

## **Heart Centered Learning: Integrating Mindfulness, Breath, and Compassion for Well-Being and Connection**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This qualitative study explored how educators and leaders experience and implement Heart Centered Learning (HCL), an integrative framework that connects mindfulness, breath, and compassion to promote well-being and community across educational settings. Based on semi-structured interviews with nine purposefully selected participants, the reflexive thematic analysis identified core themes of community, mindfulness, compassion, and breath as interrelated elements of personal and collective transformation. Participants described using HCL to cultivate emotional competence, reflective awareness, and relational safety for themselves and their students, emphasizing practices that extend beyond classrooms—such as family engagement, student-led initiatives, and community dialogue—as well as structural supports like wellness coaches and data systems to sustain implementation. Educators reported developing greater self-regulation, empathy, and confidence, noting perceived positive ripple effects on students' resilience, self-advocacy, and social responsibility. These findings suggest that committed practitioners experience HCL as a framework for integrating mindfulness- and compassion-based approaches into everyday*

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*educational practice and community life, while underscoring the need for future research using more diverse samples, direct outcome measures, and longitudinal designs.*

**KEYWORDS:** Heart Centered Learning, Mindfulness, Mindfulness and Lived Experiences, Compassion, Well-Being, Educator Stress Reduction, Community Building, Regulating Emotions, Collective Well-Being.

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In the contemporary climate of education, educators, practitioners, and providers are increasingly turning to mindfulness and compassion-based approaches to foster holistic well-being across the lifespan (Bamber & Kraenzle Schneider, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2005). These practices are grounded in a broad base of work linking contemplative techniques to self-regulation, empathy, and prosocial behavior in educational contexts (Beer et al., 2015; Gardner, 2020; Damsgaard et al., 2022; Silva & Palathra, 2024; Vilvens et al., 2020).

Providers across settings have identified the benefits of integrating mindfulness and compassion-based approaches into their practices (Conversano et al., 2020; Lamothe et al., 2016). Moreover, in the educational context, prior quantitative and mixed-methods studies have documented associations between mindfulness- or compassion-based training and indicators such as teacher stress, burnout, and classroom climate (Flook et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2013; 2019; Mahfouz et al., 2025; Neff, 2023; Neff & Germer, 2022). Notable findings include reductions in stress and burnout and improvements in classroom climate and related well-being outcomes across various populations and settings (Adams & Gray, 2023; Beer et al., 2015; Dorais et al., 2022; Epstein et al., 2021).

Qualitative studies have also begun to explore teachers' experiences with school-based mindfulness and compassion initiatives, including perceived benefits and implementation barriers, and how contemplative practices shape teachers' professional identities and practice (Ager et al., 2016; Morgan, 2012). Related qualitative work with long-term yoga practitioners extends these insights by showing that many practitioners experience yoga as a "way of life," integrating breathwork, mindfulness, and compassion beyond the mat into daily life. Vogler et al. (2024), for example, document increases in yoga participation and conscious monitoring of practice, with associations to psychological health and quality of life outcomes (Reynolds et al., 2024; Schmid et al., 2022; Telles et al., 2022). Such embodied contemplative practices strengthen coping, self-regulation, and interpersonal engagement, suggesting mechanisms by which educator well-being and relational capacity might be enhanced in everyday professional contexts (Adams & Gray, 2023; Beer et al., 2015; Torres, 2020). This alignment is consistent with evidence that contemplative practices support stress management and emotional regulation for both students and adults in educational settings (Beer et al., 2015; Damsgaard et al., 2022; Dickerson & Nelson., 2024; Gardner, 2020; Sensiper, 2022).

Despite these insights, the field still has substantial gaps; notably, far less is known about how educators who share these tools with students make sense of and live within integrative frameworks spanning personal, relational, and institutional dimensions. More qualitative work is needed to understand the lived experiences and lessons of educators deeply engaged in contemplative practices, including how they weave meditation, breath, and other components into their lives and roles; these insights can illuminate the supports, frameworks, and barriers to sustaining such work (Adams & Gray, 2023; Gardner, 2020; Morgan, 2012).

To address these gaps and consider what could be learned from experienced, dedicated practitioners, we examined Heart Centered Learning (HCL) as one concrete framework. HCL positions adults as co-regulators and relational anchors in their communities, operationalized through its five Cs—Consciousness, Compassion, Confidence, Courage, and Community—

drawing on social and emotional learning, contemplative pedagogy, and adult well-being research (Byrnes, 2012; Flook et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2013, 2019; Mason et al., 2019; 2021; Zessin et al., 2015). This framework offers a pathway to address how contemplative practices are sustained in educational ecosystems by foregrounding adult well-being alongside student outcomes, aligning with the literature on teacher well-being as essential to sustaining positive classroom ecosystems (Byrnes, 2012; Germain & Klevan, 2025; Klein, 2017; Durlak et al., 2022). In response to this need, this qualitative inquiry aims to illuminate educators' lived experiences and the organizational contexts in which contemplative practices are sustained (Adams & Gray, 2023; Byrnes, 2012; Torres, 2020).

The current study investigates how educators and leaders engaged with HCL describe the interconnections among breath, compassion, and community in their daily lives and institutional roles. The guiding questions were: (a) How do participants understand and practice HCL as adults? (b) How do they perceive its influence on their well-being, relationships, and school or community culture? and (c) What supports and barriers do they identify for integrating HCL within educational systems?

## **Method**

### ***Sample and Procedures***

To develop a rich, contextually situated understanding of participants' experiences with HCL, the study employed a qualitative design grounded in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis allows for flexible, iterative, and interpretive engagement with data to identify patterned meanings across the dataset. Further, this approach conceptualizes meaning as actively produced through the interplay between participant accounts and researcher interpretation, emphasizing the situated, reflexive role of the researcher in the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019; MAXQDA, 2026).

To best capture the lived experiences of participants, researchers employed semi-structured interviews to allow participants to engage in open dialogue about their perspectives. Nine professionals were purposely selected based on their multi-year engagement with HCL or analogous work. Given the specialized expertise and contextual knowledge required, a purposeful sampling approach was used to ensure the inclusion of individuals with rich, experiential insight into HCL and its analogous work. Participants were all adults (18 years or older) and did not include any vulnerable populations. All participants were fully informed of the research purpose and provided verbal consent to be video recorded before agreeing to participate. Given the minimal risk to participants and the absence of vulnerable populations, this study did not undergo Institutional Review Board (IRB) review.

The participants' settings span early childhood to higher education, urban, rural, and multicultural contexts. Participants had 5-16 years' experience applying mindfulness, compassion, or contemplative pedagogy, including Heart Centered Learning, in PreK-university or community settings. Sampling prioritized maximum variation of professional roles, years engaged in HCL, and inclusion of both formally trained and self-developed practitioners.

From the sample, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to probe emerging ideas in depth. Data collection focused on eliciting rich, descriptive accounts that reveal how HCL may foster transformation at both the personal and collective levels. The interview data were subsequently analyzed to identify common themes that illuminate HCL's potential to influence not only

individual participants but also the broader cultures of schools and communities. Demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, setting, role, affiliation) are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Sample*

<b>Identifier</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Affiliation with Heart Centered Learning</b>
E1	F	White	MA - rural	Retired principal	CEI Executive Director 2023-2025. Initial HCL researcher, co-author
E2	F	Black	DC-urban	Faculty CEI	Developer of HEART (Mason et al., 2025) co-author
E3	F	White	MA - rural	Education Administrator	Co-founder of HCL; co-author
M1	M	White	MD - urban	Mindfulness Coordinator	Co-author; yoga instructor
M2	F	White	OR - rural	Administrator-Professor	Exec. Director of private school; co-author
L1	F	Black	DC/MD-urban	Mindfulness Instructor	Co-presenter; Co-Director of CEI's Cultivating Happiness Initiative
L2	F	White	MD - urban	Education Specialist/teacher	Restorative practice/ collaborator
L3	M	White	PA – rural	Independent Practitioner	None/ yoga-mindfulness instructor
L4	M	White	PA – rural	Independent Practitioner	None/ yoga- mindfulness instructor

***Data Collection and Analysis***

Analysis followed an iterative, reflexive process of coding and theme development, involving repeated movement between data familiarization, initial coding, and the refinement of emerging themes. This recursive engagement with the data enabled the identification of shared patterns of meaning that reveal how HCL is lived and understood as both an individual experience and a socially embedded phenomenon (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The analytic approach emphasized the situated nature of participants’ accounts within broader cultural and institutional contexts, allowing for attention to how HCL may foster shifts not only in personal orientations but also in the collective practices and norms that shape schools and communities (Goddard et al. 2007; van Manen, 1990)

Across the research team ( $n = 5$ ), three members (including the lead author) were deeply involved in Heart Centered Learning as developers, trainers, or long-term practitioners. The research team consisted of the lead author as the PI, a research assistant (RA; primary) and doctoral student (secondary) who acted as the coders for the dataset, and two doctoral students who ensured internal and external validity of the approach. The doctoral students were recruited to ensure reliability across engagement with the data as they were not involved heavily in the initial stages of the HCL development. The lead researcher developed the interview guide while the RA derived a codebook from the questions asked in interviews.

To begin the analysis of data, transcripts derived from the videotaped interviews were examined to account for participants' exact dialogue (emphasis on word choice) and coded segments so the research team could query each other and reach consensus on the most appropriate codes. After initial coding, conceptually related codes were grouped into categories, which were iteratively refined into broader themes and subthemes by examining patterns across categories and revisiting coded excerpts. Through repeated reviewing and naming of themes, and discussion about the most appropriate labels, we developed a final thematic structure that captured shared patterns of meaning relevant to the research questions. We monitored thematic saturation by tracking the emergence of new codes as we progressed through the interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017); after coding the final three interviews, no substantially new codes or themes were identified and data primarily reinforced existing patterns, which we interpreted as evidence that thematic saturation had been reached for our research aims.

After identifying major themes through thematic coding, the secondary coder imported interviews into R (version 4.5.1) for independent text preprocessing and word-frequency analysis (Silge & Robinson, 2016). After cleaning the text (i.e., converting all text to lowercase and splitting it into individual words), the coder generated frequency counts for a predetermined set of target words based on the themes identified during the thematic coding process. The frequency word counts, computed across all transcripts as well as by individual transcript, were used to examine variation in theme emphasis and to elaborate, rather than validate, thematic analysis. The word counts were not treated as "proof" of the themes, but instead served an illustrative function, highlighting which patterns appeared most salient for answering our research questions and informing our conclusions about the most prominent aspects of participants' experiences. Consistent with recommendations for using numbers in qualitative research, word frequencies served as an illustrative rather than evidentiary function (Sandelowski, 2001).

### ***Inter-Rater Agreement***

To mitigate bias and ensure trustworthiness, two of the team's researchers were responsible for thematic coding, with one researcher conducting line-by-line coding of all transcripts and a second researcher independently reviewing the coded material, consistent with recommendations for credibility and dependability in thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Hill et al., 1997). Researchers convened over Zoom, an online video conferencing platform, to compare and contrast codes, discrepancies, and areas of consideration, engaging in a consensus-oriented process akin to consensual qualitative research approaches (Hill et al., 1997). After three rounds of review, researchers obtained 100% agreement across generated themes, and the resulting themes were then reviewed by doctoral-level researchers who were not directly involved in the initial coding process, providing an additional layer of analytic scrutiny and enhancing confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017; Hill et al., 1997). This collaborative and reflexive approach strengthened the consistency, coherence, and applicability of the findings across contexts in line with established guidance on trustworthiness in qualitative research journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

***Researchers’ Reflexivity***

The insider status of the research team understanding the foundation of HCL afforded nuanced understanding of the language, history, and context of the framework, however presented potential for confirmation bias and interpretive alignment with participants generally positive views (Rowe, 2024). To address these risks, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue throughout the study, explicitly surfacing our assumptions, encouraging team members to question emerging interpretations, and actively attending to tensions, challenges, and critical or ambivalent accounts in the data. In our analytic meetings, we emphasized consensus over simple agreement indices and prioritized fidelity to participants’ words rather than promotion of the framework (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The doctoral students’ involvement ensured review of materials, codes, and presentations for alignment with broader literature and methodologies in qualitative work, and objectivity in the approaches employed.

**Results**

Table 2 presents the word counts of various themes across all nine semi-structured interviews.

**Table 2**  
*Frequency of Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>
Community	117
Mindfulness	107
Compassion	94
Breath	43

***Community***

Community emerged as a central theme across all nine interviews. The word "community" appeared 117 times across transcripts, illustrating how frequently participants returned to this concept.

When adults model transparency, active listening, and reflective dialogue, they generate microcultures of safety where learning and innovation thrive. The educational specialist's observation that "community is the foundation—learning is social and needs support to be transformational" captures this synergistic dynamic. She said, "We have those kinds of proactive pieces that intersect with heart centered learning in many different kinds of ways, from elevating the importance of community, and moving together through, as both supports and opportunities to learn from one another, as well as just having the conscious presence of how we are when we're in shared spaces."

Participants emphasized that establishing a sense of community within schools requires both structural and relational support. Several described how the presence of wellness coaches and coordinators can strengthen schoolwide efforts to sustain emotional well-being, particularly when

paired with open opportunities for dialogue. Listening sessions were seen as vital not only for acknowledging challenges but also for celebrating successes and positive experiences. Others noted that the use of intentional strategies to strengthen family-school connections further deepened community ties and ensured that the principles of Heart Centered Learning extended beyond the classroom.

However, being in community with others doesn't always happen spontaneously. Living an HCL life orients individuals to foster community. One of the independent practitioners stated, "We guide heart parties, inviting people into gentle, shared practices that build community." These heart parties are usually formed through personal outreach and allow everyone in attendance to engage in deep individual and group reflection of what is on their hearts.

### *Mindfulness*

Mindfulness emerged as a central theme in participants' accounts. The word "mindfulness" appeared 107 times throughout the interviews, reflecting diverse expressions of presence, balance, and compassion in their daily practice. Reflecting on her role as a school administrator, one interviewee highlighted how the practice of mindfulness can even extend beyond the classroom. She said, "Kids brought mindfulness home; before dinner, they would light a candle and take a breath."

Mindfulness is also just as powerful for the individuals who have been living HCL for years. The school administrator again demonstrates this when she says, "I now take 10 minutes in the morning for my own mindfulness. It makes a difference." It makes a difference in her life and the lives of everyone she subsequently interacts with.

Interviewees also reflected on how mindfulness practices reached into home and personal spaces, influencing family routines and relationships. They observed that students often brought these practices to their parents, teaching breathing techniques and calm reflection at home. Educators described the importance of maintaining their own mindfulness practices—engaging in daily moments of reflection and stillness—as a way to remain grounded and model regulation for their students.

Moreover, many of the interviewees reported on how they were using HCL and mindfulness in a variety of settings. The co-founder of HCL, for example, implements heart centered principles in her work with former inmates transitioning back into society. She noted that one inmate she worked with said, "When I was imprisoned, it was mindfulness that saved me." She elaborated on how mindfulness works with this population by saying, "They have to battle their past and their trauma but staying present and having something like mindfulness and heart centered, is so critical to their success."

### *Compassion*

Living with compassion is a HCL principle that was also at the forefront of the interviews. Interviewees highlighted the impact and benefits of compassion, mentioning it 94 times across the nine interviews. Compassion is a foundational aspect of HCL. The CEI Faculty member echoed this sentiment, saying, "It's not just about pedagogy; if you're not having compassion at the foundation of what you're doing, children are not going to be able to retain and or learn." However, before you can have compassion with others, it is important to practice having compassion with yourself. According to one of the independent practitioners, "Heart centered living begins with adults reconnecting to their own compassion and creativity." The mindfulness instructor further

supported this notion, saying, "Compassion is something that I worked on." The individuals who live in a HCL way lead with compassion.

Participants described compassion as multilayered: first inward (self-kindness), then outward (empathic care), connecting classroom presence with civic responsibility. These observations align with Neff's (2023) tri-part model of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness—as crucial to reducing perfectionism and emotional fatigue among educators (Tripathi & Mulkey, 2023).

Participants discussed compassion as both a skill set and an orientation that can be cultivated intentionally. They highlighted the importance of compassion building for students, emphasizing that emotional competence arises not from punitive correction but from teaching skills that foster empathy and reflection. Several noted that students who engaged consistently with heart centered practices became more confident, demonstrated stronger self-advocacy, and operated within a culture where mental health and compassion were treated as shared district priorities.

### ***Breath***

From a psychological lens, the breath becomes both a biological and relational intervention—a facilitator of connectedness and adaptive coping. Participants' emphasis that "the breath is portable" highlights HCL's accessibility: it democratizes regulation by turning an involuntary process into a voluntary practice of agency and healing. Breath surfaced as the foundational practice connecting mindfulness, compassion, and community across narratives. Teachers and leaders saw intentional breathing as a starting point for all reflective and restorative processes. Educators noted that even young children "learned to pause and breathe during conflict," showing that regulation could precede reasoning. Neuroscientific findings support these observations—rhythmic breathing improves heart-rate variability, activates neural networks linked to self-regulation, and decreases stress hormone fluctuations (Mather & Thayer, 2018; Zaccaro et al., 2018).

Most of the interviewees strengthened compassion by starting with their breath. An independent practitioner talked about the simplicity of teaching effective breathing techniques. She said, "Our daily creative-breathing practice is portable and easy to teach. We paired art with breathing daily—light, playful, consistent."

Teaching children and adults alike how to use their breath effectively is a skill they can take wherever they go. An administrator/early adopter notes the benefit of the breath for all ages by saying, "The number one hook for this program is mindful breathing; I don't want to characterize it as easy, it's meaningful. It is something that a 5-year-old, a 4-year-old, and a 3-year-old can control. When you just settle and think about breathing in and breathing out. It works with adults in the heat of the moment." As one of the interviewees stated, "Start with one breath."

### ***Differences Across Interviews***

Even though all nine interviewees touched on the common themes mentioned above, thematic coding revealed some variation in themes. Table 3 illustrates how the themes of the interview varied based on when the interviewee adopted HCL principles.

**Table 3**  
*HCL Adoption Comparison*

Group	Focus/Themes	Example Quote
Early Adopters (2014+)	Hope, breath, buy-in, trauma sensitivity	"Hope is the foundation of everything we do."
Mid Adopters (2018+)	Policy embedding, scaling, networks	"Ease of implementation. . .how it's sticking."
New Adopters (2020+)	Restorative practice, innovation, inclusion	"Heart centered living begins with adults reconnecting to compassion."

As shown in Table 3, practitioners who were early adopters of HCL tended to focus on its foundational aspects, such as breath, the traumatic landscape, or healing, and ways to alleviate trauma. The early adopters are focused on getting the initial groundwork right and letting the foundation be their stronghold. In contrast, the practitioners who adopted HCL later, the mid-adopters, tended to focus on promoting HCL in the world. These mid-adopters want to help spread HCL principles far and wide, and have it positively influence the greater society. Finally, the new adopters were more attuned to how HCL practices can be an inclusive way of life in the turbulent times that our world faces.

It is also important to note that there were some observed differences in interviewees who had been HCL trained versus those who were tangentially related but hadn't been formally trained. Table 4 highlights this comparison below.

**Table 4**  
*Practitioner Comparison*

Aspect	Non-CEI Practitioners	CEI-HCL Practitioners
Training	Informal, independent	Formal HCL/CEI lineage
Modality	Art+breath, playful	SEL/ritual, structured
Focus	Adult connection	Staff/student focus

Differences appeared in the training, modality, and population focus areas. While both groups of practitioners embody HCL principles, they illustrate the various ways that they live these principles.

### ***Other Findings***

Specific practices mentioned by the interviewees included daily breathwork, creative rituals, and listening with empathy—strategies for self-care, stress reduction, and outreach. They described using mindful reflection and gentle presence to improve relationships, guide school

leadership, and engage in family advocacy. The educational specialist summed this up by saying, "Leadership is about listening and bringing conscious presence into every shared space."

A major theme that emerged was how these micro-practices enable adults to help those struggling and to embody key democratic values related to inclusion and agency or individual self-determination. An early adopter stated, "We're not here to tell you what to do. We're here to listen." Participants believed that practicing invitation, inclusion, and compassionate outreach could improve outcomes not just for schools, but for communities and society—by fostering civic engagement and healing polarization.

An additional insight concerned the significance of measurable outcomes and data in demonstrating the value of heart centered practices. Participants recognized that tracking results could build credibility and promote sustainability within districts. They also described how integrating compassionate and mindful practices into diverse subject areas—such as physical education, science, and nature-based learning—made these experiences more accessible and contextually meaningful for students. Empowering students to lead projects and initiatives was another common thread; many educators found that student-led efforts encouraged greater awareness of self, community, and one's broader impact on others.

### *Movement and Yoga*

One participant explained how heart centered practices could be woven into physical education and outdoor learning environments. She described how movement, breathwork, and time spent in nature work synergistically to support self-regulation and awareness. Her experience reinforces the notion that mindful embodiment is not limited to yoga sessions but can be woven throughout the rhythm of the school day.

Since several participants were yoga instructors and had written about using yoga and mindfulness in schools, all interviewees were asked whether they considered yoga or movement instruction to be an integral part of compassionate support for students. Participants tended to agree, remarking upon the neuroscientific evidence that supports active movements as a way to quiet the brain and bring a sense of relief when feeling stressed out. However, they also realized that attitudes of the general public can be a barrier to using the term "yoga," and that perhaps considering "stretching" or "stretch-breaks" can be helpful.

### *HCL Applications to Daily Life*

Daily HCL practices, such as mindful breathing, compassionate outreach, and inclusive advocacy, provide adults with practical tools to regulate emotions, foster self-compassion, and cultivate deeper connections with others in both professional and personal contexts. According to interviewees, these approaches, when implemented with consistency and fidelity, are particularly effective at promoting social support and resilience. They support not only general well-being but also help those who are struggling or marginalized by encouraging empathy, listening, and justice-oriented advocacy. Empirical evidence indicates that regular engagement in mindfulness and compassion-based routines can enhance mental health, strengthen social bonds, and build vital personal and communal resources (Condon et al., 2013; Fredrickson et al., 2008; Mahfouz et al., 2025).

Our interviewees provided many examples of applications in everyday life. For example, one of the independent practitioners spoke of facilitating "heart parties," gatherings where participants share mindfulness, art, and reflective breathing practices to build community through presence and joy. Another stated, "We never start a meeting without a check-in or round . . . it

brings humanity into the room." Through these "micro-practices," educators learned that belonging is both a process and a product—one cultivated through breath, exchange, and reflection at a time.

Moreover, the interviewees described how mindfulness extended beyond the classroom to family and community relationships—children reportedly "brought mindfulness home," integrating breathing rituals into mealtime or evening routines. One early adopter mentioned that whenever she does a TikTok video for teachers, she says, "Hi, I'm here to boost your confidence and your compassion." Another suggested that heart centered practices could be expanded to community classes, "I think most clubs when they offer up classes there's always an emotional or mental health piece attached. So, whether they're offering up some yoga or zumba, or you're gonna see a lot of this overlap work at clubs and community centers. . . people are actually going to gravitate to where they want to go."

One of the mindfulness implementers, a co-founder of HCL, had a booth at a local festival where they gave out breathing cards and compassion tools. She commented further, "We've worked with schools. . . and now halfway houses. . . and I've always gravitated to people who have been marginalized." This individual has found ways to bring and integrate HCL into a number of communities' daily lives. In this way, HCL transformed mindfulness from a technique to a shared lifestyle—what we are naming as Heart Centered Living. Table 5 provides additional examples from our HCL interviews along with a description of the impact provided in Column 3.

**Table 5**  
*Daily Adult Applications*

<b>Principle / Practice</b>	<b>Adult Example</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Mindful breathing/pausing	Commute, work breaks	Regulates mood, improves attention
Creative synthesis	Journaling/art+breath	Fosters self-compassion, resilience
Community check-in/rounds	Meetings, coaching	Deepens trust, connections
Compassionate outreach	Family dialogue, listening	Builds empathy for those struggling
Inclusion/advocacy	Leadership "voice", partnerships	Supports democratic participation, justice

### ***Barriers and Cautions***

When asked about barriers, interviewees provided some detailed examples and recommendations. Barriers—such as initial skepticism, resistance to soft approaches, urgency for quick results, and discomfort with new routines—were overcome through persistence, invitation, creative integration, and modeling. As one of the late adopters indicated, "Restorative practice is slow. There needs to be pausing, reflection. . . up against a culture that pushes for fast results." Additional barriers were related to the time needed to gain support, the discomfort with using a new tool, and introducing new variables into existing systems.

Implementing mindfulness and heart centered practices within schools is often hampered by several substantial barriers. Securing buy-in and achieving consistent implementation across staff and families demands patience, intentional exposure, and visible positive outcomes over time. Discomfort and unfamiliarity with mindfulness or yogic movement practices are common—not only among students but among adults. Therefore, framing participation as an invitation rather than a requirement has proven to be crucial in mitigating resistance and fostering inclusivity. Many initially hesitant stakeholders became supportive only after the practices permeated various aspects of school life, from classrooms to playgrounds and community spaces.

Additionally, limited funding, especially for wraparound services and community integration, as well as ongoing shifts in school priorities between academic achievement and social-emotional development, pose persistent system-level challenges to sustaining these initiatives.

### ***Discussion: From Inner Awareness to Collective Well-Being***

This qualitative interview study examined how nine educators and leaders engaged with Heart Centered Learning describe the roles of mindfulness, breath, and compassion in their own lives and professional practice. Participants portrayed HCL not simply as a classroom program, but as an orientation to living and leading that links inner awareness with relational responsibility and community care.

Across narratives, adults emphasized an arc of experience from individual regulation to relational compassion to a broader sense of community. They described breath and mindfulness practices as accessible tools for grounding attention, managing stress, and approaching others with greater patience and empathy, in ways that they believed shaped classroom and organizational climates. These perceptions align with research indicating that mindfulness-based and compassion-focused interventions can strengthen educator well-being and support more positive classroom environments, even though such outcomes were not measured in the present study (Jennings et al., 2013, 2019; Neff, 2023).

Rather than focusing on student social-emotional skills directly, participants framed HCL as engaging adults as co-regulators whose daily "micro-practices"—such as mindful pauses, check-ins, and compassionate listening—contribute to a culture of safety and belonging. Their accounts resonate with work suggesting that teacher-student relationships and educator well-being are central to students' sense of connection and engagement (A'yun et al., 2024; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2016). In this study, however, such connections remain at the level of practitioner meaning-making and perceived impact.

The patterns described here suggest that, for committed practitioners, HCL may evolve into what might be considered as heart centered living—a way of integrating consciousness, compassion, confidence, courage, and community across personal, professional, and civic spheres. Participants' stories highlight how seemingly small rituals (e.g., using gratitude rounds, inviting rather than mandating participation) can serve as vehicles for enacting their values in everyday institutional life.

### ***Practical Implications for Educators: Heart Centered Living and Heart Practice***

Educators reported that practices such as compassionate self-reflection improved interpersonal relationships and overall well-being. These experiences mirror Neff's (2023) findings that sustained compassion practice fosters resilience and engagement. As one of the co-founders of HCL stated, "Our way of life with heart centered learning. . . is something we live by."

Through this lens, teaching for our sample of educators, with their heightened mindfulness, evolved into a heart practice: a daily discipline integrating body, mind, and emotion. As educators deepened their mindfulness, they simultaneously embodied the values they wished to impart—gentleness, patience, and courage. Jennings et al. (2019) describe this as the "relational art" of education, wherein teachers serve as co-regulators of calm and community.

According to our interviewees, HCL equipped them with practical, lived skills for empathetic engagement, stress relief, and compassionate listening—qualities which they believed reinforced their own resilience and contributed to healthier relationships in their communities. As research and practice syntheses suggest, mindfulness and compassion-based practices can help reduce burnout and feelings of isolation in adults (Mason et al., 2019; Neff & Germer, 2022).

Participants hoped that centering compassion through HCL would support academic and relational outcomes and contribute to more inclusive, civically engaged communities, although these outcomes were not assessed in this study. Practitioners described transformation as "invitation, not requirement," using active listening and creative practice to reconnect adults to hope, relational trust, and collaborative community. These findings are echoed in meta-analyses of SEL, mindfulness, and civic engagement, which demonstrate sustained benefits not only for learners but for adults, schools, and society at large (Morrell, 2010; Learning Policy Institute, 2025; Zhao & Sang, 2025). For example, Jennings et al. (2019) and Durlak et al. (2022) have demonstrated that mindfulness-based professional learning strengthens teacher emotional regulation, classroom climate, and student engagement, while Neff (2023) underscores how self-compassion training mitigates burnout and enhances resilience. HCL extends these insights by emphasizing not only personal regulation but also the collective embodiment of compassion and shared responsibility for community well-being. Participants framed their own shifts in awareness and practice as potential mechanisms for positive outcomes for students and organizations, a hypothesis that warrants empirical testing.

### *The Five Cs Framework in Practice*

**The Five Cs—Consciousness, Compassion, Confidence, Courage, and Community—**anchor Heart Centered Learning in both theory and action. As evidenced in our examination of the interview transcripts, each dimension supports another: consciousness cultivates clarity; compassion deepens empathy; confidence fosters voice; courage sustains risk-taking; and community grounds belonging.

Educators operationalized these principles through micro-practices: breathing during transitions, gratitude circles, collaborative norm-setting, and reflective dialogues. Confidence and courage were frequently catalyzed by participatory structures—student-led agreements and peer mentorship—that decentralized leadership (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2016). Collectively, these behaviors generated classrooms that functioned as democratic microcosms of relational trust.

HCL's influence for our sample extended from individual practice to organizational transformation. Teachers and leaders reported that compassionate rituals—such as mindfulness check-ins, heart circles, and invitation-oriented collaboration—shifted their school climates. This mirrors Bowlby's (2008) and Roffey's (2011) findings linking relational security with prosocial motivation.

Findings from this study affirm that intentional daily practices are essential for translating Heart Centered Learning (HCL) into the daily lives of adult educators and leaders. Participants emphasized the value of beginning meetings with mindful check-ins and breathing exercises to cultivate collective presence and emotional regulation. Practices such as engaging in self-

compassion before extending compassion to others and leading through invitation rather than imposition were described as strategies that foster psychological safety and authenticity in relationships. Consistent with established mindfulness research, adult modeling of mindful vulnerability was found to strengthen trust and promote relational coherence within school communities.

***Systemic Implications for Leadership and Policy***

According to our interviewees, sustaining the principles of HCL requires attention to systemic coherence, with consideration to school expectations, protocol, and rituals. Table 6 provides some examples that emerged from the interviews about ways to implement practices that support compassion and well-being in schools.

**Table 6**  
*Recommended Practices for Implementing Heart Centered Learning (HCL)*

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Key Practices</b>	<b>Implementation Strategies</b>
<b>Daily Practices for Adults</b>	Mindful meeting openings; self-compassion before compassion for others; invitational leadership; modeling vulnerability	Begin meetings with mindful breathing; foster authenticity; use "invitation, not imposition" leadership styles
<b>Consciousness (Mindfulness)</b>	Breath-centered daily grounding	Whole-school breathing practices; mindful pauses; staff mindfulness training; designated reflection spaces
<b>Compassion</b>	Self- and community-compassion practices	Gratitude circles; "shout-out" rituals for recognition; peer support networks; address compassion fatigue collectively
<b>Confidence &amp; Courage</b>	Cultivating voice and agency	Student participation in decisions; restorative justice; creative showcases; risk-taking encouragement
<b>Community</b>	Building relationship-centered culture	Morning rituals; listening circles; collective goal setting; art- and breath-based community events
<b>Systemic Integration</b>	Policy and cultural alignment	Embed HCL in mission and operations; train leaders in compassionate leadership; trauma-informed, co-regulatory policies

Compassion connected individual healing to emotional awareness and community building across all interviews. In participants’ narratives, compassion began with the self—recovering from overextension, perfectionism, and emotional fatigue—before radiating outward to students, colleagues, and communities. This expansion mirrors Neff’s (2023) model of self-compassion as a

triad of mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness. In educational systems wounded by chronic stress, the restorative potential of compassion for the school community is significant.

Participants emphasized that sustainability depends on integration rather than intervention. HCL endures when compassion and mindfulness are embedded within professional culture through shared rituals, reflective practices, and leadership modeling. Sustaining HCL involves intentional structures that balance empathy with accountability—such as quiet reflection periods, mentorship networks that foster emotional literacy, and leadership frameworks linking compassion to decision-making processes. When compassion becomes normalized within meetings, communication, and policy, caring shifts from sentiment to system. Leaders trained in mindfulness and trauma-responsive decision-making were described as cultivating psychological safety and long-term commitment (Jennings et al., 2019; Leggett, 2022).

Leaders in this study viewed sustainability as iterative. Enduring HCL systems institutionalize compassion as an indicator of organizational success, valued alongside academic outcomes (Jennings et al., 2019). Educators envisioned schools as communities of consciousness: responsive, reflective, and resilient. When leaders consistently model reflection and presence, HCL, over time, evolves from an intervention to an organizational identity—sustainable because it is lived through relationships rather than prescribed programs. As portrayed in Table 7, when the interviewees focused on building a compassionate, caring school culture, the efficacy of a HCL approach also was more substantial, resulting in the potential for greater benefits within the school community.

**Table 7**

*Interviewees' Strategies for Scaling and Sustaining Heart Centered Learning (HCL)*

<b>Focus Area</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Outcomes Supported by Research</b>
Culture over Program	Treat HCL as culture-building rather than discrete training; emphasize micro-practices that aggregate into cultural norms	Embeds HCL across organizational learning models, strengthening coherence and stability
Networks of Practice	Develop peer mentorship and reflection groups that sustain emotional literacy	Build educator resilience and collective efficacy
Community Inclusion	Engage families and local partners in shared compassion initiatives	Deepens trust, expands reach, and reinforces collaboration
Systemic Adaptation	Align policies with trauma-informed and co-regulatory principles; establish iterative reflection cycles	Promotes long-term adaptability and educator well-being
Compassion Training	Implement mindfulness and self-compassion programs (e.g., CARE)	Reduces burnout, enhances relational climate, supports retention (Jennings et al., 2019)

## Limitations and Future Directions

The ongoing evolution of HCL underscores the need for continued investigation into how relational and contemplative practices contribute to both the educational systems and also individual growth over time. While this study identified conditions that facilitate transformational outcomes, future research should examine the long-term effects of HCL on lived practices of practitioners as well as educator resilience, collaboration, and student engagement and well-being. However, before turning to these areas, it will be important to first consider how to view the results of this investigation in the context of more rigorous research.

Several limitations warrant careful consideration. The sample was small, self-selected, and composed entirely of practitioners who were positively engaged with HCL or analogous work, including multiple individuals who are co-authors, co-founders, or formally affiliated with CEI and HCL. Several members of the research team were likewise deeply involved in HCL implementation and practice. This allegiance profile may have encouraged positive social desirability and confirmatory interpretation of participants' narratives, even though we sought variation in roles, settings, and years of experience. As a result, the findings are best understood as rich descriptions of committed practitioners' perspectives on HCL, rather than balanced assessments of its effectiveness.

In addition, the thematic analysis relied on semi-structured interviews that invited participants to reflect on the benefits and applications of HCL, and the subsequent word-frequency counts focused on terms derived from the themes identified during coding. These counts were used only descriptively to illustrate the prominence of key concepts in participants' language and generalization beyond this small sample cannot be made until further confirmatory research is conducted. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples, including educators with less allegiance to HCL, are needed before generalizing these patterns.

Future research could recruit educators who are newly introduced to HCL or who hold more neutral or critical perspectives, compare HCL with other compassion-based or SEL approaches, and incorporate direct measures of educator and student outcomes, including longitudinal and, where appropriate, physiological indicators. Such studies would help clarify how, for whom, and under what conditions HCL contributes to well-being and relational culture in schools.

Additionally, future research could employ longitudinal methods to track adult and student well-being outcomes over time. A valuable next step would be comparative analysis of HCL alongside compassion-based pedagogies like the CARE model (Jennings et al., 2019) to clarify theoretical distinctions, contextual applicability, and scalability.

## Authors Contributions

Christine Mason designed the research questions, conducted and video-recorded the interviews with participants, and was responsible for preparation and submission of this manuscript. Hallie Williams served as the lead initial coder, assisted by Dr. Mason. Alexis Richmond conducted the second level of coding and made substantial contributions to organizing the research findings, including development of the data tables. Melody Mann, assisted by Chandni Lal, was most involved in independently reviewing findings and elaborating upon the qualitative analysis and implications for future research.

## Conflict of Interest

This research was supported solely by the Center for Educational Improvement, with small scholarships awarded to research assistants, and no external commercial or governmental funding for this study. Given the nature of this qualitative research, to mitigate bias, data coding, review, and analysis were conducted iteratively, and all themes—including critical views, barriers, and limitations—were reported in full.

## Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study (de-identified interview transcripts and analytic tables) are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical restrictions related to participant privacy.

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Dr. Mason has an extensive background as a researcher, professor, principal investigator, program evaluator, yoga instructor, and entrepreneur, contributing to over 15 national research investigations funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the National Institutes of Health, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. She is lead author of eight recent books on heart centered learning, mindfulness, compassion, and equity. Her most recent book, co-authored with Renee Owen, is *Becoming a Transformative Leader from the Inside Out*.

**Alexis M. Richmond** is a PhD student in Educational Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, where she is a Donald D. Harrington Fellow. Her research focuses on student motivation, self-regulated learning, and effective cognitive learning strategies. She is particularly interested in understanding how situational contexts—such as course structures, student perceptions, and competing goals—shape how students approach their learning.

**Hallie K. Williams** is pursuing her Master of Education in Mental Health Counseling at Hunter College and has been a Research Assistant for the Center of Educational Improvement since 2022. Hallie is interested in child development and in supporting individuals through grief and loss, using both cognitive and somatic/yogic approaches to healing. Hallie has worked with children in after-care programs, orphanages, and family shelters and has since been committed to family and child mental health. Her counseling background spans inpatient treatment settings, school counseling, and private practice—demonstrating her interest in working with a wide variety of populations and in bridging gaps in mental health treatment for underserved populations.

**Melody Mann**. Melody Mann is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research examines disability as both an identity and an indicator of accessibility within racially marginalized communities, with her dissertation focusing on Punjabi families in the South Asian diaspora. Her academic background spans Psychology, Special Education, and Child and Adolescent Development, grounding her commitment to educational equity.

She is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Research Scholar, the Research Lead at the Center for Educational Improvement (CEI), and the Director of CEI’s Indigenizing Compassionate School Leadership project (funded by the RWJF Foundation). Her work centers on representation, advocacy, and equity, including prior service on the Hawai‘i Association for Behavior Analysis board. Outside of her dissertation, her current research explores cross-sector collaboration between education and healthcare systems to better support racially diverse families navigating mental health and disability services.

**Chandni Lal** is a 3rd year PhD student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the Cognitive Psychology Program. Her current research focus is in mind-wandering and attention control in academic settings. She is also a yoga teacher who is passionate in introducing the healing practice of yoga to children. She currently serves as an evaluator for CEI, including her role as lead evaluator of the Indigenizing Compassionate School Leadership project. She aims to inspire others with life changing practices through evidence-based research.

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