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Arts-Based Mindfulness Group Work with Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Sean C. Lougheed\textsuperscript{a} and Diana A. Coholic\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Canadore College, North Bay, Ontario, Canada; \textsuperscript{b}Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article describes the development of a 10-week arts-based mindfulness group program for youth aging out of foster care. This unique group program is briefly described, and examples of creative activities are provided. The use of an arts-based approach was engaging and relevant for the youth given the challenges they displayed such as paying attention and focusing. The authors discuss other convergent facets of the group including its strengths-based approach, social understanding of resilience, and holistic approach to facilitating mindfulness. This article contributes to an emerging field of practice regarding creative and holistic applications of mindfulness with youth who are marginalized.

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In this article, we describe a novel 10-week arts-based mindfulness group program that was developed for youth aging out of foster care and the child welfare system. The group program was developed and studied as part of the first author’s doctoral research (Lougheed, 2016), and it built upon earlier research lead by the second author that explored the benefits of an arts-based mindfulness group program for children who were marginalized (Coholic, Oystrick, Posteraro, & Lougheed, 2016). The disparity between older youth in care and their peers is striking. In many Canadian provinces, youth not involved with the child welfare system regularly receive familial financial support into adulthood, whereas funding for housing and education supports for older youth in care is discontinued at age 18 to 19 years (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). Meanwhile, researchers continue to point out the benefits (e.g., educational outcomes) of extending the age at which formal connection with the care system ends (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Unfortunately, many youth who have aged out of care attain lower levels of education than their peers, struggle to avoid homelessness, and incur poorer health outcomes across their life span (Ministry of Children and Youth Services & Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2013).

The young people involved in the arts-based mindfulness group program had experienced traumatic events and loss of biological family members.
tendency to self-blame was common. As one youth explained about her experience of coming into care, “I don’t want to say that it’s my fault that I came here but I’m the one who kind of gave the ministry the information they needed to put us here.” The youth participants also described living with roles/expectations inappropriate for their age, and participating in the dual roles of being cared for by the State and caring for others. They felt marginalized from being in care, and they experienced mounting academic pressure in relation to the age that they would no longer qualify for government services. Overall, the challenges of system involvement and aging-out of foster care encompassed a critical period of increased responsibilities and stressors with fewer supports. Given these serious challenges and a general lack of supports available to these youths, and based on our positive previous experiences facilitating arts-based mindfulness group work with younger children, we thought that a strengths and arts-based mindfulness group program might assist these youths to develop self-awareness and aspects of resilience that could help them to navigate this life transition.

*Arts-based activities* refer to the use of creative methods associated with multiple art mediums. In our group program, we used painting, drawing, music, and experiential activities that emphasized collaborative play and movement. These methods have a 75-year history in the helping professions, advancing the use of art-related therapies (e.g., dance, music, poetry) alongside medicine and psychology (Rappaport, 2014). McNiff (2014) underlined the importance of a creative healing process where the role of the facilitator helps to support as much participation from others as possible. Arts-based methods have also been utilized in research as a way for participants to occupy an active role in creating and analyzing their own art work and learning (Blodgett et al., 2013). As such, arts-based methods can be transformative in their ability to facilitate participation and encourage an empowering experience among research participants (Clover, 2007).

The use of arts-based methods in our group program was essential. First, they helped engage older youth in care who are typically a difficult population to engage in helping services (Nsonwu, Dennison, & Long, 2015). Because the use of arts-based methods mirrors experiences from most young people’s childhoods, art becomes a natural youth-centered point of entry for teaching and learning (Carter & Ford, 2013). Second, the arts-based exercises provided a relevant and meaningful experience with learning mindfulness as many youth who are marginalized lack skills to learn mindfulness from a more traditional approach. For example, they may have challenges sitting still, paying attention, and focusing. Approaching mindfulness using arts-based methods is conducive to working with young people because it is an enjoyable experience that the participants can and do invest in themselves (Flook et al., 2010). This may be especially true for youth that do not have the resources and/or supports to endure the emotionally challenging aspects of
more traditional treatment processes nor the skills to engage with meditation and homework. Furthermore, researchers have stated that arts-based methods can provide an important instrument for a broad range of children to express themselves (Lyon & Carabelli, 2016). This may be because persons, through the experience of art, feel more emotionally and/or spiritually connected and can communicate their feelings nonverbally through creative expression. This creative expression can encourage sharing and help us to understand their perspectives in different ways. Thus, creative activities may represent a more equitable means of communication for social justice (Coholic, Fraser, Robinson, & Lougheed, 2012).

Creative approaches are also convergent within our strength-based approach to group work. Previously, researchers have outlined the advantages of standardized, deliberative approaches to group work (Galinsky, Terzian, & Fraser, 2007). At the same time, Rosenwald et al. (2013) called to mind group work’s intuitive, nondeliberative, experiential origins. Jointly, these approaches mirror what Lang (2016) acknowledged as two distinctive methods simultaneously employed in a group’s problem-solving process. Our approach with strengths-based group work primarily extends from the traditional experiential learning model which was strongly influenced by John Dewey’s theory of experience (Kolb, 1984). Dewey’s ideas about experience can be described as a river that changes in shape, characterized by never-ending interplay between our thoughts and our individual, shared, and physical environment (Clandinin, Rosiek, & Clandinin, 2007). Furthermore, for Dewey, art was connected to daily life as a method for exploring and making meaning. This was based on the idea that the process of experiencing art could produce new understandings from past and present experience, resulting in an imaginative and cultivated experience (Butler-Kisber, Li, Jean Clandinin, & Markus, 2007). The resulting process of strengths-based group work is largely intuitive; yet there is an emergent back-and-forth pattern of nondeliberative problem solving, and deliberative practice, marked by broad overarching objectives and a facilitator with a particular role in guiding the group’s process (Lang, 2016).

Mindfulness, the other key component in our program, refers to a holistic philosophy and practice emanating from the Buddhist tradition of meditation as one teaching for the purposes of increasing compassion, reducing suffering, and helping individuals attain inner peace (Coholic, 2014; McWilliams, 2014). Kabat-Zinn (1994) was one of the first Western practitioners to define mindfulness for use in North America. He defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). General agreement on what specifically constitutes a mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) is a matter of ongoing discussion largely dependent on the theories that underpin different methods of facilitation (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013). In general,
MBIs share the principles of mindfulness to generate insight and encourage a healthy mental state (Cullen, 2011). Well-known MBIs for adults include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). These programs have been adapted for use with youth (Greco & Hayes, 2008), and there appears to be agreement that MBIs are an encouraging practice that can foster resilience among young people (Tan, 2015). In studying MBIs with youth, researchers have focused on interventions that target a specific clinical group (such as those exhibiting attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]) (Carboni, Roach, & Fredrick, 2013) or have evaluated manualized MBIs that target universal populations within schools (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). For example, Himelstein, Hastings, Shapiro, and Heery (2012) demonstrated that youth who were incarcerated in related participation in a 10-week MBI to “an increase in the ability to regulate both mental and emotional content, as well as physical actions” (p. 234).

Overall, though promising results have been reported, these have also been criticized for having relatively weak methodological designs, and a lack of adequate measures and/or follow-up data (Felver, Celis-de Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh, 2016). At the same time, Barrett (2015) supported exploration of the suitability of specially-tailored MBIs (in our case, using arts-based methods) for youth populations with unique challenges. Research exploring the implementation of MBIs among older youth involved in the child welfare system is scant. This could be due to logistical challenges involved with facilitating applied research among vulnerable youth populations including transportation and attrition. Older youth in care may be less likely to engage in helping services because they experience social conditions (e.g., housing, food insecurity) that impede their involvement (Liljedahl, Rae, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2013). Next we describe our arts-based mindfulness program.

**The arts-based mindfulness group**

The development of the group for youths aging out of care built on earlier research in which the authors studied arts-based mindfulness group work with children age 8 to 12 years (Coholic et al., 2016). In the current research, eight youth in total participated in two different groups (six girls and two boys age 15–17 years). Each group was facilitated once per week for 10 weeks in duration. Sessions were cofacilitated by a social worker who was an employee of the child welfare system and the first author, who is an experienced child and youth care worker. The cofacilitator was not a case worker for any of the participants and had experience facilitating group work with youth. Group sessions were 3 hours long, which enabled sustained attention on activities, more opportunities to practice meditation, and a clearly defined break period in the middle of the session. Due to the youths’ ability to pay
attention for longer periods of time than younger children, and their cognitive abilities, a verbal summary was provided at the beginning of each session relaying the session’s main objectives and reaffirming the focal components of mindfulness philosophy and practice. The activities selected for the group were developmentally and age appropriate with a specific onus placed on the participant to be responsible for practicing the exercises outside of the group.

Each of the 10 group sessions followed a similar structure that included a warm-up activity, first half activities, a break, second half activities, and a closing exercise. A similar format for each session promoted comfort and familiarity with the program. A concerted effort was made to replicate activities that extended the learning from a previous session, often with an emphasis on group collaboration the second (or third) time an activity was facilitated. The consistency and the repetition between the groups created opportunities to put the concepts of mindfulness into practice. The short warm-up activity was used to engage the participants in a fun, group activity to acclimatize to the group setting and transition from the day’s events. For example, the first author taught the participants how to correctly deliver and receive a medicine ball. As they arrived at the program site for each session, they were invited by the facilitator to pass the ball back and forth. This activity was well suited for this age group of participants compared to facilitating activities with balls with younger children that in our experience have had a tendency to quickly unravel. The youths were physically strong enough to participate and were actively engaged in mindful practice when safely passing the ball to one another. The proper stance for catching and throwing and appropriate breathing techniques were practiced and promoted. The youth participants decided to modify the activity by sitting in a circle and rolling the ball slowly to one another. In this way, the pattern of the ball and the sound of the ball rolling across the floor became the focus of participants’ awareness. This activity was effective because it could begin with a single participant and the facilitators, and continue until all members of the group had been added to the circle.

Next, the facilitators outlined the agenda for the session and reviewed some of the main concepts of mindfulness in a short discussion (approximately 5 minutes) titled “Mindfulness: 101.” Group participants would then partake in an arts-based mindfulness activity such as mindful walking augmented with drawing. Participants were invited to remove their shoes if they chose and walk around the building following a path that everyone walked together first as a group. Participants began walking at staggered intervals along the same prescribed path allowing space between each person so that they would have less difficulty focusing with fewer distractions. The youths were asked to take notice of the changing terrain (grass to pavement to wooden stairs) and to pay attention to the different sensations felt through their feet. Afterwards, they were encouraged to draw the path they had
walked in a way that communicated the patterns of the terrain and the various sensations experienced. Individual drawings were shared with the group. Some participants drew what looked like a treasure map to outline the path they had walked, complete with different patterns drawn in various colours on the map representing the sensations and textures participants had noticed while walking. They were encouraged to consider practicing mindful walking outside of the group and to collect some sea glass, small shells, and small stones for a future creative activity.

The midgroup break included food, which was important given the timing of the after-school group. The first author engaged a local restaurant to cater the group sessions with sandwiches that could be customized to order the week prior. The intent of doing so was to underline a sense of group belonging. The snack also enabled an opportunity for consistent mindful eating practice. The break did not result in the subsequent loss of momentum in returning to activities that could sometimes be the case with younger children. The break also afforded the participants an opportunity to talk informally with one another and with the facilitators promoting the development of group cohesion.

Following the break, participants engaged in a more traditional mindfulness meditation followed by an additional art-based activity, again emphasizing the concepts reviewed at the beginning of the session. Seated or laying down comfortably, participants were encouraged to listen as one of the facilitators either read aloud a guided meditation (Hooker & Fodor, 2008) or played a recorded meditation from an audio book (Williams, Teasdale, & Segal, 2007). An alternative to this meditation was having one of the facilitators lead the participants through a series of deep breathing exercises for approximately 10 minutes. Following this activity, an art-based exercise was facilitated in a collaborative nature, to explore participants’ ideas and ultimately to foster empathy for one another. In the activity, “Handprints,” participants were invited to trace their handprint on a piece of paper then affix the paper to their back. For the next 15 minutes or so, participants took turns writing a positive affirmation on the sheets of paper affixed to their peers’ backs. This activity provided an opportunity for participants to share what they appreciated about others in the group. As such, the goal of the activity was to help develop self-esteem and to reflect on what they enjoyed about their group experience and each other.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the research findings in detail, we note that the youths reported a variety of benefits including better emotion regulation, feelings of optimism, and improved sleep hygiene. Notably, participants also reported feeling accepted in a group with their peers, which is vitally important for youth who are marginalized given their experiences of exclusion and discrimination. Group work can be normalizing for people who are marginalized and promote feelings of self-compassion (Eaton, 2016). Walsh, Rutherford, and Crough (2013) utilized
arts-based methods with Indigenous woman who were incarcerated to foster social inclusion and new understanding about the experiences of another person. In our program, Lily explained her sense of relief in being able to listen and share experiences with peers she felt understood by:

It was nice to have other people to talk to about that kind of stuff because you know at school you don’t just like talk about it with anyone. So, it was nice there. It was nice to have other people to talk about it who get it [the experience of being in foster care].

The reported benefits aligned with the fundamental view in strengths-based group work that people have much to offer one another to improve the quality of their lives (Malekoff, 2014). The participants were able to access social support through the group experience. This coincides with what researchers call interdependence, acknowledging the need for opportunities to establish a wide array of supportive relationships, having rightly anticipated the deficits that can result from earlier relationship breakdown (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). Programs for youth in care that focus solely on developing skills related to self-sufficiency in preparation for independent living are missing an opportunity to promote the development of skills and growth by creating and strengthening healthy relationships that may otherwise be missing in the lives of these youth (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009). In the following section, we briefly discuss other facets of the group program that aligned with utilizing an arts-based approach.

**Strengths, resilience, and a holistic approach**

The arts-based mindfulness group was grounded in strengths-based practice, a broader social understanding of resilience, and a more holistic understanding of mindfulness. Strength-based approaches focus on the innate strengths of individuals, families, and communities rather than health, education, and/or behavioral deficits (Antonovsky, 1987). Viewing individuals’ resilience in relation to their social context is a process of looking broadly across the environment for assets that could potentiate personal strength. Rather than focus on undesirable behaviors that may very well be adaptive, a strengths-based approach maintains a dogged concentration on inherent characteristics in and around the individual. In the dominant mainstream, the challenge for practitioners has been to hold a strengths-based approach in balance with the prevailing tendency to focus on risk. Saleebey (1999) asserted that “it is as wrong to deny the possible as it is to deny the problem” (p. 15). In other words, a strengths-based practice does not ignore problems but focuses on a person’s strengths as a way to create change. Practitioners can identify strengths in seven key areas including talents or athletic competencies. past coping. past thriving. future goal-setting. accumulation of personal and social resources. advice from others. and evidence of hidden talents (McCammon, 2012).
In our program, key practice principles of strengths-based group work included decentralizing authority of decision making, developing alliances with key members of the participants’ lives outside of the group, and welcoming the whole person to the group (including their abilities and hidden talents perhaps not yet known or well understood), not just aspects of the person deemed undesirable or challenging (Malekoff, 2014). For instance, the group design complemented the youths’ interests by including specific art-based activities that they indicated enjoying in pregroup interviews. The style of facilitation we employed empowered group members by promoting their decision making regarding the activities that they wanted to repeat, and their food preferences. Another characteristic of the group was the degree to which decisions were determined by consensus (decentralizing authority), which allowed participants to shape the helping process and actively pursue self-determination (Steinberg, 2014). For example, with guidance outlining the benefits, participants elected to adopt a “clean air policy” free of any negative comments or put-downs, even in a joking manner. They demonstrated their commitment to this idea in the way they would hold each other accountable during the first two sessions when the bulk of those types of comments effectively disappeared.

Moreover, it is important to value participants’ skills by incorporating their talents. This was accomplished by assisting participants to identify their abilities and encouraging them to express these through the creative activities. We purposely repeated activities that incorporated the participants’ artistic talents (e.g., painting) and encouraged them to consider taking the artwork home to share with others as a way to help the youth communicate their experience of group participation. Participants were encouraged to affix their artwork to fridge doors as a way to provide a conversational piece for discussion with their foster parents. The “fridge door experience” was a concept we discussed as a group, highlighting the importance of opportunities for young people to celebrate strengths and success, sadly lacking in many young people’s lives who are involved in the child welfare system (Coholic, 2014).

Second, a social understanding of resilience is inherently strengths-based. We conceptualized resilience in line with the work of Ungar and colleagues who emphasized the social connections and relationships underlining resilience that are determined by navigating toward health sustaining resources, and negotiating with family and community to provide such assets (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Framing resilience in this manner meant that decisions were made about the structure, format, and timing of the group that would provide opportunities to form, extend, and ultimately strengthen social relationships. For example, the first author attempted to mobilize people involved in the lives of the youths including teachers, foster parents, biological parents, service providers, peers, and siblings. This meant meeting with
these people prior to the beginning of the group sessions to discuss the research, and inviting them to embrace the central concepts of the group so that participants would feel comfortable discussing the concepts outside of the group sessions. The first author attended service provider meetings and traveled to the participants’ homes to meet with foster parents and in some cases the participants’ siblings. Additionally, in the absence of a network of good transportation in the rural area within which the groups were facilitated, the facilitators relied on foster parents and child care workers to transport the youths to the group program site.

A social understanding of resilience also reinforced the decision to implement arts-based group work so that participants could feel supported by their peers to explore their individual strengths, and emerging sense of belonging and self. Expressing feelings and thoughts through art is believed to be a more comfortable way to address challenging and existential issues (Sinding, Warren, & Paton, 2014). Support for this was previously established by Nsonwu, Dennison, and Long (2015, p. 25) who utilized arts-based methods with youth transitioning out of foster care. Among their findings, they found that youth reported “deeper caring and supportive relationships with one another” in part because the feelings expressed through art were validated by peers. It is noteworthy that strengths develop within a climate of supportive relationships, and researchers have encouraged practitioners to embed a focus on strengths in every interaction with young people (Rawana & Brownlee, 2009).

Finally, in our experiences, approaching mindfulness as a holistic and creative practice can be more helpful in engaging vulnerable youth populations because it offers a more flexible approach that meets the needs of the group participants and is in line with a social group work methodology. Dynamic group work that appears fluid, and even messy, can mean its members are seriously involved in analysis, introspection, and collaborative problem-solving (Malekoff, Salmon, & Steinberg, 2014). Malekoff (2014) also reminded us that a consequence of utilizing only evidence-based practices in the helping/health professions is that much of what is then called group work is actually “curriculum driven” (p. 36) classes that cannot deviate from predetermined scripts that facilitators must follow to preserve the methodologically coherence from group to group. Unfortunately, among marginalized groups, this agenda flies in the face of what works in strengths-based group work that celebrates a much more flexible process that promotes creativity and belonging. The use of the term holistic referred to a decision to take into account the entirety of participants’ wellness including their physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being. We were sensitive to the view that persons’ health is influenced by their environment. This was deemed important to the way that mindfulness was approached with the youth because the
experiences necessitating child welfare involvement typically affect the lives of these youth on many levels from an individual level (e.g., identity development) to a broader systems level (e.g., displacement from culture, sense of community belonging, spiritual influences). Put simply, young persons’ existential questions in early adulthood related to identity, culture, their sense of belonging, and spirituality are not likely to be answered if their well-being is only viewed as one dimensional (e.g., physical health).

There is a connection between the arts and a holistic viewpoint. For instance, arts and spirituality can help people come to terms with their existence and express moral and ethical dilemmas that are difficult to put into words (Damianakis, 2007). Also, embracing a holistic framework can mean that the process of learning mindfulness is less prescribed than a manualized cognitive-behavioral-based approach that emphasizes specific tasks and clinical outcomes. Even now, as mindfulness has gained popularity in the mainstream, the majority of studies with young people focus on interventions that seek prescribed outcomes (Zack, Saekow, Kelly, & Radke, 2014). For example, in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), the targeted symptom reduction outcomes in each session relate to the overarching goal of reducing depression relapse (Saltzman & Goldin, 2008). In the arts-based mindfulness program, the participants’ interests on a week-to-week basis were incorporated without fear of being diverted from the group session’s agenda. For instance, participants would often relate the difficulty in applying key concepts of mindfulness in daily life situations such as an argument with a foster parent. This provided an opportunity to solicit feedback from other members of the group to jointly problem solve the matter. In fostering mutual aid, group participants should be helped to develop collaborative relationships by learning to help one another and solve problems together (Steinberg, 2014).

“Dream Sand” is an example of an arts-based activity that demonstrated a holistic approach to learning mindfulness. Working with dreams can be a rich intervention for making meaning from significant life events (Coholic & LeBreton, 2007). The goal of this activity was to develop self-awareness and explore/express the feelings associated with their dreams. Having already completed dream journals, participants were invited to review their entries and select a dream or image from a dream to re-create using colored sand. Participants were encouraged to consider how sand is malleable and the picture they would create with it would not last as the sand is swept up at the end of the exercise. This was connected with the concept of being able to appreciate and focus on the present moment and to encourage participants to practice self-compassion by focusing on staying present and not judging their creation, since the prevailing concern, when working with any art medium for the first time, was that the end result they created may not be any “good.”
Conclusion

Facilitating arts-based mindfulness group work with older youth in care represents a promising approach for engaging this population of youth who are difficult to engage as they exit the child welfare system. Our approach was rooted in strengths-based practice, whereby participants’ past experiences were normalized and accepted. A broader understanding of resilience expanded the focus on individual wellness to include a larger group of people that support positive long-term outcomes. In practice, these ideas fostered collaboration and mutual aid. Finally, a holistic approach to the study of mindfulness embraced the use of arts-based and experiential methods to teach mindfulness concepts.

Arts-based approaches have received less research interest to date but are important to consider within the field of MBIs. Although we cannot say with certainty that the reported benefits were a result of group participation, our approach demonstrated that young people can learn mindfulness-based skills using creative, enjoyable, and engaging interventions. Our results are promising and warrant future research in this area. Because responsibility for child welfare rests with society as a whole, research is necessary to support policies and programs that are flexible enough to successfully engage and support young people in their transition out of the child welfare system. Interventions are required that promote improved long-term health and education outcomes, more equitable to the experience of youth not involved in the child welfare system. Although it is perhaps easier to point to the many challenges that these youth face, and simply throw up our collective arms after a missed appointment, carefully considering the influences underpinning our approach to arts-based mindfulness group work offers ingredients for successful group program design.

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