

Just Breathe: Teachers and Students Practicing Mindfulness in the Fifth Grade Classroom

The College of New Jersey

**Dedication**

I dedicate this research to my students. Their open--mindedness and excitement for mindfulness has made this project a joy to complete.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am forever grateful for my teacher friends at school who have taken this mindfulness journey with me. Without them, I would not have been able to implement this as deeply as I have. I am also grateful for my yoga teacher training group who has showed me the meaning of yoga and mindfulness through love and compassion.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to determine the effects that practicing mindfulness has on students and teachers in a fifth grade classroom. This study explored the effects that mindfulness has on student attentional abilities and emotional regulation. It also looked at the effects of the teacher mindfulness practice on teacher student relationships and the ability to manage stress. The study utilized curriculum from Mindful Schools. One mindfulness lesson was taught per week along with a daily mindfulness practice that occurred at the same time every morning. While the results did not show a major difference in students' attentional abilities, it did show that mindfulness had positive effects on students sense of calm and happiness. It was also found that the mindfulness practice of the teacher had positive effects on classroom interactions and environment. While analyzing this research, new insights came to light on the best way to implement mindfulness in an elementary school classroom.

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### Question in Context

In fifth grade, students are expected to learn how to multiply and divide fractions, how to write a structured literary essay with a strong thesis, and how to identify the theme of a complex text, among many other content related topics. Schedules are so packed that they barely leave time for necessary special area classes like physical education, music, art, and world language. So in the midst of this crammed school day, when is there time to teach students life skills that will help them manage the challenges they will inevitably face outside of the classroom? After teaching for three years, I have found the sacred answer to that question: there is no time. As teachers who care about the wellbeing of our students, we have to make time to teach these important life skills. Through my research, I plan to make time to teach my students skills to help them with attention and focus, emotional regulation, and stress management through the practice of mindfulness.

Treehouse Elementary School is a fourth and fifth grade school located in the large New Jersey School District of Ivy. There are 14 fourth and fifth grade classes in the building I teach in with approximately 700 students, as well as 17 fourth and fifth grade classes in another building. The students come from four different lower elementary schools and then travel to one of two middle schools and then two high schools. The two townships that make up Ivy District are populated by about 50,000 residents total with about 10,000 students being served by the schools ([Ivy] School District, 2016). The population in Treehouse School is made up of 60% Asian students, 29% White, 5% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 2% Mixed (NJ State Performance Report, 2015). This year I have 25 students, seven of whom have special needs and are pulled

out for resource reading and writing and are included for math, science and social studies with a co--teacher.

Treehouse School is composed of mostly students coming from families with high socioeconomic status and only about 4% of students coming from economically disadvantaged families (NJ State Performance Report, 2015). The district is known for its high performing students with 100% graduation rate and 95% of students planning to go to college ([Ivy] School District, 2016). In the fifth grade in Treehouse School, 86% of students met or exceeded expectations on the language arts PARCC exam in 2015 and 72% met or exceeded expectations on the PARCC math exam (NJ State Performance Report, 2015). These statistics have created an atmosphere of competition and stress between students and even parents. Students get upset over a grade that is less than 100% or tell me they will get in trouble for a 95% on a math test. Parents pursue teachers for extra work or insight into how to get their child into the enriched math program. In one school year, 120 middle and high school students were sent for mental health assessments ([Ivy] School District, 2016). Sixty--eight percent of high school students responded that they are stressed always or most of the time.

As a result of these findings, changes were made in the 2015--2016 school year. Midterms and finals were eliminated, no homework nights were established, letter grades were removed from elementary school report cards, and the enriched math program in fourth and fifth grade was eliminated. All of which were met with protest and anger from a majority of parents. They believed that the district was taking away valuable opportunities and that they were holding the children back. As a teacher, I was thrilled by these changes. Students in Ivy District were overly stressed and competitive with their peers. I saw less of a love and yearn for learning and more of

a competition for the best grade. Students were constantly asking when the entrance exam for the enriched math program was or what else they can do to prepare for this test. One student in particular has been trying to get in since third grade because his brother was in the program. He was doing his brother's homework to try to get in. He is a strong math student, but is even stronger in reading and writing and I hope that he sees this and will celebrate those strengths as well. In my parent teacher conferences, the students are present and they led the conference by going through a portfolio. Many parents would stop and ask what their children can do to get better at math. In one conference in particular, a mother interrupted her child when she was talking about her strengths to ask what extra math she can do because she needs to work on her critical thinking skills. As her teacher, I told the mother than if the student wanted, she could take the enrichment math sheets, but I was not going to send them home if the child did not want them.

Most of the changes made were focused on the high school level because the high school students are more stressed than the elementary school students and for obvious reasons. Students are competing for valedictorian, rankings, grades, and who can get into the best Ivy League college. Elementary school students do not have most of these worries. Yet. Eventually, my students will be those stressed out high schoolers. Yes, we can eliminate school programs that cause stress, but stress is an inevitable part of life and is actually necessary. It is what activates our "fight or flight" response and is what kept us alive back in the "caveman" days. Students need tools to *manage* this stress and learning these tools at a young age will help them when they eventually feel much more pressure.



As a student myself, I have often felt this type of stress while worrying about an upcoming exam, reading and rereading papers, or being anxious about presentations. Some would say it is part of the educational experience. During my junior year of college, I found relief in the form of a yoga class. I was instantly hooked on the amazing feeling I would get after class. Eventually, my yoga practice led me into the study of mindfulness. Mindfulness is living in the present moment with nonjudgmental awareness. It is noticing the sun on your face or the smell of a freshly mowed lawn and being grateful. It is taking a breath before reacting to a tough student. It is accepting that you did what you could with everything you had even though your lesson didn't turn out perfectly. Mindfulness is noticing your thoughts, feelings, and emotions without overidentifying them. It doesn't put any one emotion above another. It is simply the ability to notice and then to find space to make a decision on how to respond to either an emotion or a stimulus.

When I started consciously practicing mindfulness, I noticed a shift in my teaching. I was more aware of what was happening in my body and could respond to stress better. During a tough parent teacher conference, I noticed my stomach feeling tight. I took a few breaths and noticed it loosen up. I was able to truly listen to the parent and their concerns and create a plan for their child. Without noticing this, the conference may have gone in a different direction. I may have been more defensive than open. I was also not getting as stressed over new curriculum, new initiatives, and evaluations as some of my colleagues were because of my mindfulness practice.

After seeing so many of the benefits myself, of course I wanted to bring the practice to my students. Not only could mindfulness help manage and reduce students' stress, it could

improve students' attentional ability. Focus. Calm down. Pay attention. How many times do teachers tell their students to pay attention during the day? Probably countless times. And do teachers ever explicitly teach our students how to pay attention, focus, or calm down? These three skills are often thought of as abilities that our students should already have coming in to school, but the reality is most students were never taught how to pay attention to a lesson or how to calm themselves down when they are upset about a conflict or stressed about a test.

As a fifth grade teacher, I will admit that I have told my students these things before without really giving it much thought. When a student is staring off into the distance, a quick "pay attention" usually slipped out. My student's eyes were back on the lesson for a minute and then most likely she was looking out the window again. I will admit that I have told a crying student to calm down and maybe even take a few breaths before talking to me, but I have not taught them how to focus on their breathing or why it would help.

Last summer I took an online mindfulness course that kick started my professional development on the topic. Then with the help of a colleague also interested in mindfulness, I sought out a former Ivy District teacher who now runs a mindfulness company. We set up a program where she would come once a week for eight weeks to teach mindfulness to a group of teachers from my school. We had 12 teachers sign up! I tried out many of the techniques in class that she taught us, but was not as consistent as I would have liked. I became frustrated because many of my students seemed not interested and would fidget or keep their eyes open during a sitting meditation. They did not seem to be "trying." Of course I had students that would practice, but the ones that were not "trying" were getting to me. I had one student who would never close her eyes and always looked bored (or what "boredom" looked like to me) and I

assumed that she thought mindfulness was silly. In her end of the year reflection, she wrote that mindfulness was one of her favorite things about the school year. I asked her about it and told her that I was not sure if she liked it or not. She told me that she liked Go Noodle's "Airtime," but not the Inner Explorer website, which included longer meditations. I was so excited! It showed me that some of my students might seem disinterested, but actually they are engaging in their own way. From here, I took another online course from Mindful Schools that gave me the skills and curriculum to teach mindfulness to students with purpose and consistency.

Through practicing mindfulness with my students, I am hoping that they will be able to find space in their busy lives. Maybe they will be able to take a few breaths before responding to the student that just called them a name. Maybe they will be able to notice that when their fists clench up they tend to get angry and then they could make a better decision. I am hoping that they will be able to notice when their attention is not focused and bring it back to their breath in order to get back to whatever they need to. Because of my passion for mindfulness and my positive experience with it personally, my central research question will be, "What happens when I practice mindfulness with my students?" Stemming off of that main question, I am also interested in how mindfulness will affect students' attentional abilities, as well as their self--regulation. Continuing, I also wonder how mindfulness will affect my teaching, specifically my relationships to my students and my stress levels.

## Literature Review

### What is Mindfulness?

Over the past decade, mindfulness has spread from initial applications in areas such as healthcare and mental health, to many other areas including education (Meiklejohn, et al., 2012). Dr. Jon Kabat--Zinn is one of the pioneers of mindfulness in the West. He worked to make it accessible to everyone. He discusses how mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice, but the philosophies and teachings are completely relevant to our lives today (Kabat--Zinn, 1994). He explains this in the following:

This relevance has nothing to do with Buddhism per se or with becoming a Buddhist, but it has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world. It has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. Most of all it has to do with being in touch (p.3).

In the introduction, he warns against thinking of meditation and mindfulness as “some weird cryptic activity” in that “it does not involve becoming some kind of zombie, vegetable, self--absorbed narcissistic, navel gazer, ‘space cadet’, cultist, devotee, mystic, or Eastern philosopher” (p. xvii--xviii). Mindfulness is simply about being yourself while “paying attention in a particular way;; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4).

One important aspect of mindfulness is non--judging (Kabat--Zinn, 1994). Humans are constantly thinking about, evaluating, and comparing our experiences to others and trying to find if it is good or bad or if it fits with our expectations. Mindfulness helps us to develop an accepting and nonjudgmental attitude toward these thoughts, without over identifying and

labeling them. It is not saying that we should never judge or never have thoughts. Humans are hardwired to think. It is what keeps us alive. Patricia Jennings (2015) states that she notices her thoughts without stopping or judging them and recognizes that she is not her thoughts. “The thoughts are there, but I don’t get wrapped up in them or let them carry me away. I don’t need to judge my judgements, just observe them” (p. 4). By practicing nonjudgmental awareness, we can make sure these thoughts do not weigh on the mind and we can stay in the present moment. In “The Zen Teacher,” Dan Tricarico (2015) proposes that teachers look to appreciate their students, colleagues, and resources rather than being consumed by thoughts of what they should have. He asks what would happen if teachers stopped judging that tough student who causes disturbance in their lives? They would probably see that student differently, maybe as one who needs that extra compassion.

Mindfulness also “creates space, replacing impulsive reactions with thoughtful responses” (Mindful Schools, 2013). Usually when a stimulus occurs and we are not practicing mindfulness, we tend to have a knee--jerk reaction. With mindfulness, that same stimulus can occur and we can use mindfulness to find space and then make a choice in how to respond. This tool can be so powerful for students as well as teachers. Students might choose to have a conversation with an angered peer rather than a confrontation or they might choose to bring their attention back to the lesson after noticing they were looking out the window. A powerful quote by Victor Frankl illustrates this. He says, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” By using mindfulness and finding this space, teachers and students can make better decisions in how to respond to everyday situations.

There are many easy ways to practice mindfulness (Srinivasan, 2014). One of the most simple ways is observing the breath. We are always breathing, but how often do we pay attention to our breath? We can breathe mindfully anytime and anywhere. It will allow us to bring our attention back to the present moment. Teachers can take a moment or two to focus on their breathing before a class starts and notice the difference it makes. Often, teachers are doing things so fast and so many things at once, that the day might seem like a blur. Something as simple as cutting paper can be done with mindful breathing. Take a deep breath each time a piece is cut. Mindful walking is another practice that can be done easily in school. It encompasses bringing full attention to all parts of walking like how each foot raises and then falls from your toes to your heels. If teachers walk mindfully to school in the morning from their car instead of barreling through the parking lot, they will most likely seem more positive and receptive to students. They can also choose one route in school in which to walk mindfully each day. These little practices can be done almost anywhere to increase mindful awareness. Personally, I have decided to practice mindful breathing for one minute or so in my car before I walk into school. This allows me to focus on the present and prepare for the day ahead.

These ideas and definitions may seem lofty to children who have never come across it. With my students, I would simplify the definition to something along the lines of “noticing what’s happening right now” or “paying attention on purpose” and they would hopefully continue to understand as we practice and go through the curriculum.

### **The Growth of Mindfulness in Secular Settings**

Before mindfulness became a well--known (or somewhat well--known) term, Dr. Jon Kabat--Zinn introduced Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to the University of

Massachusetts Medical Center in the late 1970s. He worked with chronic pain patients who did not improve with traditional medicine (Kabat--Zinn, 1982). He created a ten week program where participants would meet once a week for two hours. Patients were taught mindfulness practices such as a body scan, mindful breathing, and a few Hatha yoga postures. They were also taught how to direct their attention when an intense emotion arises and how to observe their thoughts without judgement. Researchers found that the majority of patients improved considerably regarding their pain while practicing mindfulness. This method is now found in over 200 hospitals, clinics, and universities all over the world. The early research on MBSR and the data that showed positive effects on chronic pain led to even more research on the topic.

In the last ten years, researchers have focused on how MBSR affects the brain. Another study at the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School used the eight week MBSR program with 16 participants as compared to a control group of 17 participants, all who were seeking stress reduction (Holzel et al., 2011). Results showed increases in gray matter concentration in parts of the brain that manage learning and memory as well as emotional regulation and how we experiences different events. These two promising studies show some of the positive effects of utilizing mindfulness in the healthcare field.

After researchers began to notice these effects in the medical setting, mindfulness traveled to the mental health field. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy was developed by Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Seagal in the early 1990s to help treat patients with clinical depression as well as relapse of depression (Ma & Teasdale, 2004). Studies have shown that in recovered patients with recurrent depression, MBCT considerably reduced their possibility of relapse. With patients who have relapsed three or more times, the mindfulness

training has been shown to reduce future relapses by fifty percent. Biegel (2009) found similar results among adolescent populations in an outpatient psychiatric facility. Adolescent patients receiving MBCT showed fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety along with increased self--esteem and sleep quality. This was the first study of adolescent populations in this setting. It set the stage for future research on mindfulness with youth.

### **Mindfulness in Education**

Mindfulness in an educational setting has been studied for the past 35 years with early programs starting in the late 1980s. Mindfulness came into education as a self--care program for teachers to reduce stress and then moved down to the student level. The studies are promising, but researchers are still working on validating the results of mindfulness and adults with youth populations. There are a multitude of studies on using mindfulness in the schools, but with different approaches.

#### *The Curriculum*

Most of the studies I have researched used the same basic principles in their curriculum. The four components of one curriculum included listening to a chime and paying attention to the breath, being mindful of sensation, thoughts and feelings, managing negative feelings, and acknowledging the self and others (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). This study was most similar to Schonert--Reichl et al. (2015) and Black & Fernando (2013) which utilized the MindUP and Mindful Schools curriculum respectively. MindUP uses practices such as mindful smelling and tasting, gratitude exercises, and literature to promote skills such as empathy (Schonert--Reichl et al., 2015). Mindful Schools uses many of the same practices as well as mindful breathing and listening, body awareness, and mindful test taking, among others (Black



& Fernando, 2013). Mindful Schools curriculum is what I used in my own research. I believe that mindfulness practice should start simple and these studies did just that. They started with the basics of mindful listening with a chime and mindful breathing. That is what is needed as a base to any mindfulness practice.

Van de Weijer--Bergsma et al. (2011) studied the effects of mindfulness on children with ADHD. This curriculum included aspects specifically designed for children with ADHD. For example, a distraction exercise was used to help students practice breathing while being in a distracting environment. They were taught how to use mindfulness in a stressful situation with a parent or friend. This of course is useful for any child or adult, not just children with ADHD.

Flook et al. (2010) explained a more structured schedule for mindfulness training. Each session started with a three minute sitting meditation, then moved on to body scan or lying down meditation for approximately five minutes, followed by a game or activity to promote that week's objective, like attention or awareness. The other studies mentioned did not specifically state how long students were to sit for, besides Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor (2010) which stated that students would practice for three minutes a day and then the time would be increased as the students were ready. For students (or even adults) who have never practiced meditation before, three to five minutes is a long time. I have found that students have trouble sitting sometimes for one minute. The goal of mindfulness is not to have students sit still and be calm for long periods of time. The intention is for students to be able to recognize emotions or thoughts and respond in a thoughtful way. Nonetheless, having students start off with eight combined minutes of meditation is too much. Without the proper training of mindful breathing and mindful listening, they may feel as though they are not doing it the "right" way and become discouraged.

The amount of time that the lessons were taught also varied among the studies. The children with ADHD were given one and a half hour sessions of mindfulness outside of school for eight weeks (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Parents also received mindfulness training at the same time. The MindUP curriculum was taught for 12 weeks with once a week sessions of 40--50 minutes (Schonert--Reichl et al., 2015). From my experience, anything more than 30 minutes seems like a long time. Mindful Schools curriculum calls for 15 minutes lessons and in this specific study lessons were administered three times per week (Black & Fernando, 2013). Fifteen minutes may seem like a short time, but I believe it is just the right amount of time to practice the exercise together and then have a discussion about it. Also, typical classroom teachers do not usually have blocks of time greater than 15 minutes to use.

The studies also differed in who was giving the mindfulness training. Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor (2010) and Schonert--Reichl et al. (2015) had teachers deliver the training to the students. Researchers in one study described the mindfulness training to teachers in a district wide setting (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Then, they asked for volunteers for the study and followed up with a one day training and bi weekly consultations. Teachers in the MindUP study also volunteered, but it was not specified as to what kind of training they received (Schonert--Reichl et al., 2015).

Teachers should have personal experience with mindfulness in order to successfully integrate it into their classroom environment (Srinivasan, 2014). Meiklejohn et al. (2012) defines three ways of using mindfulness in the classroom: indirect, direct, or a combination of both. Indirect mindfulness is when the teacher has a personal mindfulness practice and embodies that through the school day. Direct mindfulness is when students are instructed on specific

mindfulness exercises and skills. In my research, I am hoping to have a combination of both. Patricia Jennings (2015) shares a story about using her mindfulness practice to be “more responsive and less reactive” (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 28). She noticed a student fidgeting in his backpack instead of paying attention to the lesson. She started to automatically think judgmentally of him and that he is always getting into trouble. She was ready to be in discipline mode. Using her mindfulness, she was able to “recognize these thoughts and feelings rather than getting caught up in them” (p. 5). She noticed her feelings of frustration, stopped, took a breath and then let them go. Finally, she paid attention to what he was actually doing in order to respond non judgmentally. By doing this, she realized that his pencil was broken and he was merely looking for another in order to take notes. Through this, she was able to remain calm, avoid causing tension that might inhibit other students’ learning, and continue a strong relationship with that student. After taking the Mindful Schools Educator Essentials Course, I have developed a background in mindfulness practice and research, as well as my own mindfulness practice and have received support in teaching the lessons. I think this is crucial in order to embody mindfulness, as well as for students to “buy into” the practice, which at first may seem silly to them.

In other studies, the teacher did not deliver the curriculum but rather it was was administered by experienced mindfulness practitioners (Black & Fernando, 2013;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011). It might be beneficial to have teachers administer the curriculum because they would be able infuse the practice into other parts of the day and because they know their students very well. On the other hand, it might be difficult for teachers to separate themselves from the usual routine and discipline of the classroom. For example, during a

meditation students may be invited to close their eyes and sit still, although this may be really difficult for them. Teachers have to accept that students might fidget around, maybe make noise or not close their eyes. It is important for teachers not to judge the students and to simply accept where they are right now. They might sit next to them or speak to the whole class by saying “notice if you’re moving around now” or “notice if you can be still.” If students are really disruptive to and the class cannot continue, they can be asked to leave. In this case, it might be valuable to have an outside provider administering the curriculum. Either way, the most important aspect for the instructor to have (either teacher or outside provider) is a good intention. Mindful Schools curriculums teaches that our intention should be to connect with the students, not to make them be calm or make them pay attention, to simply connect.

Studies also differed in how students were asked to use mindfulness outside of the specific lessons. Similar to everything else we teach in school, mindfulness needs to be practiced and used in real life. In three of the studies, teachers were asked to practice mindfulness with the students two or three times per day even when there was not a set lesson or the instructor was not there (Black & Fernando, 2013;; Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;; Schonert--Reichl et al., 2015). Students were also given mindfulness “homework” or asked to practice the strategies they learned in their everyday life (Black & Fernando, 2013;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011). This is crucial to the practice and I intend to also practice mindfulness in short bursts with my students throughout the day.

### *The Outcomes*

Most studies utilized pretest and posttest measures with teachers and/or students to assess the outcomes of the mindfulness practice (Black & Fernando, 2013;; Flook et al., 2010;;

Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011). Schonert--Reichl et al. (2015) utilized measures such as behavioral assessment of executive functioning, biological assessments, self--reports by children, peer reports, and end of year math reports. A large number of factors were analyzed through these studies including, but not limited to, optimism (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;; Schonert--Reichl et al., 2015), attention and concentration (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011), social and emotional competence, (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010), executive function (Flook et al., 2010;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011), and general school self--concept (Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;; Schonert--Reichl et al., 2015). Improvements for each of these effects were found in all studies.

Most studies are in agreement that mindfulness has a positive effect on students' attentional abilities (Black & Fernando, 2013;; Black & Fernando, 2013;; Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011;;). In the study of children with ADHD, van de Weijer--Bergsma et al. (2011) stated that students self--reported that their attention problems reduced and executive functioning improved. Effects were confirmed by improvement on computerized attention tests as well as at an eight week follow up. Black & Fernando (2013) assigned half of the classrooms to receive an additional seven mindfulness classes. They found that students' attentional abilities continued to improve with these additional classes and remained constant with the classes that did not receive additional learning. This further suggests that students must continue practicing or practice outside of the lessons in order to maintain effects and continue to improve.

It is clear that mindfulness can have vast positive effects on students' behavior in the classroom. Many different aspects can be attributed to this. The length of the lessons, the teacher

administering the material, and the time practicing outside of the formal lesson will all contribute to the overall success of my mindfulness research this year. I hope to be consistent with my lessons by keeping them to 15 minutes as well as being consistent with my short “bursts” of mindfulness throughout the day. I intend to continue practicing mindfulness myself so I can be fully present with my students and be authentic in my delivery.

As am I teaching mindfulness this year, I will always try to remember to find my anchor in my breath. Lisa Flynn (2010), author of *Yoga 4 Classrooms* describes the influence of the breath of this powerful statement:

One good breath will allow a child to relax mentally and physically. One good breath will teach a child to pause before committing to her words and actions. One good breath will help a child release his anger and approach difficult situations with a clear mind. One good breath will help a child gather the courage to take a calculated risk, whether it’s trying something different or making a new friend. One good breath will improve a child’s focus, so she can perform better at school, on the ball field, at home. One good breath will remind a child to smile, to forgive, to play, to love, to live. If one good breath will help a child to achieve all of this, imagine what a lifetime of good breaths will do. (p. 36).

I hope that this year, I can help my students to use their breath in order to respond, rather than react to difficult situations.

### **Methodology**

Yoga has been a part of my life for about five years now and has led me into the practice of mindfulness. I have become very passionate about both because they have affected my life in many different ways. The logical next step was to merge my passion for mindfulness with my passion for teaching to help teach students skills that will hopefully benefit them in a variety of ways. Many students in elementary school struggle with focusing their attention on learning as well as managing their ever--changing emotions. Students in Ivy Schools in particular also have been shown to have high stress levels. Mindfulness can give students tools to help with these struggles.

There is no shortage of research on mindfulness in education, but each study is a little bit different. Some studies used outside providers to teach mindfulness while others trained teachers to do it. In these studies, teachers were trained in different ways. Various effects were assessed in each study and different measures for analyzing data were used. I am excited to perform my research this year, in my own way, to analyze my research question and related sub--questions. What happens when I practice mindfulness with my students? How does mindfulness affect my students' attentional abilities, emotional regulation and stress management skills? How will mindfulness affect my teaching, specifically my relationships to my students and my stress levels?

This year I have 25 fifth graders in my class. My class consists of twelve students who are Caucasian, eleven students who are Asian, and two students who are Hispanic. Seven students have IEPs and are pulled out for reading and writing and are included for math, science,

and social studies in which I coteach. Five students have ADHD, three students have dyslexia, and one student has a physical disability which confines him to a wheelchair.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

During the first week of school, I gave my students two pre--surveys on internalizing and externalizing behaviors (See Appendix C). Both surveys were created by Mindful Schools (Mindful Schools, 2010--2016), but I typed the surveys on google forms. The internalizing behaviors survey measures worries related to school, test anxiety, and feelings of sadness and loneliness. The externalizing behaviors survey measures attention and getting in trouble for disturbing others or fighting. From these surveys, I saw what my students think about their attentional abilities, as well as their anxieties about school and relationships with peers.

Starting the second week of school, I taught one lesson per week from the Mindful Schools Kindergarten to Fifth Grade Curriculum (Mindful Schools, 2014). This year, my district has added a 25 minute homeroom/morning meeting period before first period starts. I use this period on Tuesdays to teach the structured mindfulness lessons. The lessons take about 15 minutes. On Fridays I asked students to respond to a question on google classroom about how they used a certain mindfulness skill this past week. The next two sources of data are student journals and my teacher journal. After each lesson, students filled out the Mindful Schools Workbook page (Appendix D) related to the specific lesson. At this time, I also journaled about the lesson by typing on a google document. Informally, I focused on the following questions: How did the lesson go? Did any student responses stick out? How were my emotions during the lesson? Did I think the lesson was successful? Both of these journals gave me an insight into all



of our thoughts about the lessons. By mid November, I was about half way through the curriculum.

We also practice mindfulness every day after second period since my students have special second period and then math and reading afterwards. Usually we just listened to the bell and practiced mindful breathing. Sometimes we practice something that we learned during the lesson. For example, if we had a lesson on gratitude, we would do a short gratitude practice during this time. This mindfulness was rather short, ranging from 1--5 minutes. Once students became comfortable with this, I started allowing students to run it. The “daily helper” for the day would get to lead mindfulness with the other students.

At the end of November, I gave my students the same internalizing and externalizing surveys that they took in the beginning of the year. I also gave my students a revised version of the Mindful Schools Student Evaluation (Appendix E) to assess their thoughts on mindfulness. I revised the survey to include asking the students to explain their responses to yes or no questions as well as to be given on google forms. This survey included questions about whether they used mindfulness in their daily lives and whether they think it is important for them and other children to use in the future. I also emailed parents a survey (Appendix F) asking if their child talked about mindfulness at home and if they thought it was beneficial.

I also used student observations as data. I added to my journal whenever I noticed students using mindfulness or when they talked about using mindfulness. Situations like this could occur in stressful times like before or during test taking, in group work, or giving presentations. It could also occur when students are interacting with their peers and managing emotions of anger or frustration. I also journaled when I noticed myself using mindfulness.

Observations may be difficult because students may be using mindfulness practices that I cannot necessarily see. They may be focusing on their breathing or using kind thoughts, but I will not be able to see that. I can only use observations in which I can physically see students using mindfulness. To this end, the student surveys will be very important.

Lastly, I conducted interviews with students about their mindfulness practice and other teachers who also practice mindfulness themselves or with their class. The student interviews were formal and were recorded with the student's' permission. Most of the teacher interviews were informal with only three being recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

After I gave the pre--survey, I coded the data by recording the students who choose a three or four on each question, four being very true. Then, after giving the same survey at the end of my data collection process, I looked at the students who choose a 3 or 4 on the pre--survey and recorded their new score in yellow. I also looked at students who wrote a 3 or 4 on the post survey even if they recorded lower on the pre--survey. I also created bar graphs that showed the difference between the pre survey and the post survey. As I was collecting my data, I went through student journals and coded feeling words that were popping up and tallied each word. This allowed me to see overall themes of the benefits of mindfulness that my students were finding. The two inductive codes that appeared the most were the feeling words having to do with being calm and being happy. This gave me my themes for when I analyzed data at the end of the process.

As the research was taking place, I went through all of my data and highlighted responses having to do with being calm and relaxed in blue and responses having to do with being happy in

purple. I also highlighted responses in student journals and my own journals that had to do with transference of mindfulness to other parts of the students' lives in orange. I highlighted responses having to do with teacher practice in red. I also pulled student responses as quotes that surprised me or showed a greater understanding of mindfulness and how the student used it (or not). I transcribed student and teacher interviews into a Google document and used the same colors to code.

### **Ethics Review**

I made parents aware of our mindfulness practice and curriculum at Back to School Night. I had a few slides in my presentation that quickly explained why and how we are practicing mindfulness. I quickly taught parents how to find their mindful bodies and we practiced together. I also used pseudonyms to protect the names of my town and school and pseudonyms for my students as well. The responses they will be giving will be even more personal because of the social and emotional content of them.

### **Conclusion**

I hypothesize that if students have mindfulness as a tool to help them manage stress and difficult emotions, they will be more likely to attend to lessons and stay engaged throughout. I truly believe that social and emotional learning is as important than academic learning. This year, one of my school's building goals is, "By June 2017, [Treehouse] Elementary School will continue to work toward continuous improvement of instructional programs with a focus on supporting the developmental, social, and emotional needs of every student." This is the first time that the school has decided to focus on social and emotional learning which is a huge step. One of my personal goals for the year is, "To support student's social and emotional learning by

integrating mindfulness practices in the classroom such as yoga and breathing exercises.” By practicing mindfulness with my students, I hope that we will build better relationships with each other and that they will be able to use these tools in their school life and outside of school. I also hope that by continuing my own practice, I will be more present with my students and will find my own space when managing difficult situations.

## **Findings**

After analyzing my data, I was able to see a larger picture of what happens when I practice mindfulness with my students, and I found three main themes: benefits of mindfulness, students using mindfulness independently, and teacher mindfulness practice.

### **Benefits of Mindfulness**

One of my original sub questions was, “How will practicing mindfulness affect my students’ attentional abilities and emotional self regulation?” Interestingly enough, when reporting how students felt when practicing mindfulness, they did not talk about how it helped them to focus their attention in journal entries or in conversation. On the other hand, 60% (n=15) stated on the Mindful Schools Evaluation survey that it helped them to focus better in the classroom. According to Mindful Schools (2013), increased attentional abilities and emotional self regulation were two of the main benefits reported.

In the pre and post survey questions asking about attention and being distracted, there were no significant findings between the beginning of the year and the end of November. There are many things that might account for this. First, self reflection surveys may not be the best form of data for measuring attention. Weijer--Bergsma et al. (2011) used computerized attention tasks to determine effects of mindfulness on attention. I also noticed through my journals that I did not focus on this during my lessons. I talked mostly about how mindfulness can help anyone make better decisions and calm down when they are frustrated. I played with the idea of starting a small group for students with ADHD to practice mindfulness and specifically how it can help them with attention. There are many studies on how mindfulness has positive impacts on

students with ADHD and I am very interested on how it would help my students. I think more individualized small groups will benefit these students and help them with focus.

When I first started practicing mindfulness with my students, I was amazed by how well the students were receiving it. I was worried because last year I had many students that did not engage and I would start to get frustrated. I wrote the following reaction in my journal on September 16, 2016:

The students have been responding very well to mindful listening. They are actually able to sit still with their eyes closed for a minute and 15 seconds! They are excited for it and get right into their mindful bodies.

A few days after the lesson, I asked students to respond to a prompt on Google classroom asking if they used mindful listening and if yes, what did they hear and how did it help. Many students were able to report what they heard, but most said that it did not help them in any way. I reflected in my journal by saying, “In the future, I need to talk about what is it used for in the first lesson as well instead of going through it fast.” During morning meeting, we discussed what they could use it for, and I emphasized bringing their attention back when they are not focused and calming down when they are frustrated.

In my class, two overall benefits of mindfulness emerged: calmness and happiness. These seem to be in line with the increased sense of emotional self regulation that was found in other studies. A sense of calmness was one of the main feelings reported by students in their journals, Google classroom prompts, interviews, and in my field notes. After the first lesson on mindful breathing, students responded to the question, “How did you feel when you practiced mindfulness breathing.” Of the students in the class (N=22), 55% of the students (n=12) reported

that they felt calm while practicing mindful breathing. On the other hand, only 18% of the students (n=4) reported feeling a negative emotion (bored, uncomfortable, or annoyed). When asked about using anchor words of breathing in and breathing out to focus on their breath students reported feelings of calmness:

“I felt more relaxed and my thoughts drifted away and I felt happy and calm.”

“When I did it, it felt calm and all of my problems ran away.”

If students can use mindfulness as a strategy to help them calm down, they might be able to manage their stress better. They also will have these strategies in their toolbelt to pull from when their level of stress increases in middle school and high school.

On the other hand, one student reported feeling, “bored, annoyed, and kind of restless.” She stated, “I could not focus on my breath.” This response supports my idea that mindfulness might not work for all students. It also helped remind me to stay non judgmental in my stance of mindfulness and that it may not work right away for all students, since this was in the very beginning of my research. This student might also just need more direct guidance in how to practice mindfulness.

Early on in the research process, I asked students to explain what mindfulness meant to them. These responses gave me huge insight into my research question. Again, of the students who responded to the prompt (N=21), 71% (n=15) stated that mindfulness had something to do with being calm. Responses included:

“Mindfulness is about peace and calmness to your mind”

“Mindfulness to me means being relaxed and calm, I also felt: peaceful, energized, ready for the day, helped me focus on my calmness and how calm I normally am.”

“Mindfulness is very calming and very mind clearing. I know that mindfulness can help anyone that is sad, nervous, scared or is bored.”

After coding these responses, I started to realize that most of the students associated mindfulness with being calm, probably as do most adults who have not studied mindfulness. A sense of calmness is certainly an amazing benefit of mindfulness and I am so happy that my students reached this state, but mindfulness is not just about being calm. It is more about noticing their emotions and making decisions in how to respond to these emotions. Of the same students surveyed (N=21), 29% (n=6) stated that mindfulness has something to do with being aware.

These responses illustrate this idea:

“To be aware of yourself and others.”

“It means a nice and easy way for me to calm down and become aware of me and my surroundings.”

“Mindfulness is being aware of your surroundings. If you are outside, you might hear animals or leaves. If you are inside you might hear other people talking or screaming.”

This shows that some students also understand that mindfulness is about noticing what is going on around them, as well as inside of them. In my interviews, I have started talking to students individually about how mindfulness does not put one emotion over the other. It does not teach that being calm is better than being angry. Mindfulness simply gives them a tool to respond to the anger.

One of the other main components of mindfulness that we practiced was heartfulness. Mindful Schools (2013) describes heartfulness as, “The intentional nurturing of positive mind states such as kindness and compassion.” In our lessons, we focused on sending kind thoughts,



generosity, and gratitude. Sending kind thoughts is very similar to the common meditation practice called “loving kindness.” In a loving kindness meditation, you practice by sending kind thoughts first to yourself, then to someone you love, and finally to someone who might bother you (Kabat--Zinn, 1994). You might say something along the lines of, “May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you be at peace.” These thoughts are sent to yourself and the other people you are thinking about.

In the first heartfulness lesson, we practiced sending kind thoughts to people who make us feel good. I found that the students felt an overwhelming sense of happiness after practicing heartfulness. When asked how sending kind thoughts made them feel, 63% of students (n=14) reported feeling happy. When practicing generosity, 45% of students (n=10) stated they felt happy after practicing generosity and 68% (n=15) reported feeling happy after practicing gratitude. After practicing heartfulness at home or in school, students reported these feelings:

“It made me relaxed and happy that people I sent kind thoughts to were happy and alive.”

“I felt very happy because I didn’t need to do it, but I wanted to, also it made me feel like I put a smile on their face today.”

“I felt happy, and content, because I knew that I had helped someone. Even just little things, can make somebody happy, knowing others are happy makes you happy as well.”

After each of these lessons, I had students notice that they made themselves feel happy in a matter of minutes and that they can do this in their own lives to find happiness.

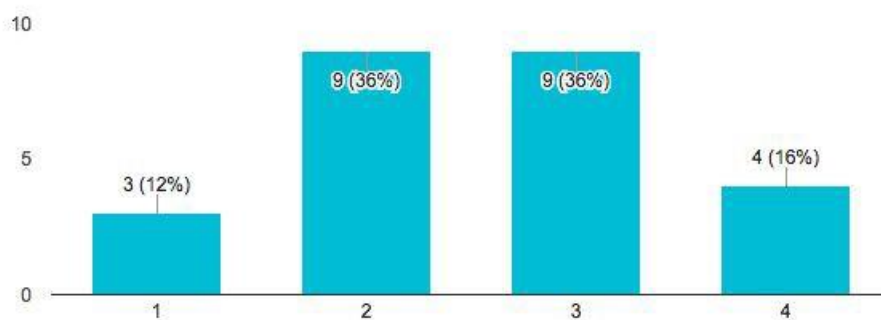
### **Using Mindfulness Independently**

One of my main goals of practicing mindfulness with students is for them to use it on their own in order to help regulate and manage their emotions. Especially in Ivy School District,

students are excessively stressed in middle school and high school. As in most middle schools, they have five or more different teachers with different homework assignments and tests. In Ivy School District, pressure from parents to achieve high test scores increases. Students start to feel competition between peers for class rank and other high achievements. They start to pile on even more extra curricular activities that add to their academic stress. My hope is that students have mindfulness as a tool to deal with the stress they might encounter later in life, as well as any stress they may be dealing with in fifth grade. Overall and as expected, I found that some of the students were consistently using mindfulness outside of our lessons, while some were not. In the Mindful Schools Evaluation survey, students rated the response of if they used mindfulness on their own and if they think it has helped them. The survey used a scale from one to four with four being very true and one being not at all true. Figure 1 below shows survey results of students practicing on their own.

### Figure 1: Survey Results

I use mindfulness on my own. (25 responses)

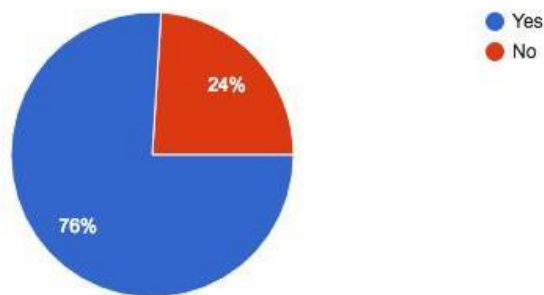


The results show that some students have been using it on their own, but there is definitely room for more students to practice. After each lesson, I would give the students a “mindful challenge” to practice what they learned on their own. Many students would report that they did the

challenge, but there was always a group that did not. On the other hand, many students reported that they would use mindfulness in the future and that other children or adults should learn about mindfulness, as seen in Figures 2 and 3 below.

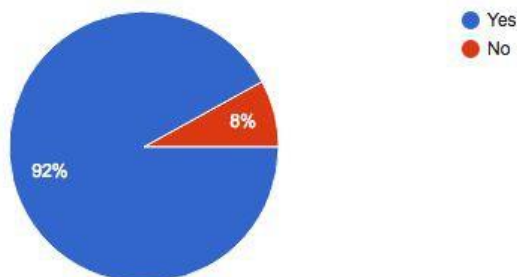
**Figure 2: Survey Results**

Do you think you will use mindfulness in the future? (25 responses)



**Figure 3: Survey Results**

Do you think more children (or adults) should learn about mindfulness?  
(25 responses)



It is interesting to note that 24% of students said that they do not think they will use mindfulness in the future and only 8% of students said that other children and adults should not learn about mindfulness. After analyzing these results further, I found that of the six students who reported that they will not use it in the future, only two of those students said that more people should not learn about it. This might mean that even though some of the students do not think they will use it, they still might see the benefit for other people. They may even see the benefit for themselves later in life. These results truly gave me hope that students have learned to use mindfulness as a tool and that they see it as something beneficial that might help them later on in life.

The survey that I sent home to parents also produced very interesting information. I asked parents if their child have talked about mindfulness at home. Of the ten parents who responded, all ten of them said that their child has talked about mindfulness at home. Again, even if students are not practicing on their own, they are talking about it. That is definitely the first step. Of the parents who responded to the question of how often they saw their child practicing, all seven answered “sometimes” or “rarely.” This may be a result of students practicing when their parents are not there. Finally, 80% of the parents (n=8) who answered the survey answered with “very true” for “I hope my student continues to practice mindfulness” and “I think more children (or adults) should learn mindfulness.” This shows that the parents see mindfulness as beneficial and if asked, might be willing to practice with their child at home which could promote independence of practice.

I also noticed students talking about or using mindfulness throughout the school day and would record these observations in my journal. One student was reading a book where the character was angry a lot. She stated to her book club that maybe the character should use

mindfulness to help her calm down. She continued to say that most characters in books should use mindfulness. On November 17 2016, I recorded this response in my journal:

Jason asked what the glitter jar was and Debbie explained that you watch the glitter fall when you are stressed. Jason said it wouldn't work because he's always stressed and Debbie and another student said they've used it and it does actually work. It was really awesome to see the students talking about mindfulness on their own and teaching other students about it.

These instances show me that students are understanding what mindfulness is used for and that they are applying it to other situations in their lives.

There are a few students that are always sharing about their experiences and stand out as the ones who practice independently. Brandon struggles with anxiety. He gets extremely frustrated when he does not understand something and starts to cry. He cried almost every day the first week of school because of frustration. When we first started practicing mindfulness, he engaged with it right away. When I asked him what he does to help himself calm down he said, "I just go into a silent room and just sit down and breathe in and out and just tell myself everything's okay. It's gonna be fine. [Mindfulness] calms me down a lot and helps me regain my focus." When I asked him what his favorite thing about mindfulness was he said the following:

Probably the way it makes me feel when you're done. Like after you finish, it feels really nice because you're just calm and relaxed. Nothing is really bugging you anymore.

You're really just happy. You're not annoyed. You can go on with your day now.

I have also seen Brandon use mindfulness in class. He often gets our "glitter jar" to help him calm down. When needed, students shake the jar and watch the glitter fall as they breathe and let

themselves calm down. My co--teacher shared about how she has noticed the students using mindful breathing on their own. She specifically shared that Brandon uses the glitter jar and mindfulness in general:

On Monday, Brandon was having writer's block... I noticed him sitting there. He had his paper and Chromebook pushed in front of him and I asked what he's doing. He says I'm taking some time to think and he was using all the strategies. He'll get the baby glitter jar. The substitute even wrote one day that Brandon became frustrated and Pat got the glitter jar and gave it to him.

On November 23 2016, I recorded this journal entry about this same student:

Today Brandon told me that “glitter jars are lifesavers.” I’m so happy that he has found a tool to help him with his anxiety. It doesn’t seem to be “stopping” his emotions, but now he has a strategy to help him deal with them, which is great!

I truly believe that mindfulness has helped Brandon to manage his anxiety and his frustrations. If I even helped one student to find peace like this, my research project would be a success.

Brandon has used mindfulness on his own because there was a definite need for him. Other students may not see an immediate need to practice mindfulness if they do not feel very stressed or they do not notice their attention wandering during class. In an interview, Hilary said that she does not really get frustrated or stressed, except with her brother. She had also told me that mindfulness does not help her. This might be because she does not see the need for it right now. I explained that she might want to keep it as a tool for later in life when she does find herself getting more frustrated.

Tim is another student in my class who did not seem very interested in mindfulness in the beginning of the year. I choose to interview him to get more information of how I can help him as he also deals with anxiety and attention problems. He surprised me! He explained that he did not like mindfulness in the beginning of the year, but then he started to use it. Without this interview, I may never have learned what Tim was thinking. When asked how he felt about mindfulness so far this year he stated:

At first I thought it was weird because why are we sitting quietly for a minute or three, but then later on in the year it started to help me. After gym we always are like crazy and loud and doing mindfulness helps us calm down and it helps us slow down.

He also talked about how he used mindful breathing when his sister broke something of his and it helped him calm down. These interviews showed me that students might need time to learn to use mindfulness on their own and it might not occur within the three months that this research has taken place.

Finally, I concluded one final reason why students might not be practicing mindfulness on their own as much as I would have hoped. As a class, we do a short mindfulness practice after second period special and right before math. Usually, this consists of listening to the singing bell while sitting in mindful bodies for one minute to four minutes. Sometimes, we will do other activities like yoga, Go Noodle (an online brain break website), Calm.com, Airtime (a Go Noodle meditation activity), among others, but most of them involve sitting meditation. When checking off the activities that students enjoy, 80% (n=20) of the students (N=25) checked off that they enjoyed Go Noodle, which is much more active. On the other hand, 64% (n=16) of the students (N=25) checked off that they enjoyed Airtime as well, but only 40% (n=10) stated that

they enjoyed listening to the bell. Listening to the singing bell was the activity that we used the most and because of this data, I had to rethink our daily mindfulness practices.

I interviewed Liz who has responded with statements like “It did not work” or “It did not help at all.” When asked about mindfulness she stated, “Instead of calming down I usually just get worked up because after specials I feel like I need to get up and jump and like do something active instead of just like sitting around.” She also told me that kids who are active might not like the practice at first, but they should learn it to help with anger. Liz finds that she enjoys the sitting practices after gym, but needs to move around after a special like Spanish or Health. These subjects are taught in my room, so the students do not get a chance to walk around after the class. She explained that she likes the yoga poses and the moving mindfulness activities and she has done those to help her. Finally, she said her favorite part about mindfulness “is that we just listen to ourselves and sometimes our thoughts. It’s kind of as if it’s like we’re watching them go past like when we’re in an alley like race cars are zooming past you.” She gets it. These interviews really proved to me that even though students may not *seem* like they enjoy the lessons, they still may be taking something away from it in their own personal way.

### **Teacher Practice**

In order for teachers to successfully teach mindfulness to students, it is important that they have their own mindfulness practice (Srinivasan, 2014). I have found it extremely helpful in my teaching. Since the beginning of the year, I have taken a minute to breath and practice in my car before I get into school. I also have set up a teacher meditation group that meets three times per week. I have journaled about a few of the times that mindfulness has helped me to stay present in the classroom. On October 4 2016, I wrote the following:



Mindfulness has really been helping me stay centered. At one point today, I noticed myself barreling down the hallway with a million things on my mind. I decided to stop and slow down and focus on my breathing. It definitely allowed me to actually get more things done because I was only focusing on one thing at a time.

There have been many times that I have noticed my mind wandering to other things or maybe too many things at once. Mindfulness has helped me manage this and in turn has improved my relationships with students. This is another example of a journal entry in which I used mindfulness:

Yesterday, a student came up to me when she was done with her test and I thought she was going to ask me if she could play math or social studies games since she was done. Instead of jumping in telling her she should work on her writing because she is behind, I took a pause. And waited. She asked if she could work on her writing! I was so excited and was happy that I took a pause and used mindfulness.

This helped me to continue a strong relationship with this student and allow her to make decisions independently.

Mindfulness practice is starting to take shape at Treehouse School. The principal asked if myself and three other teachers would present on mindfulness at one of our faculty meetings. I was nervous because not everyone is open to the idea, but afterwards we received fantastic feedback. Teachers tried some of the practices I suggested, such as taking a moment to breathe in your car before coming into school. The meeting was set up where half of the staff would attend the mindfulness session and half would attend a session on growth mindset and then they would switch. I received this email from the other presenter after the meeting:

I thought you would all appreciate knowing the difference we noticed in the second group who came in from your session. There was a marked calmness in the transition and the focus on our blind sort task! There was also a sense of centeredness in their approach to the session. Kudos to you — and to the effects of mindfulness on learners (children and adults alike)!

Because of this response and the positive response of the teachers, the principal has decided to include a short mindfulness practice at the beginning of each faculty meeting.

In a conversation with another fifth grade teacher about mindfulness, she talked about how she practices in class so the students can see what she does and hopefully encourage them to practice as well. She also stated:

On a personal note, I am usually guilty of lying in bed at night and letting my mind spin about how I can support students, what isn't working, etc. I have started doing mindfulness every single night to help clear my mind.

Another pre--school teacher talked about mindfulness in this way:

It [mindfulness] has made a huge difference in my life. I notice I'm less likely to get upset about the minor annoyances that I face in the normal course of a day and I even notice that I'm more patient. Lately I've noticed that I can concentrate better and am more aware and appreciative of some of my own smaller accomplishments and those of my students too.

These teachers may not be teaching mindfulness to their students in depth, but their personal practice has allowed them to connect with their students and has helped them manage the everyday stress that comes with being a teacher.

Another one of my grade level colleagues has been teaching the mindfulness curriculum to her students as well. She also agrees that in order to teach mindfulness to students, it is important to have a personal practice. When asked if she thinks it is helpful to practice mindfulness as a teacher she responded:

I don't think that I could appreciate it or understand or talk about it without practicing. I support people that are interested in bringing it into the classroom, but there's a reason why in the Mindful Schools courses, the personal practice course comes first. You need to develop that mindset before that can transfer to bringing it to somebody else.

Because of these conversations with colleagues and my own reflection of my mindfulness practice, I can conclude that just practicing mindfulness as a teacher is beneficial in connecting with students and managing stress. Going even further to teach mindfulness to students can only continue those benefits!

### **Implications**

Throughout my research on mindfulness in the classroom, I have learned so much about myself as a teacher and a practitioner of mindfulness. Before this experience, I thought I had a pretty good sense of what mindfulness was and how it affected me, but afterwards, I feel that I now truly understand what it means and how it can positively affect students, as well as teachers. I understand even more now that I may not quickly see (or ever see) the the results of what I do in the classroom. This can be applied to any other long term project I put in place as well. If I had not collected all of this data, as I normally would not have, I would not have been able to see the effects of mindfulness on my students. All I would have seen is that they occasionally are able to sit for a couple minutes and sometimes share about their experiences. I might have even been discouraged as I have been in past years and stopped it altogether. That being said, I am truly grateful for this experience that made me stick with implementing mindfulness into the classroom.

As a mindfulness practitioner, I was able to become even more aware of my mindfulness practice. Mindfulness can be a “state” where you have a moment of mindfulness. It can be a “practice” which is using different strategies to be in the present. Lastly, it can be a “trait” where you have a general “set point” of mindfulness (Mindful Schools, 2013). For a while, I have thought I was getting close to having mindfulness as a “trait.” I am able to use the strategies in my daily life to manage my emotions and my stress. This process has made me reflect on that and now I have specific examples of how mindfulness has helped me. I am currently in training to become a yoga teacher, and this awareness will certainly guide me as I try to connect to my students and share how mindfulness and yoga has helped me.

Most of my students were definitely engaged with mindfulness and found it useful in their lives. There were, of course, students that did not like it. During this project, I was able to talk to a few of the students that did not enjoy mindfulness to get more insight, but I did not get to all of them. In the upcoming months, I am going to try to talk to all students about their feelings towards mindfulness to learn more about how I can help them.

I am going to continue teaching one lesson per week and have students journal in the Mindful Schools workbook. In future lessons, I am going to talk more about how mindfulness is not just about being calm and about how one emotion is not better than another. I will teach students more about how mindfulness is a “pause” and helps us to make better decisions regarding our emotions. I will also try to make this more clear next year when I start the curriculum again. In addition, I am pleased with my decision to start the sitting mindfulness with thirty seconds to one minute and increase from there. Schonert--Reichl & Lawlor (2010) started with three minutes and I had proposed that was too much. If I had started with three minutes, my students would most likely not have taken to the practice so well. After the first couple sits, they were so proud with their practice because they were able to do it. They may not have been successful with anything greater than one minute.

Additionally, I want to start a smaller group with the students in my class who have ADHD. I truly think mindfulness can help with with their attention, specifically to notice when they are not paying attention and to bring themselves back to the task. I do not think the Mindful Schools lessons focused enough on this. The students with ADHD are usually the ones who are not interested in sitting mindfulness because they find it hard to sit still, which is completely understandable. In a smaller group, it might be easier for me to focus on teaching them strategies

to help their attention ability. Van de Weijer--Bergsma et al. (2011) used a distraction exercise to help students focus on their breathing in controlled distractive situations. I might try something like this as well as on movement activities rather than just sitting.

Another change I would make is being more intentional with the activities I choose to do in our everyday mindfulness practice after specials. In my findings, I noted that many students enjoyed the sitting practice after gym, but felt the need to move after a special like Spanish or Health that was in our classroom. On the days we have gym, I will continue to do the sitting mindfulness practice. On the days when we have other specials that are in our classroom, I will do different activities such as Go Noodle, yoga, or other mindful moving activities.

Two studies also explained how students were given mindfulness “homework” (Black & Fernando, 2013;; van de Weijer--Bergsma et al., 2011). I informally gave students “mindful challenges” to practice at home, but there was little accountability besides sharing with the class on the Friday after the lesson. In the future, I might send home emails to parents about the mindfulness exercises we learned that week. That way if the parents wanted, they could practice with their children. One parent talked about mindful eating and said, “We have done it [mindfulness] a few times. It helped with creating interesting conversation and made us all think about what we were actually eating and how it made is us feel.” I would have to be careful in making sure parents understand that it is not an assignment and not something I want them to “force” their children to do.

### **Obstacles**

As with any new program in a classroom, obstacles arose when implementing mindfulness as a teacher and with my students. The first problem I encountered centered around my mindfulness practice. During the summer, I planned to meditate for about five minutes every day while my students were at special. I quickly realized this was going to be harder than I thought because half of my students' specials are in my room so I did not have a place to meditate. Instead, I decided to take some breaths in my car before school. I also took any opportunity I could to take a few breaths during the day and I continued to hold teacher group meditation three times per week.

Because of the nature of mindfulness, I cannot see when students are practicing it. I had to rely on student journals and their responses for data. I did not have any attention tasks or other more formal tasks to test attention or emotional regulation. I usually only got responses from a certain group of students that always shared and with other tasks, I might have been able to see effects in other students who did not usually share. Because of this, the interviews were very helpful and informative.

Luckily, I had a set time during Morning Meeting that I could devote to a mindfulness lesson once per week. If my district had not implemented this morning meeting time, it would have been very difficult for me to carve out a time each week and it would have been easier to pass over for something else. It was also really helpful to have special during the same period every day, which made our daily mindfulness practice very consistent. We would practice every day after second period and the students knew that as routine. On the other hand, I wanted to do more. I wanted to create that small group with students with ADHD and with everything else

happening in school during October and November (parent teacher conferences, breaks, etc) it was difficult for me to find time to implement this. I am hoping that after the New Year I can set this up.

I also found that around mid October students were losing interest. In the beginning of the year, they were engaged with mindfulness, but as the year went on it became more monotonous for them. The Mindful Schools lessons are all very similar to one another. They start with a short practice of listening to the bell, then sharing about the previous homework, then learning the new skill, and finally writing in the journal. I noticed the students stagnating around this time and knew I needed to change something. I went back to review my notes from my previous mindfulness course last year and found some of the fun activities we did such as passing a water cup with eyes closed, an “auto pilot” activity, and some new mindfulness apps. With these new, more interactive activities, the students started to become interested again. As with anything in a classroom, it needs to be changed and re evaluated every once and awhile. In the future, I plan on doing one of these activities every two weeks or so.



### **Emerging Questions**

Some might say that mindfulness could be the next “buzz word,” but I feel very confident in that it can have profound and lasting effects on students and teachers alike. I would be very curious to see what shifts would happen if my entire school embraced mindfulness. Between myself and three other teachers who practice, we have gotten the word out through our weekly meditation group, the mindfulness faculty meeting, various character education themes such as gratitude activities, and more. Our principal has taken notice and is very interested. What would happen to the school climate if mindfulness was implemented in every classroom? What would happen if the whole school started off the day with a minute of mindfulness on the morning announcements? What would happen if teachers practiced mindfulness daily?

Going even further, what would be the benefits of starting this practice at an even younger age? How would my district’s culture and climate change? Currently, there is a good of eighth graders, with help from their gifted and talented teacher resource specialist and the superintendent, who are working on bringing mindfulness to their peers. They have held sessions, sold glitter jars and notebooks, and ran various workshops for teachers in the district. As these eighth graders are moving on to high school, I am going to connect them with my students. Hopefully, when my students are sixth graders, they can carry on this program at the middle school. There is also a teacher at Ivy High School who embeds mindfulness into her science class. There are already several seeds of mindfulness being planted, but what would be needed to implement a mindfulness program district wide?

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this research project, I have explored the effects of practicing mindfulness in my fifth grade classroom. Based on the data that I collected, I can conclude that mindfulness can help students to calm down when they are frustrated and find happiness when needed. I was surprised that I did not find conclusive data on how mindfulness affects attentional abilities, but I have attributed that to the nature of my observational and conversational data. I was very pleased in my students' responses of how mindfulness has helped them and what it means to them. The responses showed me that the students value mindfulness as something that can help them in their daily lives. Of course, not every student found it directly useful in their lives right now and I expected that from the beginning. For those students, I hope this year serves as an introduction to a tool that they may find useful later in life.

I have also looked at the effects of the teacher practicing mindfulness as well. Based on my own self-reflections and interviews with other teachers, it is apparent that mindfulness practice should start with the teacher. A personal mindfulness practice can have such a huge impact on teaching even without passing it along to the students. I find that I am more present with my students and better able to manage stress because of mindfulness. As the year goes on, I am excited to use what I learned throughout this research to continue to practice mindfulness with my students and to continue my own personal practice as well.

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### **Appendix A: Subjectivity**

I choose to research mindfulness because of the positive effects it has had on me. So of course, I had biases about it. To me, it makes so much sense. Humans need to notice their emotions and make a decision in how to respond to them rather than to react without thinking. We tell students to make better choices, but we do not teach them how. I came in to this research project with my own biases that mindfulness will be the tool that can help students with frustration, stress, anger, and anything else they might be feeling emotionally. Throughout the project, I had to continually remind myself that mindfulness will not work for every student and that I am just providing them with an experience. To protect against this subjectivity, I used mindfulness, of course. I had to be mindful and nonjudgmental when my students did not give me the responses I would have liked or when they seemed like they did not want to be participating. I had to accept that they might not be presenting in the way that I would have hoped with closed eyes and a still body. Instead, they might be fidgety or silly.

My students were also very aware that I practice mindfulness and that it has had positive impacts on my life. I used stories from my life to teach them about mindfulness and they would even see me practice when I needed to refocus. They knew that I taught the other teachers at a faculty meeting and that we meditate in my classroom a few mornings per week. Because of this, my students might have given positive responses about mindfulness to “please the teacher.” Although this is a possibility, I do not think it occurred often and I got plenty of responses explaining why mindfulness has not worked for some students. When sharing positive experiences, students would give specific examples of when they used mindfulness and how it helped them. I do not think they would be able to make these up. Additionally, students were able

to explain what mindfulness is in detail and very accurately. I really believe that you can not understand what mindfulness is without seeing some of its benefits. That being said, I do not think students would be able to explain mindfulness in the depth that they did without feeling it's positive effects. Lastly, my final survey was anonymous which allowed students to answer honestly. Taking all of this into account, I do not think I would have been able to do this research without already having a steady mindfulness practice and being deeply invested in it.

Based on my early journal entries and students' responses, I found that the students were only seeing mindfulness as a still, calming practice, rather than a practice of being in the present moment, no matter what your emotion. Because of this, I learned about my own beliefs about mindfulness. In the beginning of the year, I focused mostly and students practicing sitting mindfulness and how long they could sit for. This shows my own subconscious beliefs that mindfulness is about being calm and maybe calm students is what I wanted out of this practice. I quickly reminded myself about the different ways to practice mindfulness like seeing, walking, eating, and being in the present moment and made sure to include more of these into the classroom.

### **Appendix B: Implementation**

I have been a mindfulness “pioneer” at my school for the last year and a half. Over this time, I have brought the practice to staff in many ways. Along with a colleague of mine, I applied for a grant to have eight weekly sessions of mindfulness for staff. We started weekly meditation and presented at a faculty meeting. I have been in contact with other teachers in the district and members of the community who practice. I hope to continue this path of sharing in the upcoming years. Based on my findings that teacher practice is important, I would continue to discuss with teachers ways that they can practice mindfulness themselves and encourage them to develop their own practice before sharing with their students. There is a group of teachers in my school who practice mindfulness and have taken (or are going to take) the Mindful Schools Educators Course. Informally, I am going to share my findings with them in hopes that they can use my research when they teach the curriculum to their students.

I would love to implement school wide mindfulness with teachers and students. This is already taking place in faculty meetings as the principal has decided to start each meeting with mindfulness. In order to continue this dialogue with my principal, I would like to present my findings to her in hopes that she would be willing to implement mindfulness school wide with the students as well. I think it would be beneficial for the entire school to start each morning with a moment of mindfulness on the announcements. Teachers and students would get a chance to center themselves for the day. At Treehouse Elementary School, there are character education themes that are presented every other month such as caring, responsibility, honesty, etc. I have discussed with my school’s guidance counselor about adding in a monthly character theme which includes mindfulness. There have also been schools who have created a Mindful Moment



room. The room would have bean bag chairs, pillows, glitter jars, coloring books, and anything else that would be calming. Students would be able to go to the room when they needed a mental break. I would love to incorporate this type of room at my school. Through these activities, students would start to get exposed to mindfulness in a few different areas of the school.

Eventually, I hope to find (or create) a position where I can teach mindfulness and yoga to students and teachers. I would do yoga classes for teachers before or after school. I could give professional development workshops on personal mindfulness practice and then on implementation into the classroom. I could also come into classrooms to teach mindfulness or yoga. I am currently training to become a yoga teacher and would also like to become certified to teach kids yoga. I would like to start an after school yoga program where I would focus on mindfulness as well as the yoga postures. This research is the first step in that process. Ivy School District already highly values social and emotional learning and the administration is actively trying to reduce student stress. Mindfulness can be another tool for students to use to combat this stress. In order to do this, I plan on furthering my education by taking more courses on mindfulness and social and emotional learning. Through this, I hope to extend mindfulness to as many students and teachers as possible.

### Appendix C

#### Pre and Post Survey

## How Do I Feel When..?

\* Required

What is your name? \*

Your answer

I feel angry when I have trouble learning. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I worry about taking tests \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I often feel lonely. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I feel sad a lot of the time. \*

1            2            3            4

Not at all true                    Very true

I worry about doing well in school. \*

1            2            3            4

Not at all true                    Very true

I worry about finishing my work. \*

1            2            3            4

Not at all true                    Very true

I worry about having someone to play with at school. \*

1            2            3            4

Not at all true                    Very true

I feel ashamed when I make mistakes at school. \*

1            2            3            4

Not at all true                    Very true

I often argue with other kids. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

It's hard for me to pay attention. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I get distracted easily. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

It's hard for me to finish my schoolwork. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I get in trouble for talking and disturbing others. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I get in trouble for fighting with other kids. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

Appendix D

Excerpt from Mindful Schools Student Workbook



Mindful Breathing:  
FINDING YOUR  
Anchor SPOT

How did you feel when you practiced mindful breathing?

When you breathe, where do you feel it in your body? Your belly? Your chest? Your nose? Somewhere else?

Appendix E

Mindful Schools Student Evaluation Survey

# Mindfulness Check In

Please answer the following questions

\* Required

I enjoyed the mindfulness lessons. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all True	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very True

I use mindfulness on my own. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all True	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very True

Mindfulness has helped me in my life. \*

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all True	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very True

Please check off your favorite mindfulness strategy.\*

- Mindful listening
- Mindful breathing
- Heartfulness
- Body scan
- Using 'thinking, thinking'
- Gratitude
- None
- Other :

Please check off your least favorite mindfulness strategy.\*

- Mindful listening
- Mindful breathing
- Heartfulness
- Body scan
- Using 'thinking, thinking'
- Gratitude
- None
- Other :

Please check off the activities that you enjoy.

- Airtime
- Listening to the bell
- Calm.com
- Yoga
- Go Noodle

**Mindfulness has helped me: \***

Check all that apply.

- get better grades.
- focus better in the classroom.
- be more happy where I live.
- be more happy at school.
- calm down when I am upset.
- avoid fights or arguments.
- be better at sports, music.
- fall asleep at night.
- make decisions.
- all of the above.
- mindfulness has not helped me.



Do you think you will use mindfulness in the future? \*

Yes

No

Have you taught anyone you know about mindfulness? \*

Yes

No

Do you think more children (or adults) should learn about mindfulness? \*

Yes

No

Is there a time when you used mindfulness to help you? If yes, explain.

Your answer

---

What is your favorite thing about mindfulness? \*

Your answer

---

Is there anything you don't like about mindfulness? Is there anything you would change about how we practice mindfulness in class? If so, explain.

Your answer

---

Is there anything else you want me to know about mindfulness?

## Appendix F

### Parent Survey

# Mindfulness Parent Survey

\* Required

Has your child talked about mindfulness at home? \*

- Yes
- No

Have you seen your child practice mindfulness at home? If yes, did it help them and how?

Your answer

---

if you have seen your child practice at home, how often have they done it?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely

**Please answer the following questions if your child has talked about mindfulness. If not, just submit :)**

Mindfulness has been helpful for my child.

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I hope my child continues to practice mindfulness.

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true

I think more children (or adults) should learn mindfulness.

	1	2	3	4	
Not at all true	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very true