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“I Notice My Feelings:” Exploring Mindfulness with 1st Graders and their Families

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Abstract

This paper explores a study completed with 1st grade students while a five-week mindfulness unit was implemented in their classroom. The paper discusses tactics for teaching mindfulness strategies to students and results observed in the students over the course of the five-week study. It also contains journal entries completed by students and their families both in the classroom and at home.

Keywords: mindfulness, literacy, first grade

Introduction

Boooooonnnnggg. 28 first graders grew silent as I rang the gong bell. The children closed their eyes and listened intently as the bell resonated through the classroom. One by one, they raised their hands, indicating the end of the bell sound. Boooooonnnnnnggg. I rang the bell again and the students continued peacefully listening, maintaining focus uncharacteristic of typical first graders. This time, at the end of the bell, the students opened their eyes and fixed them on the Hoberman ball I held. Together they followed my lead and took three deep breaths – breathing in with the expansion of the ball and breathing out with the closing of the ball. Any chaos or stress that was once in the room quickly vanished.

The students in this vignette were practicing “mindful listening” and deep breathing in a mindfulness unit of study. Mindfulness is paying attention in a present moment, on purpose, and without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness involves acceptance and paying attention to one’s thoughts and feelings. During this five-week engagement, first grade students and their families explored relevant children’s literature on mindfulness, practiced mindfulness self-regulation techniques, and wrote and responded to their experiences with both.

Why Mindfulness?

The pressures and stress of school and home are alive and well even in today’s early childhood classrooms. Many schools are turning to mindfulness as a way to support students in their social and emotional learning as converging evidence begins to show that mindfulness interventions could cause changes in the adult brain, specifically in the areas that regulate attention, emotion, and self-awareness (Tang, Holzel, & Posner, 2015). Mindfulness interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety and depression in adults (Hoffmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010) and improve “cognitive performance and resilience to stress” in school-aged children (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, Walach, 2014, pg. 1). The effects of mindfulness interventions grow even further when school wide participation and home practice are implemented (Stuart, Collins, Toms, Gwalla- Ogisi, 2017; Zenner et al., 2014). The field of mindfulness with young children has been described as “nascent,” as researchers are in the beginning stages of its growth and potential (Zenner et al., 2014, pg. 1).

The teachers in this study were first introduced to mindfulness in the classroom when they came across the children’s book *I Am Peace* by Susan Verde. In her book, Verde describes the fruits of mindfulness as inner calm and peace that can in turn be shared with others (Verde, 2017). This description sparked an inquiry in the first-grade teachers Mrs. Devries and Mrs.

Wear, and we embarked on a qualitative teacher action research project to answer the question, how do first grade children respond to mindfulness training that includes exploring relevant children's literature, reading responses, and self-regulation techniques? This simple question led to the creation of a five-week unit of study on mindfulness.

This study took place at a small private elementary school in the mid-south. Oak Tree Academy (pseudonym) serves approximately 220 students ages pre-kindergarten through 6th grade. The school's mission statement maintains its dedication to serving an economically, racially, and culturally diverse student body. This diversity is accomplished by providing full scholarships or financial assistance to over 65% of the student population. Over 138 families are served, with 30% of the students coming from single-parent households, and 50% of the students from minority backgrounds.

Twenty-eight first graders from two first grade classes at Oak Tree Academy participated in a five-week unit of study on mindfulness at the request and direction of their teachers, Mrs. Devries and Mrs. Wear. The purpose of the teacher action research was twofold: to investigate potential changes in students' understanding and ability to implement mindfulness, as well as deepen our own understanding and practice of social emotional learning and instruction (Burns, 2010).

A Starting Place for Instruction

We began our inquiry by interviewing the students using the *Child and Adolescent Mindfulness Measure* as the basis for our questions (Greco, Baer, & Smith, 2011). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The themes revealed that many of our students did not know about mindfulness and could not identify self-regulating strategies of their own. Many students referenced external things, such as

food or other people when asked the question, “Do you have any strategies for calming down when you feel worried or upset?” For example, many students said that eating a treat such as ice cream would help them feel better. One student said that he could not push thoughts out of his own head but “his parents could do it for him.” Screen time was a popular response for a strategy to calm down. The trend in the interviews was that students did not hold the view that they could find calm from within themselves, and they needed someone or something to do it for them. Many students said they did not think about their own feelings and were too distracted or busy to understand and identify how they are feeling or what they might be worried about. The information gained from the pre-interviews helped us curate a set of lesson plans that would expose students to a rich variety of ways to understand the abstract idea of mindfulness.

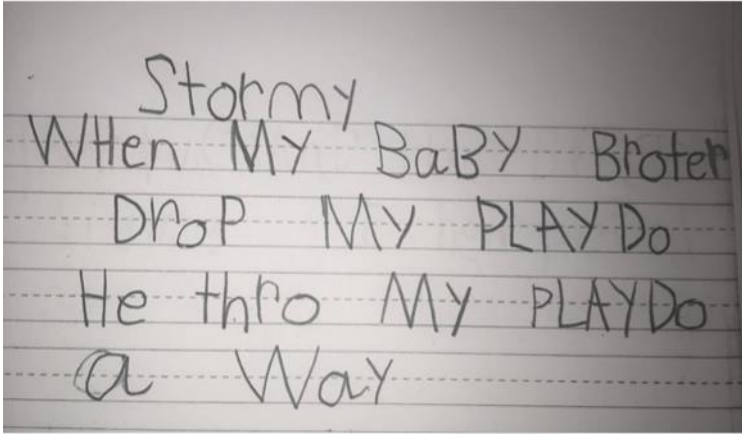
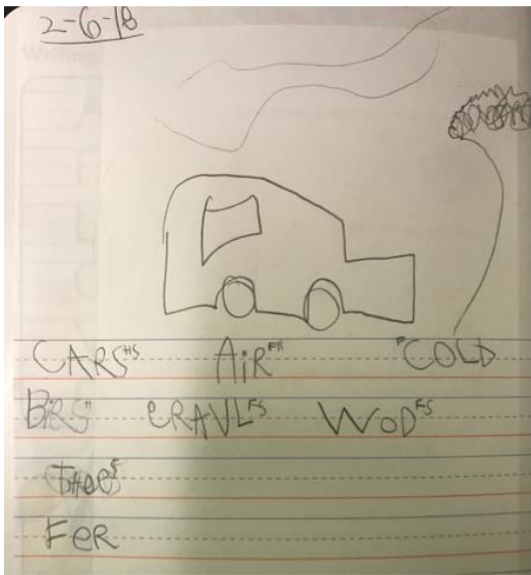
The mindfulness lessons lasted 45 minutes each and were implemented two days a week for five weeks. Each lesson followed a similar format. We began with a mindfulness exercise that would get students physically involved in the practice of mindfulness and help them identify a few key strategies they could use outside the classroom. This beginning segment lasted approximately five minutes and mainly revolved around deep breathing and mindful listening. Since many first graders are not familiar with deep breathing, a Hoberman sphere was used as a support to teach children to slowly breathe in through their noses, expanding their stomachs with the expansion of the sphere, and slowly breathe out through their mouths, deflating their stomachs with the collapse of the sphere. It was incredible to see the students fix their eyes on the sphere, focus on their breathing, and then visibly become still and quiet. Another favorite exercise was mindful listening. In this exercise, the students were asked to close their eyes and quietly listen as the teacher hit the side of a singing bowl and let the soothing noise ring through the room. The students were asked to listen for as long as they could and silently raise their

hands when they could no longer hear the bell. The purpose of this bell is a meditation focus, helping the students bring their attention to the present moment. The beautiful sound gave the students a sense of peace and calm.

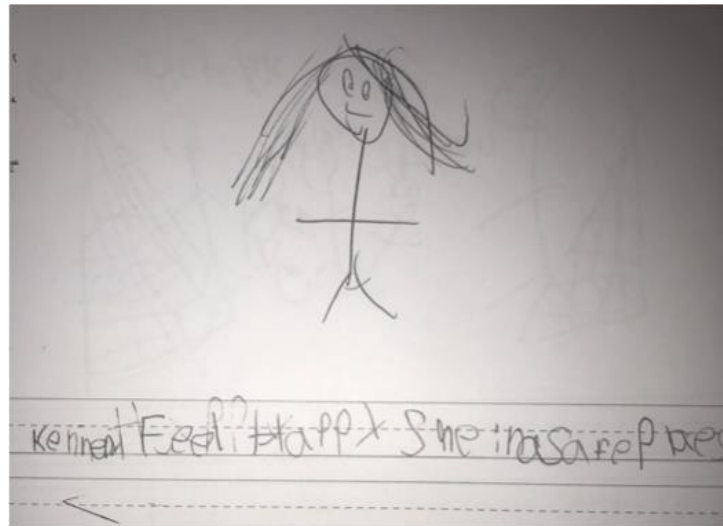
The next part of the lesson plan format was an interactive read aloud using children's literature centered on the theme of mindfulness. During the read alouds, the students would turn to a partner and talk about the illustrations and the ideas in the book. These classroom discussions laid the foundation for the written responses that closed out each lesson. (A list of the children's books can be found in Appendix A.) Lastly, the students were given 20 minutes at the end of the lesson to write responses in a mindfulness journal. We were amazed to see the thoughtfulness that the students put into their writing. Student samples from each writing session are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Student Writing Samples According to Mindfulness Prompts

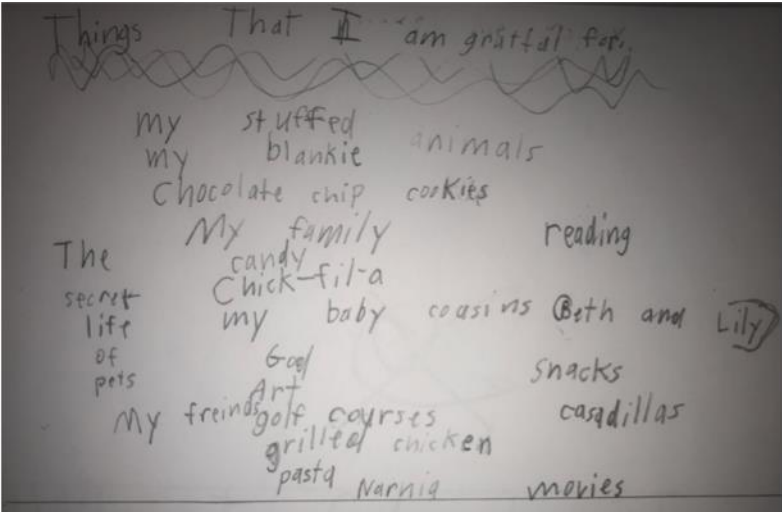
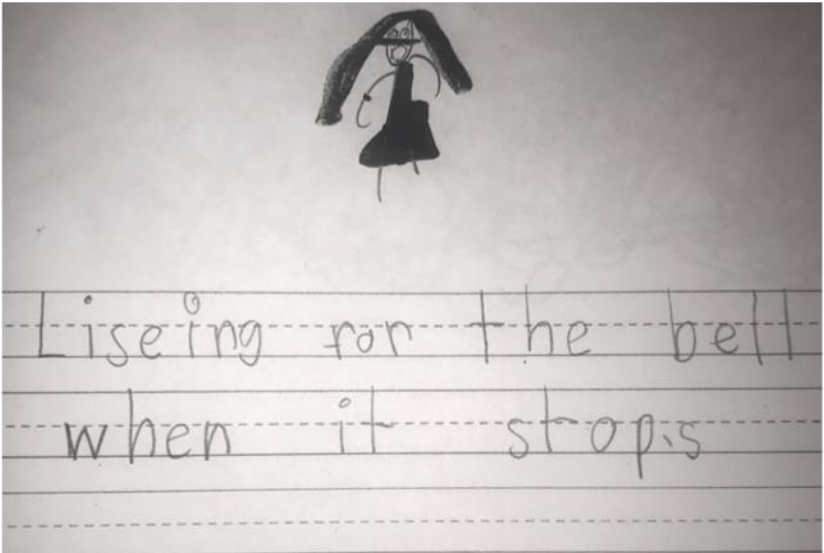
Writing Prompt	Student Sample	Explanation
<p>Tell about a time you felt stormy or peaceful.</p>		<p>“Stormy. When my baby brother dropped my play-doh. He threw my play-doh away.”</p> <p>Kedi (all names are pseudonyms) was able to identify a time she felt stormy. Being able to name and identify our feelings without judgement is one tenant of mindfulness.</p>
<p>Go outside together. Sit silently and watch, listen, and feel. Make a list of everything you notice.</p>		<p>“Cars^{HS}, Air^{FS},^F Cold, Birds^H, Gravel^{FS}, Wood^{FS}, Tree^S, Fur”</p> <p>Karly’s journal entry was particularly interesting. She created her own coding system as she sat mindfully outside. She coded each thing with a superscript identifying which of the five senses she was using: hear (^H), feel (^F), see (^S). Karly was very much in the moment and focused on her senses as she silently noticed her surroundings.</p>

How do you feel today? Write it down. How is someone else feeling today? Interview two friends and write their names and how they are feeling.

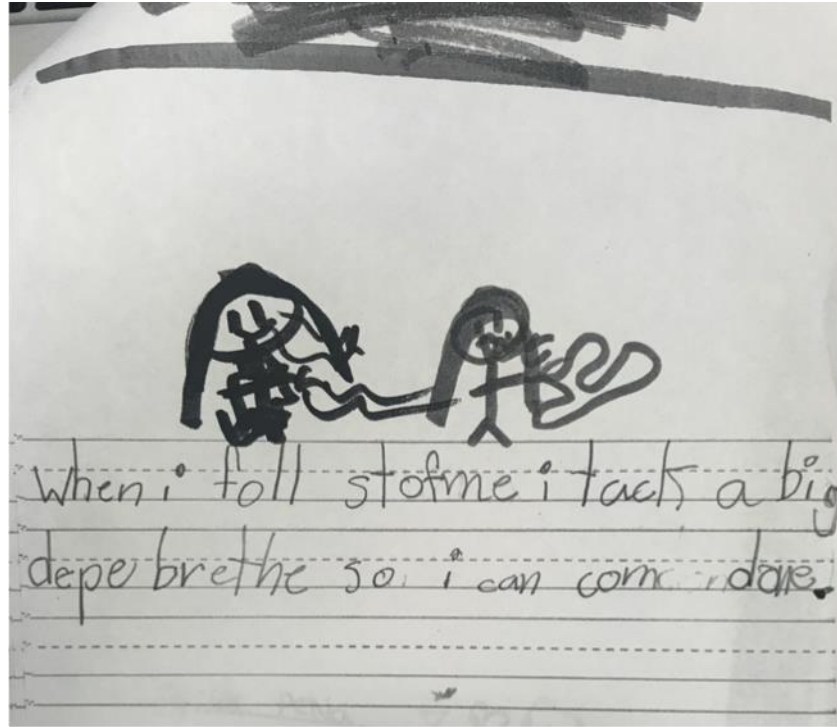


“I am feeling mad and sad. I feel stormy.” “Kennedy feels happy. She is in a safe place.”

Identifying one’s own feelings and noticing the feelings of others can help us become more understanding and empathetic toward ourselves and others.

<p>Make a list of things you are grateful for.</p>	 <p>Things That I am grateful for.</p> <p>my stuffed animals my blankie Chocolate chip cookies My family The secret life of pets candy Chick-fil-a my baby cousins (Beth and Lily) God Art My friends golf courses grilled chicken pasta Narnia reading snacks quesadillas movies</p>	<p>“Things that I am grateful for: My stuffed animals, my blankie, chocolate chip cookies, The Secret Life of Pets, my family, reading, candy, Chic-Fil-A, my baby cousins Beth and Lily, God, art, my friends, snacks, quesadillas, golf courses, grilled chicken, pasta, Narnia, movies.”</p> <p>The role of gratitude is deeply connected to positive psychology and can enhance empathy and reduce anxiety and aggression. Teaching children at a young age to think on what they are grateful for can help form positive habits that could last a lifetime.</p>
<p>Things that help me feel relaxed and focused ...</p>	 <p>Listening for the bell when it stops</p>	<p>“Listening for the bell when it stops.”</p> <p>This student is referencing the singing bowl. The students repeatedly mentioned this as their favorite classroom strategy we used to calm and focus our bodies. The students would immediately still, close their eyes, and mindfully listen to the bell.</p>

When I get worried, I
can...
When I feel
overwhelmed, I
can...



“When I feel stormy I take a big deep breathe so I can calm down.”

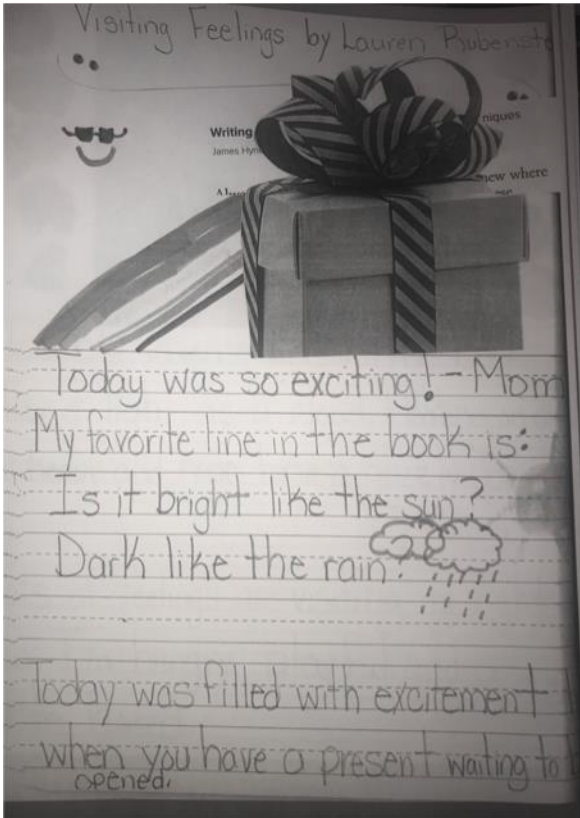
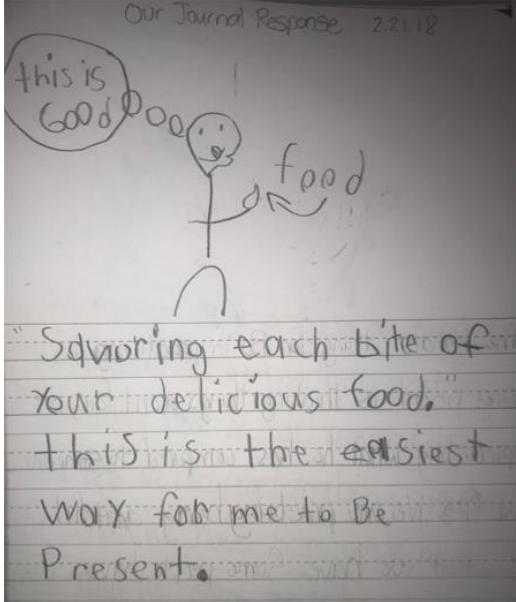
This was the last writing topic for the unit of study. This topic’s intention was to see if the students had made the connection that they have a tool kit they could pull strategies from now. Many students were able to identify mindfulness strategies beyond food and screen time.

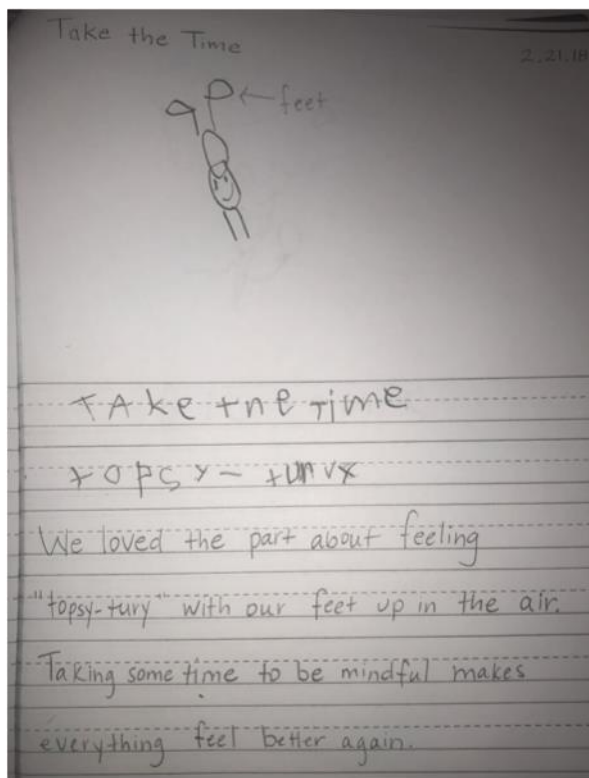
Sharing Mindfulness with Families

After five weeks of mindfulness lessons, the students were allowed to choose one of the books to take home with them for an extended weekend. Families were invited to read the book together and respond as a family in the mindfulness journals. Students were able to lead their families in discussion and together they created meaningful responses that allowed the families to participate and learn about mindfulness. The families were invited to use pictures, words, conversations, or sketches to express their ideas. The students came back to class with their responses and shared them in literature circle groups with their peers who took home the same book. The students were able to keep the books and journals after the lesson was over. Caregivers and students engaged with the text to create meaning for each individual family in their own unique ways. The family members reported that the journal and the book were great conversation starters that helped them discuss the complex feelings their children experience. Bringing the classroom discussion into the home allowed for greater reinforcement and connection to the lessons taught in class. Students and caregivers took ownership of the mindfulness strategies and discussions, adding their own family's ideas into the mix, making the learning richer and more sustainable. Table 2 contains some samples from these family response journals.

Table 2

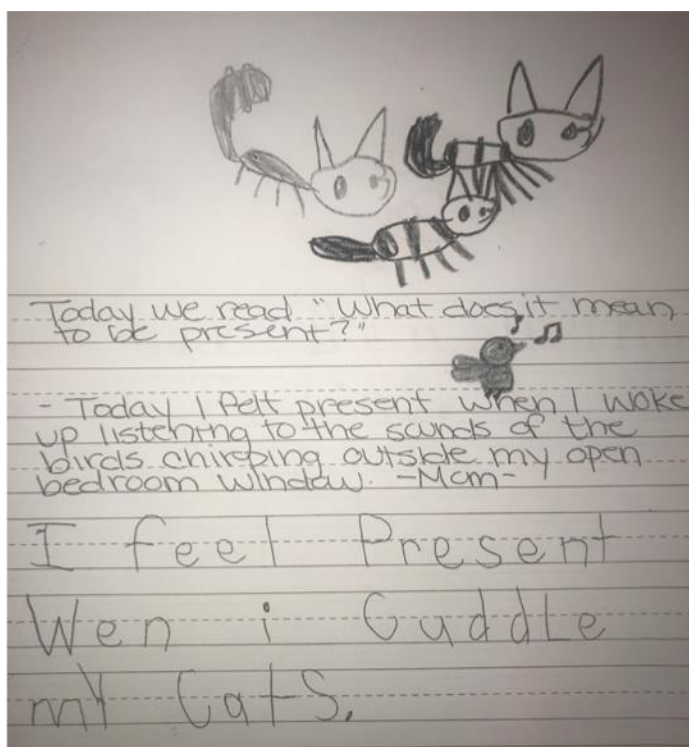
Family Response Journal Samples

Family Response Journal Samples	Content
	<p>This family read <i>Visiting Feelings</i> by Lauren Rubenstein. The family used a variety of media and language to respond including writing, references from the text, clip art, drawings, and metaphor.</p> <p>“Today was so exciting! – Mom My favorite line in the book is: ‘Is it bright like the sun? Dark like the rain?’ Today was filled with excitement, like when you have a present waiting to be opened.”</p> <p>This family wrote 5 pages together, with each family member taking a turn to add to the conversation.</p>
	<p>This family read <i>What does it mean to be present?</i> by Rana DiOrio and Eliza Wheeler. Through drawings and writing, this mom and son came up with their own practical way they like to practice being present. They added to the conversation by bringing their own ideas to the response of the book.</p> <p>“Our Journal Response: Savoring each bite of your delicious food. This is the easiest way for me to be present.”</p>



This family read *Take the Time: Mindfulness for Kids* by Maud Roegiers. This response includes writing from both the child and the parent as well as a picture representing what it might feel like to be “topsy-turvy.”

“Take the time. Topsy Turvy. We loved the part about feeling “topsy-turvy” with our feet up in the air. Taking some time to be mindful makes everything feel better again.”



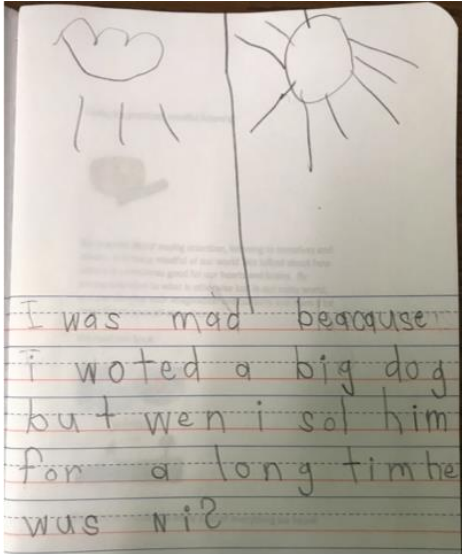
This family made personal connections to the text *What does it mean to be present?* by Rana DiOrio and Eliza Wheeler. Both the mom and the daughter thought of tangible examples of times they have felt present, making an abstract idea more concrete together. Drawings and writing from both the mom and the child are present.

“Today we read *What does it mean to be present?* Today I felt present when I woke up listening to the sounds of the birds chirping outside my open bedroom window. – Mom. I feel present when I cuddle my cats. [-daughter]”

When the students shared their journals in their literature circle groups, they were highly prepared for discussion. The students came to the group having experienced mindfulness in a variety of ways in and out of class and were eager to share their ideas. One of our favorite discussions was in response to Kara’s journal entry seen in Table 3. Kara told her classmates that she felt “stormy” because she wanted a big dog but her parents got her a small dog. As the kids asked questions about her dog, one student spoke up and said, “Oh but Kara! You have a DOG!” This sparked a lively, but non-judgmental, first grade discussion about gratitude and acceptance. Kara ended the conversation by reiterating what she wrote in her journal—that after a “long time” she realized that she really does like her dog and she decided to feel “sunny” rather than “stormy,” stating “that’s when my mind got calmer.” Kara was able to identify her feelings and talk about them with her friends without judgment. She was then able to use discussion and writing to reflect and visualize a change in her thinking, leaving her with a “calm mind”.

Table 3

Kara’s Journal Entry

Kara’s Journal Entry	Content
	<p>“I was mad because I wanted a big dog but when I saw him for a long time he was nice.”</p>

At the end of the unit, the 28 first graders were interviewed about their experiences learning about mindfulness. The interviews were again recorded and coded for themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The responses were astounding as the majority of the students were able to successfully define mindfulness, identify their own feelings and words, and name specific strategies that helped them calm down and be mindful.

Defining Mindfulness

“When I am still, I can feel the light soaking into my skin,” Ivan said when asked what it means to be mindful. Many of his friends also defined mindfulness as “listening and feeling” with more than one student referencing sunshine and light as a comparison. The students spoke about listening and being focused. They referenced taking time to be quiet and alone. The first graders described mindfulness as “a state of being calm, joyful, peaceful, loving and kind.” Shiloh stated, “Mindfulness is noticing your feelings. I notice my feelings. I am not stormy. I am calm and happy.”

Identifying Feelings and Worries

At the beginning of the unit of study many students could not identify their state of being. The students were distracted and not in tune with their feelings. At the end of the unit of study, the students were able to identify things that made them worried or anxious. Some of these things included friends being mean, sibling fights, nightmares, fear of injury, the safety of family and pets, and struggling academically. This time the students were able to clearly express their feelings and hear from others that they are not alone in their thoughts. Ila said, “My favorite part was when we got to tell each other and talk about what things make us stormy or happy.” The students were now able to look at their thoughts and feelings without judgment. One student stated, “It is ok to have those thoughts because a lot of people have that. I can replace thoughts I

don't like with something else. That's ok!" And when they did begin to struggle and feel anxious the students were now able to identify many strategies they could use to find peace and calm.

Mindfulness Strategies

Our favorite part as teachers was seeing the plethora of strategies that came out of this five-week unit. In the post-interviews, we asked the students to identify mindfulness strategies that they will use in the future. Out of the tools created by the teachers, presented in the books, and added by the families, the students came up with a list of 18 of their favorite strategies.

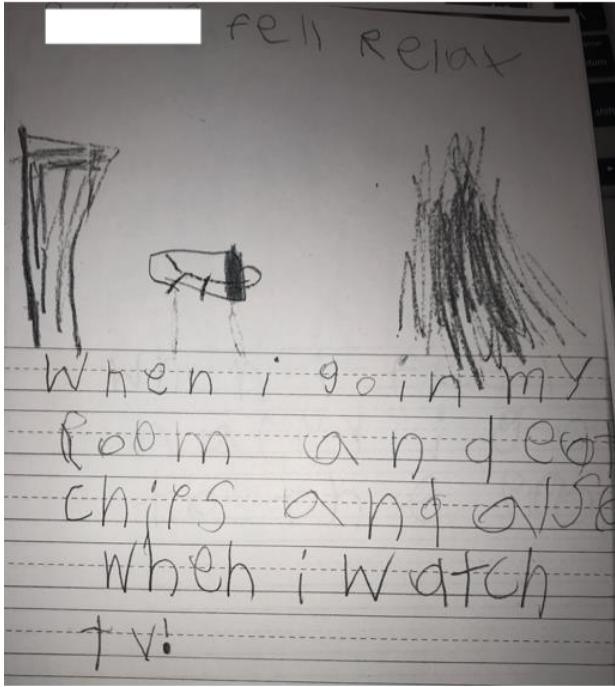
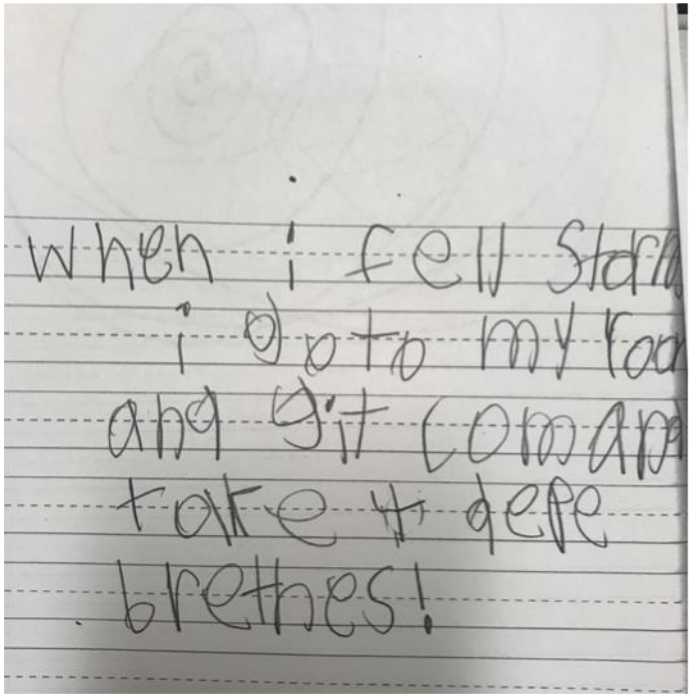
1. Find a quiet place
2. Write in a journal
3. Listen as long as you can to a bell ringing
4. Play alone
5. Build or create with Legos, math manipulatives, and/or play-doh
6. Breathe in and breathe out
7. Identify a "think space" where you can stop and go think
8. Chewing gum
9. Replace a sad thought with a happy thought
10. Think about a pretty picture
11. Talk to a friend about how you feel
12. Draw spirals
13. Take a nature walk
14. Take a hot bath
15. Read a book

- 16. Listen to music
- 17. Draw a picture
- 18. Play with “squishy stuff” like a compression ball

The students’ writing also demonstrated they were able to move away from references of food and screen time and identify how they could find peace and calm from within themselves.

Table 4

Two writing samples by Chase

Written by Chase on February 2 nd	Written by Chase on February 22 nd
	
<p>“When I go in my room and eat chips and also when I watch TV.”</p>	<p>“When I feel stormy I go to my room and get calm and take deep breathes.”</p>

Mindfulness with children is a growing field and much is to be discovered. Incorporating mindfulness in classrooms could help students learn both academically and socially. Our five-week study at Oak Tree Academy incorporated strategies such as deep breathing and mindful listening, as well as children’s literature, as a springboard for conversations about being fully

present. Take home books and journals allowed students and their families to make meaning out of the abstract idea of mindfulness and then solidify their learning by writing responses. In this exploratory teacher action research project, we were able to observe the children develop their own strategies for mindfulness as the study progressed. We hope this article will help empower teachers to be curious and investigate their own questions, as well as give them a tools and guidance to implement mindfulness with young children. Measuring the effects of mindfulness in this setting is challenging (Zenner et al., 2014). Young children's ability to self-reflect and monitor their own thinking is still developing. It is our suggestion to use as many concrete tools as possible to teach the abstract idea of mindfulness. Tools such as the Hoberman ball, the children's book pictures, and the bell help support students' understanding of mindfulness. It can also be difficult for teachers to find peaceful times in a busy and crowded school day. We suggest breaking these lessons into smaller 15-minute sessions across the week if the 45-minute time blocks are too difficult to find.

In a world that grows increasingly busy, teaching mindfulness strategies to students at a young age could help them navigate challenges both in and out of the classroom. Mindfulness strategies are integral skills for the future success and emotional well-being of students. Mindfulness training allows students to achieve a focused awareness that helps them foster resilience and manage stress, and students who embrace these strategies show improved attention and increased participation in the classroom. Students also report a sense of happiness and connection to their families while practicing their new skills. As one student expressed, "I liked it when we go to write at home in our journals and take deep breaths together and listen. I like to tell people what we wrote. My sister and my mom and dad wrote and it was peaceful."

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APPENDIX A

Children's Literature on Mindfulness

Breathe and Be by Kate Coombs

I Am Peace by Susan Verde

Silence by Lemniscates

Take the Time: Mindfulness for Kids by Maud Roegiers

The Sound of Silence by Katrina Goldsaito

Visiting Feelings by Lauren Rubenstien

What does it mean to be present? by Rana DiOrio and Eliza Wheeler