice by connecting the body and mind directly to musical performance. Students use the 4-7-8 breath technique to address performance anxiety, followed by a full guided body scan to systematically release physical tension before playing. Visualization is then introduced; students mentally rehearse a passage with eyes closed before playing it immediately, transferring the mental rehearsal into live performance. Imagery prompts by section help unlock expressive playing, and journaling connects the physical and mental experience to their individual sound.

Music National Standards (2014)

- MU:Pr4.2, Pr5.1 — Selecting, analyzing, and refining performance choices, including internal emotional preparation.

- MU:Cn10.0 & MU:Cn11.0 — Synthesizing and relating music to broader personal and cultural contexts.

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Students have basic knowledge of mindfulness exercises introduced in Lesson 1.

Lesson Objective(s)

- Students will use a guided body scan to release physical tension before playing.
- Students will identify physical signs of performance anxiety and apply calming breath techniques.
- Students will practice guided visualization to mentally rehearse a musical passage.

Assessment of the Lesson

- Observation: Listening for changes in tone and watching for visible tension release during the body scan and long tones.
- Visualization Debrief: Open share — what did students notice after going straight from visualization into playing?
- Review: Look for students connecting body awareness or imagery to a specific musical moment.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Needed Modifications/Accommodations

Digital survey reflections are used instead of written reflections.

Instructional Resources, Materials and Technologies

- Instruments.
- Journal/reflection notebooks.
- Whiteboard with 4-7-8 breath diagram.

- Current repertoire.

Lesson Sequence: Body, Breath & Vision

Time	Activity	Purpose of Activity	Sequence	Assessment
5 min	Opening Breathing	Breathing: activate calm response, reduce performance anxiety	4-7-8 Breath x 3 rounds as a group (inhale 4, hold 7, exhale 9). Discuss how it feels	Observation: Listen for changes in tone and watch for visible tension release during the body scan (melting and long tones.
7 min	Body Scan/Melting	Body Scan: Systematic tension release before playing.	Guided scan seated with instruments at rest: feet-legs-back-shoulders-arms-hands-jaw. Release tension at each point	Observation: Watch for visible tension release during the body scan/melting exercise.
8 min	Technical Warm-Up	Body scan & Breathing: integrate awareness into technique.	Long tones & scales with breath cues, ow arm. Reset breath together between runs.	Observation: listening to changes in tone. Debrief: Open Share: What did students notice after? Review: Look for students connecting body awareness to specific musical moments.

7 min	Imagery in Repertoire	Imagery: metaphor unlocks expressive playing.	Assign imagery prompts by section: “play this phrase like a conversation.” Play, then debrief: was anything different?	Observation: Are students settling and tracking? Review: Look for students connecting imagery to a specific musical moment.
5 min	Reflection Journal	Journaling: connect body awareness and visualization to playing	“Where do you hold tension when you play? What image helped you today?”	Exit Journal/Discussion
5 min	Reflection/Journal	Journaling: consolidate awareness, build reflection habit.	“What is one thing you noticed today, in the music or in yourself?”	Exit Journal/Discussion.

Table 2.2 Rehearsal Plan

Reflection

The instructional strategies in this lesson were designed to move students progressively inward — from breath, to body, to mental imagery — before bringing them back outward into ensemble playing. The 4-7-8 breath technique, the guided body scan, and the visualization exercise each served a specific purpose, and sequencing them deliberately was essential. I found that moving directly from visualization into playing, without discussion in between, was one of the most effective strategies in the unit. The absence of words allowed the mental work to translate immediately into sound. Assessment in this lesson was primarily observational: I listened for shifts in tone quality and watched for visible signs of tension release. The change in

how students carried their instruments after the body scan — lighter, more open — told me more than any written reflection could have.

Lesson Plan 3: The Whole Musician

The final lesson shifts ownership to the students. A student volunteer leads the opening mindfulness practice, and the class reflects as a group on which techniques resonated most. During warm-up, each student independently selects and applies their preferred technique, demonstrating internalization of the practices. The class then performs a full repertoire run together using a shared pre-performance ritual. Pair sharing and a personal mindfulness pledge in their journals close the unit, with students committing to carry a practice forward.

Music National Standards (2014)

- MU:Cr1.1.E — Generate musical ideas for various purposes and contexts.
- MU:Pr4.2, Pr5.1 — Selecting, analyzing, and refining performance choices, including internal emotional preparation.
- MU:Re7.1 — Perceive and analyze music to support understanding and personal connection.
- MU:Cn10.0 & MU:Cn11.0 — Synthesizing and relating music to broader personal and cultural contexts.
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Prior Knowledge/Skills

Students have basic/beginner knowledge of the mindfulness exercises. We have been implementing exercises in the classroom regularly.

Lesson Objective(s)

- Students will reflect on which mindfulness techniques resonate most with them personally.
- Students will self-select and apply a mindfulness tool independently during warm-up.
- Students will articulate a personal mindfulness practice they intend to carry forward.

Assessment of the Lesson

- Self-Directed Warm-Up: Teacher observes whether students apply a technique authentically, not just going through the motions.
- Pair Share: Teacher walks around to listen for specific, genuine reflections connecting mindfulness to musical experience.
- Final Share: Open share; Teacher facilitates discussion listening for growth in self-awareness over the unit, in discussion.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Needed Modifications/Accommodations

Digital survey reflections are used instead of written reflections.

Instructional Resources, Materials and Technologies

- Instruments.
- Journal/reflection notebook.
- Whiteboard/Clear Touch listing all techniques covered in the unit.

Lesson Sequence: The Whole Musician

Time	Activity	Purpose of Activity	Sequence	Assessment
5 min	Opening: Student-led Mindfulness	Student ownership: activate calm response,	A student volunteer leads the opening	Observation: Does the student-leader

		demonstrate internalization.	mindfulness practice chosen from unit techniques.	demonstrate genuine understanding and calm facilitation?
7 min	Group Reflection	Responding/Connecting: synthesize unit learning identify personal resonance.	Class reflects as a group on which techniques resonated most. Teacher facilitates open discussion.	Pair Share: Teacher listens for specific, genuine reflections connecting mindfulness to musical experience.
8 min	Self-Directed Warm-Up	Student autonomy: each student independently selects and applies their preferred technique.	Students choose and apply their preferred mindfulness tool during warm-up (scales, long tones). Teacher observes without directing.	Teacher observes whether students apply a technique authentically, not just going through the motions.
8 min	Full Repertoire Run with Pre-Performance Ritual	Performing/Connecting: integrate mindfulness into ensemble performance.	Class performs a full repertoire run together using a shared pre-performance ritual established across the unit.	Observation: Does the ensemble demonstrate greater focus, connection, and confidence compared to the beginning of the unit?

7 min	Pair Share & Final Discussion	Responding/Connecting: articulate personal practice and commit to carrying it forward	Pair sharing. Open share: Teacher facilitates discussion listening for growth in self-awareness over the unit.	Final Share: Teacher listens for growth in self-awareness over the unit, in discussion.
5 min	Mindfulness Pledge/Journal	Journaling: commit to personal mindfulness practice going forward.	Students write a personal mindfulness pledge in their journals, committing to carry a practice forward.	Exit Journal/Discussion. Review pledge for specificity and personal connection.

Table 2.3 Rehearsal Plan

Reflection

Watching students self-select their mindfulness tools in this final lesson was the most compelling evidence that the unit had achieved something real. They were no longer following my lead — they were leading themselves. Going forward, I want to build on this by making student-led mindfulness a regular feature of rehearsal rather than a unit endpoint. I also want to be more intentional about connecting specific techniques to specific musical challenges — for example, using visualization before a technically demanding passage, or grounding before a high-stakes performance. This unit expanded my teaching practice in a fundamental way: it taught me that the most important thing I can do for my students is create the conditions for them to be fully present. That is a lesson I will carry into every rehearsal I lead from here forward.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

This reflection examines my experience implementing a three-lesson mindfulness unit within my middle school orchestra program as part of a classroom-based research study. The unit was designed not as an add-on to rehearsal, but as a structural support — addressing foundational student needs for safety, belonging, and esteem that, when unmet, create barriers to musical learning and growth. Drawing on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943, 1954) and mindfulness-based pedagogical approaches, the study sought to explore whether intentional mindfulness practices woven throughout rehearsal could meaningfully impact student well-being, focus, and musical engagement.

My goals for this unit were threefold: to help students develop skills to self-regulate their emotions and physical responses, to strengthen their ability to play and listen as an ensemble, and to support self-love and confidence — not only as musicians, but as human beings. From the beginning, this study was about more than musical technique. It was about creating a rehearsal space, an environment where students felt safe enough to be present, vulnerable, and genuinely themselves.

Students were introduced to and developed a working understanding of five core mindfulness techniques: breathing/body scan, grounding "melting," visualization and imagery, focused listening, and reflection. Each technique was introduced within the context of rehearsal, grounded in its direct connection to musical performance rather than presented as a separate wellness activity. Students learned that the rehearsal room could be a place of stillness and vulnerability, and that vulnerability, when shared, creates something powerful. By lesson 3, students were self-selecting their preferred mindfulness tools during warm-up, demonstrating not

only comprehension but genuine internalization of the practices. The shift from compliance to ownership was one of the most meaningful indicators of learning across the unit.

Each of the three lessons followed a consistent structure: an opening breath to signal transition into focused musical work, a mindfulness-centered warm-up connecting body awareness to technical skill, a core activity applying the technique directly to the ensemble playing, and a closing reflection to pull together the day's learning.

To be honest, it did not start easily. The initial response from my middle school students was exactly what any teacher might expect — eye rolls, loud sighs, and sounds of genuine displeasure. Middle schoolers are not naturally inclined to sit in silence, and the vulnerability of a body scan or a visualization exercise felt uncomfortable, even intimidating, to some students at first. Getting them to stop talking to each other long enough to settle into the exercises was its own challenge. Middle school students, as any teacher knows, do not know how to whisper.

To meet students where they were, I offered a choice: students could lie on the floor for the grounding/melting body scan exercise or remain seated in their chairs. Giving students ownership over their own experience changed everything. That small gesture of autonomy transformed the energy in the room; it made the exercises feel less imposed and more chosen.

Lying or sitting in silence, releasing tension from the body, resting the eyes and the mind for just a moment — students seemed to recognize something they had not been given a language for before: the need to stop. It was as though they had been waiting for permission to rest, and the mindfulness unit gave them that permission. This can feel vulnerable, but it allows students an opportunity to reset. I found the breathing exercises proved especially powerful in the days and hours leading up to performances. As we breathed together before taking the stage, you could feel the shift; we all locked in. Students performed with confidence, but more than

that, they had fun performing together. We really connected as an orchestra. What happened next was the part I did not fully anticipate. Once students became familiar with the exercises, once the routine became theirs, they began requesting them. The melting and grounding exercise in particular became a class favorite.

Assessment in this unit was intentionally observational and reflective rather than formal or evaluative, in keeping with the nature of mindfulness as a practice that resists standardized measurement. Three primary assessment strategies were used across the three lessons: observation, reflection, and informal discussion. The quality and specificity of these conversations served as a meaningful indicator of the unit's impact. Students who could name a specific moment when mindfulness changed how they played had clearly moved beyond surface-level participation.

What the lesson plans could not account for was the human element that preceded everything: trust. I was new to the district, and my 7th and 8th grade students had already been shaped by a relationship with a different teacher. We did not know each other yet. And asking students who do not know you to close their eyes, lie on the floor, and sit in silence is, in most honest terms, a significant ask. Before mindfulness could live in my classroom, belonging and acceptance had to come first.

The most surprising thing about this study was how alive the theoretical framework became once I was inside it. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943, 1954) and mindfulness-based pedagogy moved off the page and into my classroom. I could see them working. The idea that students need to feel safe, to belong, and to feel valued before they can reach their full potential as learners and musicians was no longer a theory. It was something I watched unfold within my orchestras.

The Arrival Breath gave students a calm, judgment-free way to enter the rehearsal space, and in doing so, it quietly began to lower the walls that so often keep middle schoolers from taking risks in front of each other. Giving students the choice to lie on the floor or stay in their seats sent an equally important message: your comfort matters here, and your autonomy will be respected. As the unit moved forward, the body scan and visualization exercises began to build something deeper — a sense of confidence that came not from my approval, but from within. Students were learning to trust their own preparation, their own bodies, and their own musical instincts.

Diane Wittry (2014) wrote that “Identifying with your inner feelings is difficult because it exposes part of your soul” (p. 183). This stayed with me throughout this study. It speaks directly to what mindfulness asks of young musicians: a willingness to look inward in a space that has always asked them to perform outward. And my students did it — slowly, imperfectly, and beautifully. What I witnessed in my students — the gradual willingness to participate in the grounding exercises, to breathe together, and then make music from that place — represented exactly the kind of vulnerability Wittry describes. And the music that came from it was richer, more connected, and more joyful than anything technique alone had produced.

This study challenged me in ways I did not fully anticipate. I came into it hoping to help my students, and I did, but what I did not expect was how much I needed these tools myself. Watching my students resist, then soften, then request the very practice they had once despised, held up a mirror to my own relationship with stillness, vulnerability, and self-regulation. I realized that the rehearsal room I was trying to create for them — one of safety, presence, and belonging — was one I needed to inhabit more fully as a teacher as well.

This study also challenged me to find more effective ways to communicate with my students. Mindfulness requires a different kind of teacher voice — slower, softer, more inviting than directive. Learning to lead a body scan or visualization with genuine calm, especially in a room full of middle schoolers who are testing the boundaries of silence, required me to model the very self-regulation I was asking of them. Perhaps the most beautiful and unexpected outcome of this unit was the environment we built together. Being willing to be vulnerable alongside my students — to breathe with them, to sit in silence with them, to trust the process alongside them — the safe space was not just something I gave to my students. It was something we created together.

This unit changed me as a teacher in ways I did not expect and cannot undo. Mindfulness is no longer something I am experimenting with; it is something I believe in. Having seen what mindfulness does for my students — how it sharpens their focus, deepens their connection as an ensemble, and builds their confidence on and off the stage — there is no going back.

Going forward, my goal is to be more intentional about how mindfulness lives in my classroom, not as something I pull out for a unit, but as something woven into the rhythm of everyday rehearsal. I also want to be more thoughtful in my planning, making sure each mindfulness element connects clearly to the music we are working on. Eventually, I want these exercises to be more student led. The more they lead, the more they own it. And the more they own it, the more it will last. My job is to keep making space for that to happen.

This study began with a question about whether mindfulness could support student well-being, ensemble playing, and self-confidence in a middle school orchestra setting. What it revealed was so much more than a simple answer. Mindfulness, when introduced with care,

consistency, and genuine vulnerability, does not just improve the conditions for learning — it changes the very nature of the community that is learning together.

My students came in resistant and left requesting. They came in guarded and left standing together before performances, filled with confidence and joy. From resistance to ownership, from reluctance to belonging. I could not have asked for more compelling evidence than that. And I could not have asked for a better reason to keep going.

Maslow (1954) reminds us that human beings cannot reach their fullest potential until their foundational needs are met. In the orchestra room, that means the path to beautiful music runs directly through the inner lives of the young people holding the instruments. Mindfulness is not a detour from musical learning. It is, I now believe, the very ground it grows from.

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