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From Inner Awareness to Professional Presence: Integrating Mindfulness and Creativity in Early Childhood Teacher Education

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Abstract

Early childhood teaching depends on the teacher's voice, gesture, attentiveness, and responsiveness, yet teacher education often emphasises knowledge of curriculum and method over the embodied capacities that such teaching requires (Klein et al., 2019)(Scheiner et al., 2026). This exploratory, practice-based paper describes an approximately eight-week preparation experience with 34 pre-service teacher candidates at a pre-primary teacher education college in Palanpur, Gujarat, India, followed by clinical teaching in English-medium and Gujarati-medium Balmandirs. Candidates engaged with reflective beginnings, Balgeet, Abhinay Geet, Jodakna, storytelling, art, craft, movement, and project work, and then applied these experiences in micro-teaching and clinical teaching. A qualitative descriptive design was used, drawing on reflective journals, group discussions, observations, and teaching records, which were analysed thematically. The experience is organised as a six-stage Mindful–Creative Teacher Education Cycle: Centre, Experience, Express, Teach, Reflect, and Reconnect. Observations indicated a movement from self-conscious performance towards purposeful participation, greater attention to children's responses, and more analytical reflection on practice. The framework is pedagogically consistent with the National Education Policy 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022. The findings are interpreted as tentative educational observations and not as evidence of measured effects on well-being. The paper concludes with recommendations and a plan for a pre-test and post-test study with the next batch of candidates.

Keywords: mindfulness, early childhood teacher education, professional presence, creativity, experiential learning, reflective practice, pre-service teachers, play-based learning

Introduction

Early childhood classrooms are shaped by continuous interaction among the teacher, the children, materials, language, movement, and the wider learning environment. Young children learn not only from what teachers explain but also from how teachers listen, wait, speak, move, respond to mistakes, and invite participation. Preparing an early childhood teacher therefore requires more than knowledge of child development, curriculum, assessment, and classroom management. It also requires professional presence.

Clarifying Professional Presence

Professional presence is used in this paper as a technical term with a specific meaning, and it should not be confused with charisma, confidence, or stage performance. Following the account of teacher presence as a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual student and the group within the learning environment, presence is understood here as the capacity to remain attentive, expressive, responsive, and reflective during classroom interaction, and as the disposition that supports a considered and compassionate next step in the moment-to-moment flow of a lesson (Roeser et al., 2021). It is therefore behavioural and observable rather than mysterious: it is visible when a teacher pauses before repeating an instruction, when she notices that a song has lost the group's attention and shortens it, when she lowers her voice rather than raising it, and when she returns her attention to the child who has not yet spoken. The prosocial classroom model locates this capacity within teachers' social and emotional competence, arguing that it shapes the relationships teachers build with children and the emotional climate of the group (Jennings & Greenberg, 2008).

Presence, so defined, is a professional capacity and not a personality trait, which means it can be taught and practised. Because early childhood teaching is especially embodied — teachers sing, narrate, demonstrate, vary their voices, and adjust activities in response to children — a student teacher may understand child-centred pedagogy intellectually and still hesitate to sing, act, or lead a group. Teacher education therefore needs repeated opportunities for candidates to experience

activities as learners, practise them as emerging teachers, teach children, and reflect on the outcomes.

In this paper, mindfulness is used in an educational rather than a clinical sense. It refers to pausing, noticing, listening attentively, recognising one's own reactions, becoming aware of bodily tension, and deliberately returning attention to the present teaching situation. Creativity is treated as a teacher's willingness to explore, express, and adapt in order to engage young children, and not as the production of polished artistic work. The guiding question was: How can mindfulness-oriented and creative practices contribute to the preparation of pre-service teachers for early childhood education? The paper describes one institutional response, presents a six-stage framework derived from it, and outlines how the framework will be evaluated with the next cohort of candidates.

Conceptual Background and Related Literature

Mindfulness and Teacher Presence

Mindfulness is widely defined as the awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (Roeser et al., 2021). In educational settings, this awareness is treated as a resource for teaching: the capacity to attend to what is happening moment to moment, and to pause between a stimulus and one's response, affords the teacher a measure of choice about how to react, and the resulting calm, clear, and kind manner is closely related to what the literature calls teacher presence (Roeser et al., 2021)(Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Within teacher education specifically, mindfulness-based programmes have been trialled with pre-service teachers. A six-week programme for pre-service teachers in Hong Kong was evaluated with intervention and comparison groups and pre- and post-programme assessment (Hue & Lau, 2015), and qualitative action research has examined the value of mindfulness training for teacher candidates (Soloway, 2016). These studies provide useful background, but their designs and contexts differ from the present experience, and their findings cannot be assumed to transfer to it.

Creativity, Experience, and Reflection

Learning from practice is not automatic; it depends on structures that convert doing into understanding. Experiential learning theory proposes that learning arises from a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, and that the cycle is recursive rather than closed (Kolb, 1983).

Scholarship on professional practice distinguishes reflection-in-action from reflection-on-action and treats both as central to expertise (Schön, 1983), while structured reflective cycles provide a widely used scaffold for moving from description to analysis in professional education (Gibbs, 1998).

Creative processes can supply the concrete experience on which such reflection operates. Work with pre-service teachers has examined how visual arts practice can nurture mindful persistence (Flannery, 2018), and embodied pedagogy — inviting candidates to move between their student selves and their teacher selves — has been shown to move reflection beyond the search for solutions to teaching problems towards deeper questions of professional identity and self-understanding (Klein et al., 2019)(Klein et al., 2019). The present paper extends this logic to everyday early childhood practices such as songs, storytelling, and movement.

The Indian and Gujarati Context

The practices described here are culturally situated. Analyses of early childhood curricular beliefs in India have highlighted the diversity of provision and the coexistence of competing pedagogical orientations (Bhatt & Mohite, 2019), and a multidimensional "third space" curriculum has been proposed to draw on more than one source of knowledge (Gupta, 2015). The Balmandir tradition associated with Gijubhai Badheka is a foundational instance of child-centred early education in the region: with Tarabai Modak, Badheka established Bal Mandir in 1920, adapting the name of Montessori's Children's House, and created Montessori infrastructure in Indian languages rather than importing expensive materials and training from abroad (Debs, 2022). Badheka's educational thinking, particularly his insistence on activity-based and child-oriented methods and on mother-tongue education, remains relevant to contemporary practice (Modi, 2022), and he is recognised as one of the pioneers of early childhood care and education in pre-independence India (AKSHAYA, 2023).

Policy frameworks now point in a similar direction. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education emphasises the reflective practitioner as the aim of professional preparation (2009); the National Education Policy 2020 stresses holistic and experiential learning in the foundational stage (India, 2020); and the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage gives play, stories, rhymes, songs, movement, and art a central place (India, 2022). Teacher noticing, meanwhile, has recently been theorised as an embodied and ecological enactment rather than a purely

cognitive act (Scheiner et al., 2026), which is directly relevant to a framework built on songs, movement, and gesture. Alignment with policy is a pedagogical argument and not evidence of programme effectiveness.

Objectives

The practice-based inquiry has the following objectives:

- to explore the educational role of mindfulness-oriented practices in pre-service early childhood teacher education;
- to examine how selected creative practices can support experiential teacher preparation;
- to document candidates' reflections on attentiveness, expressive confidence, collaboration, and adaptation in teaching;
- to examine how Balgeet, Abhinay Geet, Jodakna, storytelling, art, craft, movement, and project work can enrich teacher–child interaction; and
- to propose a practical framework that other teacher education institutions can adapt and evaluate.

Method

Design

An exploratory, qualitative descriptive, practice-based design was adopted. The study was tentative and intended to inform a planned follow-up. The aim was to describe a teacher-preparation experience in its natural setting and to interpret recurring patterns in candidates' learning, rather than to test the effect of an intervention. No control group, standardised scale, or pre-test and post-test procedure was used.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

A purposive, total-enumeration sampling strategy was used. The unit of sampling was the teaching–learning group rather than the individual, because the practice was delivered as a timetabled component of the pre-primary teacher education programme and could not meaningfully be offered to some members of the cohort and withheld from others. The sample therefore consisted of all 34 candidates enrolled in the programme during the period of the study — 31 female and 3 male — admitted through the institution's regular centralised admission process, which produced a naturally constituted cohort rather than a research-selected group. No inclusion or exclusion criteria beyond enrolment were applied, no sampling frame was constructed, and no candidate declined or withdrew.

Two consequences of this procedure should be recorded. First, because the sample is a complete cohort of a single institution, the findings describe that cohort rather than a population, and no claim of statistical representativeness is made. Second, because participation in the activities formed part of regular coursework, the sample cannot be treated as volunteers; the ethical safeguards described below were designed with this in mind. Candidates undertook clinical teaching in English-medium and Gujarati-medium Balmandirs managed by the Trust.

Procedure

The learning process extended over approximately eight weeks (10 sessions per week, 35 minutes each) and was followed by clinical teaching. Candidates first experienced selected activities as learners. They then practised them as emerging teachers, adapted them for young children, implemented them through micro-teaching or classroom teaching, observed children's responses, and reflected in writing and in discussion. Three culturally rooted practices were central: Balgeet refers to children's songs and rhymes; Abhinay Geet to action songs combining words with gesture and movement; and Jodakna to rhythmic, rhyming verbal play. The term Balmandir refers to the pre-primary setting in which the candidates taught. Table 1 summarises the practice components and their professional focus.

Table 1

Practice Components and Their Professional Focus

Practice component	**Examples**	**Professional focus**
Reflective beginnings	Quiet time, conscious breathing, observation, gratitude	Attention and self-awareness
Balgeet	Songs, rhymes, rhythm, and repetition	Voice, language, timing, and participation
Abhinay Geet	Action songs and expressive movement	Gesture, confidence, and communication
Jodakna	Rhythmic riddles and verbal play	Listening and linguistic awareness
Storytelling	Oral narratives and retelling	Voice, sequencing, and audience awareness

Art and craft	Drawing, clay, paper, and natural materials	Creativity, persistence, and concentration
Movement	Rhythm, games, and action sequences	Body awareness and participation
Project work	Local themes, observation, and community experiences	Collaboration and contextual learning
Micro-teaching and clinical teaching	Classroom application and observation	Adaptation and transfer to practice
Reflection	Journals, dialogue, and peer feedback	Professional judgement

Sources of Evidence and Analysis

Evidence was drawn from reflective journals, group and focus-group discussions, observations of participation and micro-teaching, records of clinical teaching, and professional reflections. These sources were reviewed repeatedly for recurring observations. The analysis was inductive and guided by the phases of thematic analysis — familiarisation with the material, initial coding, generation and review of themes, and naming of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation across sources was used to strengthen credibility, and the analysis was interpretive rather than statistical.

Ethical Considerations

Reflective activities formed part of regular coursework. Candidates were informed of the purpose of the study, and their informed consent was obtained for the use of their reflective material for research and academic presentation. Permission was also granted by the institution. To protect confidentiality, candidates are not named and are referred to as Candidate A, B, and C. Participation in reflective activities carried no assessment penalty, and no identifying details are reported.

The Mindful–Creative Teacher Education Cycle

The experience was organised as a six-stage cycle: Centre, Experience, Express, Teach, Reflect, and Reconnect. The cycle is not rigidly linear; each teaching experience generates reflection, and reflection informs the next cycle.

Centre. Sessions began with a brief pause, quiet sitting, conscious breathing, prayer, gratitude, sound, or gentle stretching. Where prayer was used, it remained inclusive

and sensitive to different beliefs and family backgrounds. The educational purpose was attention, readiness, and community.

Experience. Candidates participated in songs, stories, movement, craft, art, or rhythmic language as learners. Experiencing an activity from the learner's position helped them notice what made it engaging, confusing, repetitive, demanding, or accessible.

Express. Candidates practised voice, rhythm, gesture, facial expression, movement, drawing, and storytelling. The emphasis was on comfort with the expressive resources that early childhood teaching demands, and not on artistic perfection.

Teach. Candidates adapted selected experiences for young children and implemented them through micro-teaching or clinical teaching, taking into account age, language, group size, attention span, materials, and routines.

Reflect. Candidates examined which children participated, when attention shifted, whether instructions were clear, how voice and movement influenced participation, and what unexpected events occurred.

Reconnect. Reflection was used to modify the next teaching experience and to link practice with child development, pedagogy, language, and classroom management, so that theory and practice were repeatedly brought together.

Findings

Analysis produced four themes. These are educational observations and not measured outcomes.

Table 2

Themes Identified in Candidates' Reflective Evidence

Theme	**Primary sources**	**Focus of observation**	**Candidates (n = 34)**
From self-conscious performance to purposeful participation	Observations; journals	Willingness to sing, act, narrate, and demonstrate	34
From performance to presence	Micro-teaching observations; discussions	Noticing children's participation, confusion, and pace	32

Adaptation in real classrooms	Clinical teaching records; journals	Modifying activities for language, group size, and materials	30
Reflection linking theory and practice	Journals; peer discussion	Analysing what worked, what changed, and why	32

Note. Counts show the number of candidates whose reflective journals, discussion contributions, or observation records contained evidence of the theme. A candidate could contribute to more than one theme. Counts are descriptive only and were not statistically analysed.

From Self-Conscious Performance to Purposeful Participation. Candidates who repeatedly practised singing, acting, storytelling, movement, and demonstration had opportunities to become more comfortable using voice and body as teaching resources. Early attempts were often marked by hesitation or by concern about being judged. Over successive sessions, the focus of many candidates' reflections moved from personal performance towards the purpose of the activity for children.

From Performance to Presence. Knowing the words of a song or the sequence of an activity is insufficient if the teacher does not notice how children are responding. Candidates were therefore encouraged to observe participation, confusion, engagement, pace, and the need for support. Creative activities thus functioned as occasions for practising classroom observation rather than as entertainment.

Adaptation in Real Classrooms. Clinical teaching in English-medium and Gujarati-medium Balmandirs showed that activities planned in college seldom unfolded exactly as expected. Language, group size, available materials, and children's interests required candidates to simplify, extend, or restructure activities. Because candidates had experienced the activities as learners, many were able to anticipate where children might find instructions unclear or repetition tiring.

Reflection Linking Theory and Practice. Candidates were asked to consider what happened, what children did, which instructions worked, when attention changed, and what needed modification. These questions directed reflection towards children's responses and away from evaluation of the candidate alone, and they helped connect classroom events with child development, pedagogy, language, and professional judgement. Such reflection is close in spirit to reflection-on-action and to structured reflective cycles (Schön, 1983)(Gibbs, 1998).

Three anonymised cases illustrate the themes. They are thematic descriptions synthesised by the researcher and do not reproduce candidates' words. The reflective record of Candidate A was characterised by mindful attention, growing participation, and expressive confidence. The record of Candidate B centred on experiential learning, classroom adaptation, and the development of teacher presence. The record of Candidate C emphasised creative expression, reflection, and the connection between practice and teaching.

Discussion

The findings offer qualified support for the general direction of the framework. The experience suggests that attention, active experience, expressive practice, classroom application, and reflection can be deliberately connected within one teacher-education sequence. Its contribution is primarily pedagogical: the six-stage cycle allows teacher educators to integrate activities that many institutions already use, such as songs, stories, and micro-teaching, and to give them a shared reflective purpose instead of treating mindfulness or creativity as separate add-on sessions.

The cycle resembles and draws on established models of experiential and reflective learning (Gibbs, 1998)(Kolb, 1983)(Schön, 1983). Its distinctive features are the deliberate opening of sessions with a centring practice, the use of culturally rooted forms such as Balgeet, Abhinay Geet, and Jodakna, and the emphasis on expressive competence as a professional skill. The last point is consistent with the Balmandir tradition (Debs, 2022) and with the place of stories, rhymes, songs, and play in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (India, 2022).

The mindfulness component is best understood as an educational practice of noticing, and the observed movement from performance towards presence is the movement the literature on teacher presence describes (Roeser et al., 2021). The pre-service studies of mindfulness training suggest that present-moment awareness can be meaningful in teacher learning, but the present study did not measure mindfulness, stress, or well-being and cannot confirm any such effect (Hue & Lau, 2015)(Soloway, 2016).

Implications for Teacher Education

- Professional presence can be intentionally practised through structured opportunities for attention, listening, expression, observation, and reflection.
- Expressive competence — singing, storytelling, gesture, rhythm, and movement — deserves recognition as a core early childhood teaching skill.

- Practice should be followed by reflection that asks what children did and how they responded, not only whether an activity was enjoyable.
- The cycle can be integrated into existing courses, micro-teaching, practicum, and clinical teaching without creating an additional programme.

Limitations

This practice-based study was conducted in one institution with 34 candidates, which limits transferability. Because the sample was a single complete cohort selected purposively, the findings describe that cohort and cannot be generalised statistically. The descriptive design cannot establish causal relationships, and no standardised measure, comparison group, or statistical analysis was used. The paper therefore makes no claim of measurable improvement in mental health, psychological well-being, or classroom effectiveness. The evidence relies partly on reflective accounts and educator observations, which may be shaped by context and by the researcher's own interpretation; the researcher's dual role as teacher educator and investigator is an additional source of possible bias. The direct participants were pre-service teachers, so statements about children and practising teachers are implications for future work and not findings from independent samples.

Recommendations and Plan for the Next Batch

Because this study was exploratory, its main value lies in the questions and the framework it offers for systematic evaluation. Two recommendations follow for teacher-education institutions. First, centring practices, expressive activities, and structured reflection should be embedded in existing courses rather than added as separate sessions. Second, teacher educators should keep dated records of sessions, observations, and reflections so that later evaluation has reliable material.

A follow-up study is planned with the next batch of candidates. It will use a single-group pre-test and post-test design supplemented by qualitative data. The pre-test will be administered in the first week, before any programme activity, and the post-test after clinical teaching, with an identical interval for all candidates. The instrument will be a researcher-developed, 12-item self-rating scale in Gujarati with a five-point response format and three subscales: attentiveness and noticing, expressive confidence, and reflective practice. It will be reviewed by subject experts and tried out

with a small group before use. Candidates will use anonymous codes so that pre-test and post-test responses can be matched. A written reflection at post-test and structured observation rubrics for micro-teaching and clinical teaching will provide additional evidence.

Analysis will report the number of candidates with complete data, internal consistency, and descriptive statistics for each subscale and the total. Pre-test and post-test scores will be compared using a paired-samples t-test, or the Wilcoxon signed-rank test if the distribution of change scores departs from normality, with effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals. Reflections will be analysed thematically. Institutional permission and informed consent will be obtained before data collection. Since a single group cannot support causal claims, any change will be reported as an observed difference. A comparison cohort and follow-up into candidates' first year of teaching are recommended where feasible.

Conclusion

Early childhood education begins with relationships, and relationships are shaped by the teacher's presence. Preparing early childhood teachers therefore involves developing the confidence to express, the patience to listen, the flexibility to adapt, and the habit of reflecting on children's responses. The Mindful–Creative Teacher Education Cycle offers a practical way of connecting inner awareness with professional action through centring, experience, expression, teaching, reflection, and reconnection with theory.

The contribution of this paper is a set of educational possibilities and not proof of an intervention effect. It advances a modest proposition: when teacher education provides repeated opportunities to notice oneself, to learn actively, to express, to teach, and to reflect on children's responses, it may create stronger conditions for reflective and responsive practice. A planned follow-up study with the next batch of candidates, described above, is intended to test this proposition more systematically.

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