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### Understanding Educators' Perceptions of Mindfulness on Students' Academic Skills, Behavior, and Overall Well-Being

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Running head: MINDFULNESS IN EDUCATION

Understanding Educators' Perceptions of Mindfulness on Students' Academic Skills, Behavior,  
and Overall Well-Being

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Social Work

Bridgewater State University

November 29, 2018

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### **Abstract**

Research indicates that academic performance and social and emotional well-being are fundamentally interrelated (Schonert-Reichl, Oberle, Lawlor, Abbott, Thomson, Oberlander, & Diamond, 2015). Given that 13-20% of children in the United States experience social and emotional challenges, schools are required to attend to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (Maynard, Solis, Miller, & Brendel, 2017). However, students are often unequipped with the skills to effectively cope with stress and resort to behaviors that cause emotional, mental, and physical suffering, all of which thwart the learning process (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Schools warrant interventions that support the whole student, given the increase in mental health statistics (Meiklejohn, Phillips, Freedman, Griffin, Biegel, Roach, Frank, Burke, Pinger, Soloway, Isberg, Sibinga, Grossman, & Saltzman, 2012).

Given that the stakes for student success and well-being are high, many schools have integrated mindfulness practices within classrooms. This study sought to understand the efficacy of mindfulness programs in the K-12 education setting, specifically educators' perceptions of mindfulness on students' academic skills, behavior, and well-being. This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with ten participants from schools in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The findings indicate that mindfulness is successful when applied both indirectly and directly, is adaptable within class structures and transitional periods, is practiced using a variety of techniques, and supports a diverse student climate. However, while there is little to no data to support the effects of mindfulness on academics, this study does suggest that mindfulness can be an effective means of supporting students' behavior and well-being. Further research measuring the effects of mindfulness on academic skills is needed.

## Introduction

Mindfulness is a broad concept rooted in Buddhist tradition and was proposed for therapeutic purposes by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s. Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as an open and receptive awareness to present reality and the ability for “self-endorsed behavioral regulation” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 823). Mindfulness includes the concepts of self-regulation, directing attention to internal or external stimuli, awareness of thought processes, and adopting a non-judgmental attitude (Hart, Ivtzan, & Hart, 2013). Originally practiced through seated meditation and yoga, Kabat-Zinn introduced mindfulness in clinical research through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Zenner, Kernleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). Mindfulness is unique in that it is a learned coping skill on the behalf of the practitioner, which inevitably has a therapeutic effect. In other words, it is a coping strategy that truly only requires a practitioner who is willing to learn (Renshaw & Cook, 2017).

Mindfulness based interventions (MBIs) within the K-12 educational setting have been seen as effective (Eklund, O’Malley, & Meyer, 2017). Mindfulness within the elementary school setting is preferred because it is during the childhood years that children develop personalities, behaviors, and competencies that “consolidate into forms that persist into adolescence and adulthood” (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015, p. 2). Because of the significant amount of time students spend at school and the challenges that the school setting creates, the need for mindfulness within the school setting is seen as necessary (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Mindfulness improves students’ social-emotional and behavioral learning skills, which helps to alleviate stress and anxiety (Eklund, O’Malley, & Meyer, 2017). The onset of mental illness occurs as early as age seven (Stagman & Cooper, 2010). During a typical school year, children with mental health disorders miss as many as 18-22 days of school (Stagman & Cooper, 2010).

## Literature Review

### Mindfulness and Mental Health

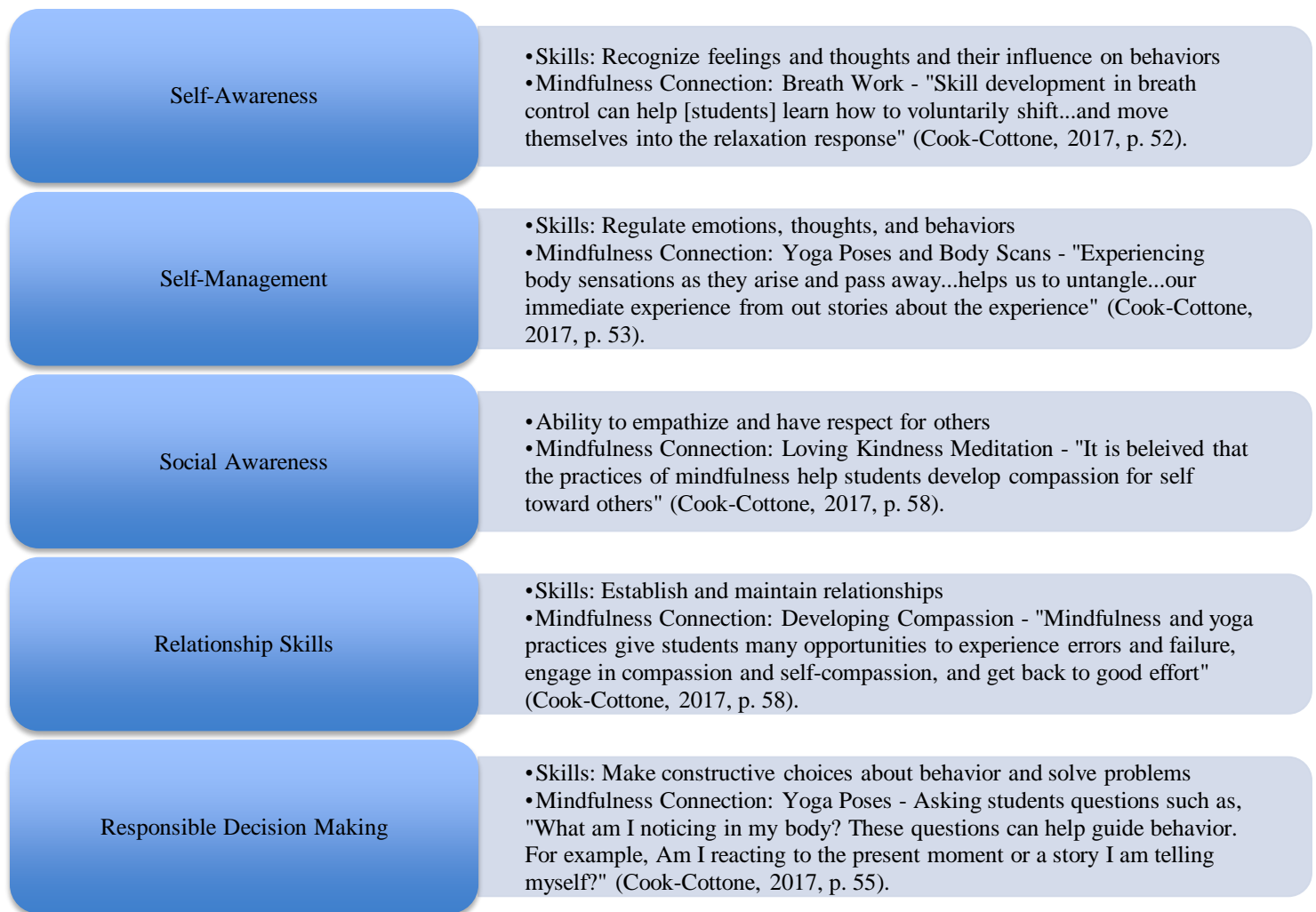
Students today face a myriad of mental health challenges. Among children, anxiety accounts for 31.9% of psychiatric disorders (Merikangas, Hep, Burstein, Swanson, Avenevoli, Cui, Benezet, Georgiades, & Swendsen, 2010). Anxiety is characterized by a narrow focus of attention on thoughts in addition to a future-oriented disposition “about *potential* threats of harm, [which] can predispose an individual to a lack of awareness of what is actually happening in the present moment” (Treadway & Lazar, 2009, p. 198). The brain is easily hijacked by thoughts and therefore the child is unable to engage in the present moment. The stress stimulated from the school environment further increases students’ anxiety and contributes to the 46,000 children committing suicide every year (Merikangas et al., 2010). And because specialists, such as therapists and psychiatrists, are in short supply but in high demand, many children are left untreated or given inadequate treatment, which further thwarts their success, both in and outside of the classroom.

Therefore, it must be understood that the school setting is not only a place for learning academics but can also be a source for learning tools to combat psychiatric disorders. Because MBIs reduce stress and depression symptoms in children and increase social skills and well-being, integrating mindfulness in schools is an approach to overcome these challenges (Eklund, O’Malley, & Meyer, 2017). Although the scientific evidence of the role that mindfulness plays in decreasing anxiety in children is in its infancy, mindfulness is promising. Mindfulness interventions teach students how to shift their attention to the present moment and rather than be “immersed in the drama of [their] personal narrative or life story, [students] are able to stand back and simply witness it” (Treadway & Lazar, 2009, p. 201).

### **Mindfulness and Social Emotional Learning**

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a concept that has recently been integrated into many school systems. SEL, as described by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is defined as the “process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2018). Social and emotional difficulties often impede upon student’s academic success (Lawlor, 2016, p. 67). However, SEL has been “referred to as the ‘missing piece’ for the reason that it embodies a part of education that is inextricably linked to school success” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 67). Evidence has shown that social and emotional factors such as, emotion regulation, self-management, relationship skills, and decision-making skills are directly and indirectly related to academic success. In integrating social and emotional skills through mindfulness practices in the classroom, students will be able to develop greater impulse control, better concentration, and focused attention in school, all of which will improve academic performance (Maynard, Solis, Miller, & Brendel, 2017, p. 13).

CASEL has outlined five core competencies that go along with SEL. The core competencies are described in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Competencies, Skills, and Connection to Mindfulness in the Classroom**

*Note.* <sup>1</sup>The skills listed are from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

Essentially, mindfulness and social emotional learning are interrelated. SEL “works from the outside-in – and [mindfulness] works from the inside-out. When the two come together in the mind of a student, the effect can be powerful” (Lantieri & Zakrzewski, 2015, p. 1). SEL focuses on teaching skills, in which the teacher introduces a new skill and practices with the students and then moves on to the next skill. However, mindfulness focuses on teaching students to identify how their internal emotions, feelings, and body sensations may impact their behaviors, stress



levels, and overall ability to succeed (Lantieri & Sakrzewski, 2015). Mindfulness helps students to connect their inner and outer experiences to see how the two affect one another. In essence, mindfulness teaches students skills to embrace the present moment so that they can become more aware of their own feelings, emotions, behaviors, relationships, and make better decisions, all of which are skills within the five core competencies as outlined by CASEL.

### **Approaches to Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is often incorporated into the school setting in a variety of ways. Indirectly, mindfulness is learned through the educator. In doing so, the teacher develops a personal mindfulness practice and embodies mindfulness ideals throughout the day. The purpose of this approach is to acknowledge, “beyond just conveying course material, teachers are supposed to provide a nurturing environment...coach students through conflicts, and be exemplars of emotional regulation” (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 3). This indirect approach is twofold- 1) If teachers use mindfulness in their own lives, including teaching, children will learn about mindfulness practices indirectly and 2) Teachers will be more effective as individuals. However, mindfulness can also be taught directly, in which students are taught mindfulness techniques and practices in the classroom. Mindfulness taught in this way promotes sensory awareness, cognitive control, emotional regulation, acceptance of thoughts and feelings, and the ability to regulate attention (Jones, 2011). When mindfulness is integrated in this direct approach, mindfulness becomes a branch of the social-emotional learning curriculum in schools and facilitates goals of relationship building, social awareness, and reasonable decision-making skills (Klingbeil, Renshaw, Willenbring, Copek, Chan, Haddock, Yassine, & Clifton, 2017). The last approach is a combination of direct and indirect practices, where teachers and students are simultaneously taught mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness-based programs have been implemented in a variety of elementary educational settings and have been seen as just as effective as in clinical settings (Renshaw & Cook, 2017). Observed across a variety of parameters including academic achievement, emotional regulation, physical health, and social competence, mindfulness has promising evidence (Renshaw & Cook, 2017). There are a number of elementary schools throughout Massachusetts and Rhode Island that have integrated and adapted mindfulness practices into the classrooms to serve a diverse range of student academic and social-emotional learning climates.

The purpose of this research is to understand the effectiveness of mindfulness in the K-12 education setting, specifically, educators' perceptions of students' academic skills, behavior, and overall well-being. The thesis builds upon this topic's newly researched field by outlining the methods used in conducting the study, discussing findings and their implications, and acknowledging the limitations of the research.

## **Methodology**

### **Approach**

This qualitative study was guided by grounded theory. Grounded theory “does not refer to any particular level of *theory*, but to theory that is inductively developed during a study” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 49). According to Maxwell (2013), grounded theory is valuable in that the theory is developed, or grounded, in the data itself. Rather than simply testing a preexisting theory against empirical data, theories and conclusions made throughout the research study were determined based on the collected data itself.

### **Procedure**

In order to answer the central research goal of understanding educators' perceptions of students' academic skills, behavior, and overall well-being when integrating mindfulness into the

classroom, information was gathered directly from educators who have integrated mindfulness practices in their classrooms. A series of qualitative research, one-on-one, interviews, was conducted. Qualitative research is designed to capture social life as it is experienced and provides an understanding of human behavior and the reasoning behind specific behaviors (Engel & Schutt, 2014). The interview guide consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions to allow participants to provide personal accounts while ensuring that specific information relevant to the study's aims was collected in an expedient manner (See Appendix A). Participants were interviewed individually to promote the attainment of valid results.

Using public online mindfulness training program directories from [mindfulschools.org](http://mindfulschools.org) as the sampling frame, data were collected from ten participants in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Following IRB approval, participants were sought via snowball and convenience sampling. Subsequently, interviews were scheduled with each participant from April through June of 2018. Each interview was approximately 30-60 minutes and nine participants were interviewed in their classroom and one via the phone. Before interviews began, participants were asked to sign a Consent (See Appendix B) and Audio Consent Form (See Appendix C) and the one phone interview participant was emailed the forms and returned the forms via U.S. mail. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. A fifty-dollar compensation was given upon completion of the interview and post-interview questionnaire (See Appendix D).

### **Sample**

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from private, public, and Montessori schools throughout Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Participants included classroom teachers, adjustment counselors, and outside providers who taught in a variety of classroom settings, all of whom had varying years of experience teaching mindfulness and training in

mindfulness (See Table 1). To ensure confidentiality, all participants' names, listed in Table 1, have been changed.

**Table 1. Demographics**

Alias Name	Type of School	Percent of Students on Free/Reduced Lunch <sup>1</sup>	Setting	Current Grade Level	Years of Teaching	Years of Mindfulness Application in the Classroom	Mindfulness Training
Cheryl Shepard	Public and Private	N/A	Outside provider in Rhode Island regular and special education classrooms	K-12	4	8	Yes
Sally Somers	Public	93.3%	Classroom Teacher	K	19	6	No
Nancy Norwell	Montessori	N/A	Learning Specialist	K-5	40	30	Yes
Elizabeth Ellison	Private All-Girls	88.9%	Classroom Teacher	5	9	4	No
Melissa Moon	Collaborative for students with learning challenges	32%	Adjustment Counselor	5-12	3	3	Yes
Kimberly Krest	Private	N/A	Librarian	6-8	9	5	Yes
Mark Mason	Public	15%	Classroom Teacher	5	20	4-5	Yes
Carol Collins	Public	6%	Classroom Teacher	2	24	3	Yes
Jennifer Jenkins	Montessori	N/A	Teacher's Assistant	1-3	2	2	Yes
Caitlin Cast	Public	25%	Adjustment Counselor	9-12	15	9	Yes

*Note.* <sup>1</sup>The data in column 3 are from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, National School Lunch Program and the Rhode Island Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs.

## **Data Analysis**

Following each interview, the audio recording was transcribed. Transcription Star, an online transcription service, transcribed each interview verbatim. Each transcript was re-read multiple times, both separate from and along with the audio recording, and was crosschecked with notes taken during the actual interview in order to ensure accuracy.

As mentioned earlier, this study was guided by a grounded theory approach. Both memos and coding constitute a major component of grounded theory. According to Maxwell 2013, memos are notes written about the research. Memos do not include field notes, transcriptions, or codes. Memos are used to “facilitate reflection and analytic insight,” which are then used to create codes (Maxwell, 2013, p. 20). According to Maxwell (2013), “The goal of coding is... to ‘fracture’ the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category (p. 20).” The coding process consisted of three categories: organizational, substantive, and theoretical. Organizational categories are referred to as topics and are often used as chapter or section headings because “they do not explicitly identify what the person actually said or did” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107). Substantive categories are descriptive in nature and are typically derived based on participants’ own words (Maxwell, 2013). Lastly, theoretical categories “place the coded data into a more general framework... [and may be] derived from prior theory or from an inductively developed theory” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108).

## **Results**

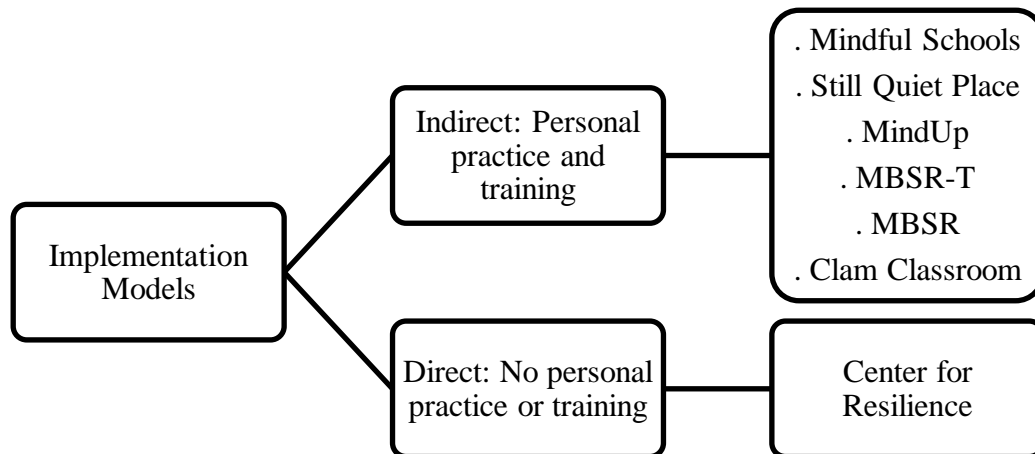
This study sought to address the effectiveness of mindfulness programs in the K-12 educational setting, specifically educators’ perceptions of mindfulness on students’ academic skills, behavior, and well-being. Qualitative data revealed that participants focused on four major themes. The results of the qualitative analyses are presented in the sections below. The first

section provides information on the implementation models used by participants. The second section addresses when mindfulness was integrated in the classroom. The third section examines the types of mindfulness practices participants integrated into the classroom. The fourth section focuses on the effectiveness of mindfulness on a broad student climate, in other words, the effectiveness of mindfulness on students with a variety of abilities and needs.

**Theme 1: Implementation Models**

According to participant responses, there were two different models by which participants integrated mindfulness practices into the classroom: indirect and direct. The indirect model implied that participants cultivated a personal mindfulness practice and then sought additional mindfulness training to integrate practices into the classroom. The trainings, which are listed in Table 2, are based the belief that “mindfulness is only truly taught through the transmission of an experienced practitioner” (Rechtschaffen, 2014, p. 20). The direct model inferred that an outside provider, who was an experienced mindfulness practitioner and had prior training, taught students mindfulness in the classroom (Rechtschaffen, 2014). Both models are pictured in Figure 2 and described in detail below.

**Figure 2. Implementation Models**



***Model 1: Indirect***

Eight out of the ten participants explained that their personal mindfulness practice prompted them to integrate mindfulness into the classroom. Notably, those eight participants pursued additional training at their leisure and expense. Six of the eight participants completed the Mindful Schools three-part training. And, three of the six participants pursued additional trainings in addition to the Mindful Schools trainings. The two remaining participants that did not choose to take the Mindful Schools training chose to enroll solely in Calm Classroom and Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program. Table 2 provides a brief overview of each of the programs.

Each of the trainings focused on the cultivation of a personal mindfulness practice within the educator, in hopes that the practice would naturally influence the classroom environment. The trainings relied on the assumption that mindfulness is effectively taught only if the practitioner has a personal practice. The format of each training varied from simple one-day professional development workshops, to online module courses, to weeklong silent meditation retreats. Despite differences in the setting and delivery of each program, all of the programs highly recommended maintaining a personal mindfulness practice, not only to effectively teach mindfulness to students but also as a form of necessary self-care.



**Table 2. Mindfulness in the Classroom Training Programs**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Website</b>
Mindful Schools	<p>Course 1- Fundamentals: Provides basics of mindfulness meditation, techniques for difficult emotions, and support for a daily personal practice; 6 weeks online</p> <p>Course 2- Mindful Educators Essentials: Provides training kit curriculum, workbooks, information on neuroscience of mindfulness, and evaluation tool; 6 weeks online</p> <p>Course 3- Certification: Use and teach the curriculum and learn how to lead professional development workshops; 1 year online with 2-week long silent retreats</p> <p>Grades: K-12</p>	<a href="https://www.mindfulschools.org">https://www.mindfulschools.org</a>
Amy Saltzman’s Still Quiet Place	<p>Begin and/or continue a personal mindfulness practice, review current research, learn curriculum, adaptations, and challenges when implementing, and how to pitch mindfulness to schools; 10 weeks online</p> <p>Grades: K-12</p>	<a href="http://www.stillquietplace.com/sqp-10-week-online-training/">http://www.stillquietplace.com/sqp-10-week-online-training/</a>
Goldie Hawn’s MindUp	<p>Receive toolkit with curriculum and a chime, implementation guidelines, and connects mindfulness in the classroom to Common Core guidelines</p> <p>Grades: Pre-K-8</p>	<a href="https://mindup.org">https://mindup.org</a>
Gina Biegel’s MSBR-T	<p>Introduces neuroplasticity and foundations of MSBR-T, explains effects of stress on the body, and how to develop mindfulness practices with students; 30-hours online for 10 weeks</p> <p>Grades: Teens</p>	<a href="https://www.stressedteens.com/training-for-professionals/">https://www.stressedteens.com/training-for-professionals/</a>
Jon Kabat-Zinn’s MSBR- UMass Medical	<p>Daily home assignments, guided mindfulness meditation practices, yoga, and group dialogues; 8 weeks online and 1 full day live class</p> <p>For adults seeking personal mindfulness practice</p>	<a href="https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/">https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/</a>
Calm Classroom	<p>Introductory Course: Presents science behind mindfulness, how to implement ambassador program, daily implementation structure, and access to worksheets, schedules, videos, and checklists; 3 hours live</p> <p>Train-the-Trainer Course: Access to online portal for school wide programming, and learn how to lead staff in professional development workshops, develop mindfulness skills, and understand the positive psychology and SEL of mindfulness on the classroom; 1 day live</p> <p>Grades: K-12</p>	<a href="https://calmclassroom.com">https://calmclassroom.com</a>

***Model 2: Direct***

Out of the ten participants, two did not have a personal mindfulness practice nor outside mindfulness training, yet successfully implemented mindfulness strategies within their classroom that were taught by an outside practitioner from the Center for Resilience. The Center for Resilience is a 501(c)(3) organization with trained mindfulness practitioners, most of who are former educators that go into K-12 classrooms and facilitate mindfulness lessons. Center for Resilience utilizes a social-emotional learning based curriculum, which aligns with Rhode Island's Common Core. Although neither of the two non-practitioner participants had participated in any training or had a personal mindfulness practice, both learned to take the strategies taught by the provider from the Center for Resilience and apply the tools in the classroom, in the absence of the provider.

*“What we found is that once some skills have been taught, we can use those to help us when [Center for Resilience] isn't here or... the school social worker isn't here... Prior to this, the teachers were never shown any skills on how to deal with this [student behavior]. It's just been, you'll learn as you go... But now we have someone coming in and showing us, now, when someone's lying on the floor in the middle of the hallway because they don't want to come to school... I can get down on the floor and say, 'Hey, remember what [Center for Resilience] taught us? We're going to try that right now...'”*  
– Sally Somers

In describing their experience with the Center for Resilience, Sally Somers and Elizabeth Ellison stressed how beneficial it was.

**Theme 2: When Mindfulness Was Integrated In the Classroom**

Mindfulness, as described by all of the participants, can be taught as both a formal lesson during the day and informally integrated into everyday class structure.

***Formal Mindfulness Lessons***

All ten of the participants reported that they implemented a formal mindfulness lesson at some point during a given day or week. When asked to describe a typical lesson, all of the

participants followed a similar format: 1) Sound of a bell, 2) Breathing exercise, 3) Activity. The activity component differed in that some participants used guided meditations and visualizations or included movement. In addition, the duration and frequency of the mindfulness lessons differed.

*“[Cheryl Shepard] comes twice a week Mondays and Wednesdays for half an hour each time and then on days that she does not come, we try to do a little bit of it during the day.” – Sally Somers*

*“I do it once a week for 30 minutes...mid-morning.” – Melissa Moon*

*“This year was more formalized. We practiced everyday after lunch and recess... Usually a guided meditation that took five minutes. And then we talked about it. And I also did breathing exercises during that time using the mindfulness bell”*

*“We have a session in the morning, and then after lunch, when they come back from recess.” – Carol Collins*

*“I was delivering a formal lesson only every other week.” – Jennifer Jenkins*

### ***Informal Mindfulness Lessons***

In addition to formal lessons, mindfulness was also informally integrated within everyday class structures. Participants explained that informal lessons were useful because they could implement the practices based on the student climate. All ten of the participants found informal mindfulness lessons especially helpful following transitions, as students moved from slightly unstructured to structured environments.

*“They [students] come back after and lunch and recess and they’re coming in from recess so they’re five and they’re super crazy and they want to play more and then now the recess is over, so that’s a great time to – let’s just – and we will say, ‘Let’s close our eyes, let’s use some of the skills that [Miss. Shepard] has taught us and try to practice some of the strategies,’ and try to get them to get back to get ready to learn.”*

*‘I knew that based on the class before, it was hard to get them settled. They’re talking a lot. There’s a lot going on anyway like with emotions in that classroom. So, for me I want them to focus and feel really successful in science. So, what we did is we did the glitter jar... And we got relaxed and we just settled and then from that point the class was*

*settled. And there was that kind of internal feeling of this is going to be a really peaceful start.” – Elizabeth Ellison*

*“We also did mindful walking... When we are going to art class, for example in the hallways. You know as opposed to okay it is zero [voices], what I am looking for is let’s be mindful. And the kids grew from that and they really learned what mindful meant. So it worked out really well...” – Mark Mason*

Furthermore, four of the ten participants reported integrating mindfulness prior to students taking a test. Mason instructed students to consider strategies that might be applicable in the present moment to ease anxiety. In addition, Caitlin Cast explained that teachers requested her to conduct short mindfulness exercises before students took Advanced Placement exams. Participants also integrated mindfulness when the classroom climate shifted.

*“So if in the middle of a lesson, I need to get them refocused, it’s just the reference because through the exercise, they understand that when they do mindfulness they get access to a different kind of attention... In the middle of a math lesson, if I notice some attentions are wandering off, all I have to say, ‘Are you listening to me mindfully?’ And in an instant switch that it happens because they know what mindful attention is because of the exercises. So they realize that, oh, they’ve actually followed their thoughts somewhere else, they’re not here. And then when I say, ‘Are you listening mindfully?’ boom, I become the anchor immediately, or the lesson, whatever I’m showing on the board or my words.” – Carol Collins*

*“Sometimes they [students] need to get up and move... We’ve done some walking meditation. Let’s just walk around the classroom. Other times is a – I use a program called Smart Moves. And it is just a series of hand movements, following prompts.” – Mark Mason*

Notably, three of the ten participants described how mindfulness was organically woven into the classroom environment.

*“Mindfulness has become part of the setting, the routine, and the culture of the class.” – Carol Collins*

*“And so now we kind of have a universal language within the school from grade to grade so that I’m not doing something completely different than the first grade teacher who’s doing something completely different than the second grade teacher. Instead, we’re all doing the same thing and we are all using the same language and the same skills, and the kids are getting used to that.” – Sally Somers*

*“So it’s built into our culture that way. So, it doesn’t ever feel forced.” – Elizabeth Ellison*

### **Theme 3: Types of Mindfulness Practices**

When describing the types of mindfulness practices integrated into the classroom, participants described a variety of practices. Formal mindfulness lessons reflected the aforementioned format: 1) Sound of a bell, 2) Breathing exercise, 3) Activity. However, the specific breathing exercises and activity components of the lessons differed between participants. Data revealed three overarching categories that reflect these differences: single-pointed focused attention, breathing exercises, and movement. These three categories are described below.

#### ***Single-Pointed Focused Attention***

A typical classroom session facilitated the teaching of single pointed focused attention through guided meditations and visualizations.

*Mindful Listening.* Mindfulness listening employed the use of a chime. When students no longer heard the sound they were instructed to raise their hand or do something that signaled that they no longer heard the sound anymore.

*Mindful Eating.* During mindful eating, students were given a clementine or other snack. Students were guided through a four-step process: 1) Students noticed how they felt simply holding the clementine (i.e. stomach grumbling, mouth salivating), 2) Students placed the clementine in their mouth and noticed how the clementine felt (i.e. rough, smooth, sticky), 3) Students chewed and swallowed the clementine, and 4) Students reflected on the process of eating a clementine in such a way and how it might feel to do the same with other foods.

*Guided meditations.* All ten of the participants used a form of guided meditation, some of which included visuals. Students were given a feather to balance on their palm. Others used a glitter jar, which was shaken and then set down. The glitter jar was symbolic of how thoughts take over the

mind, but when students take a moment to pause and rest, their thoughts settle down. One participant guided students through a series of questions, prompting students to consciously bring attention to their thoughts.

*“Think about someone who is a ringer for you. You can always go to and they’ll always love you and appreciate you, no matter what it could be; your family dog, it could be someone or some living thing... Just sit and think about that person. Visualize them. When you are done.... think of someone that you know, you have a hard time getting along with. Then again think of how you’re going to feel empathy and kindness towards them...” – Nancy Norwell*

### ***Breathing Exercises***

There were a variety of breathing exercises used by all ten of the participants, however, there were two commonly cited exercises, palm breathing and stuffed animal belly breathing.

*Palm breathing.* Students held their palm in front of their face and used their pointer finger on the opposite hand to count. Starting at the base of the thumb, students “traced” up and down each finger. When students traced up, they inhaled, and when students traced down, they exhaled. Participants reported palm breathing as effective because of its convenience; students could simply do it anytime and anywhere.

*Stuffed animal belly breathing.* Students were instructed to lie down on the classroom rug and were given a stuffed animal to place on their stomach. Keeping their eyes open, students closely watched the stuffed animal rise and fall with each inhale and exhale. Belly breathing was reported effective especially in the younger grades because that specific age group thrived off of the fact that the exercise was both tangible and visual.

### ***Movement***

Responses in in this area suggested that the majority of participants did not integrate movement into mindfulness sessions with students. Two out of the ten participants integrated

movement. One of these participants typically used physical sequences as movement breaks for the students.

*“We stand up, we reach up, reach out, we hug ourselves, reach out to the sky, we’ll do tree pose... Cat and cow pose... Butterfly... All different physical poses...” - Sally Somers*

#### **Theme 4: Effectiveness of Mindfulness on a Broad Student Climate**

In all ten of the interviews, it became evident that despite classroom diversity, mindfulness was effective within a broad student climate. Participants spoke of the effectiveness of mindfulness on students with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autism, and behavioral difficulties.

*“[The student] is sitting at the table and erasing and rewriting and erasing and rewriting... And as many times as you tell him that it looks great, it doesn’t look great to him because that’s what OCD is... And so I took away the pencil and the paper and I said, ‘Let’s just stop for a minute...’ And I moved him over to the calm down area, he took the breathing ball, he was using the breathing ball, taking the deep breaths, using the glitter jar, just really calming himself down and then he was able to go back and do more... I don’t even have to guide him sometimes. He’s just doing it on his own to try to get through being so upset with himself.” – Sally Somers*

*“I’ve seen students who have a difficult time self-regulating. And I taught them a tool and then later without me mentioning it, I see them using it or talking about it.” – Jennifer Jenkins*

*“If I did this everyday, I would never be in trouble.” – Freshman Student*

*“My entire population is that [OCD, ADHD, autism, and behavioral difficulties] and I 100% believe that the students benefited greatly from mindfulness” – Melissa Moon*

*“So, if they can’t find their crayons, that could have thrown someone off for the entire day... Well, now they’ll say, ‘Well, I can’t find my crayons, but let me take a deep breath and think about what I can do to solve the problem.’ They’re able to stop, pause, take a deep breath, use some strategies to calm themselves down and think about what we could do next.” – Sally Somers*

*“Parents could not believe that their [child] is in a regular education classroom and that they are actually succeeding because their behavior was so severe.” – Sally Somers*

Participants noted that there was less redirection and students were more attentive. Peer conflict subsided, as students were better able to regulate their emotions. One participant had even become known as the “mindfulness lady” throughout the school. Students frequently sought this participant out for mindfulness support. All of the participants believed that mindfulness was effective for a broad student climate.

*“I’ve been here almost 20 years, I’ve never collected lunch money... We’re I think the poorest neighborhood in the state. But when you look at the affluent areas, those kids are super stressed too for different reasons... Those kids are not worried about food, they’re worried about different things and they’re stressed for different things. And they are scheduled to the max and there are- they have these high expectations that they’re trying to live up to. And so I think it works well here for the reasons that we need it and I think it would work well there for the reasons that those kids would need it. I think that no matter where you are, it’s going to provide something different for these kids that kids in every community need now...” – Sally Somers*

*“Just because the student looks like they, for short hand language, have it all together, it does not necessarily mean that they don’t need these tools also.”- Jennifer Jenkins*

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this pilot study is to gain an understanding of educators’ perceptions of the effects of mindfulness on students’ academic skills, behavior, and overall well-being. During interviews, participants were able to highlight the success their own students have had with mindfulness as well as indicate some of the barriers towards integrating mindfulness school-wide.

The findings of this research indicate that mindfulness can be effectively integrated into the classroom setting both directly and indirectly. More specifically, the data seems to counteract the assumptions of the training programs listed in Table 2 that mindfulness can only be effectively integrated if the educators have a personal mindfulness practice. This finding is important because it indicates the possibility that non-practitioners can implement mindfulness. All ten of the participants are dedicated to the process and believe that mindfulness is an



effective means to help students manage a variety of challenges. This revelation may further prompt other schools and educators to employ mindfulness within the classroom. Despite the various trainings that participants pursued or did not pursue, they all utilized similar mindfulness exercises and practices, both formally and informally. During formal lessons, participants were able to introduce new practices so that informally the practices could be utilized. Breathing exercises and visualizations were the most common, while movement was least common.

Participants revealed two specific challenges for integrating mindfulness into classroom structure. Student resistance was common in the middle and high school students. Behaviorally, these students would turn or hide their face and avoid participating in group discussions. Verbally, students would make jokes and blatantly say, “This is lame,” “This is just a load of crap,” or “This is stupid.” Research participants noted that behavioral and verbal resistance, at times, became infectious with other students. However, they reported that over time students became acclimated to the lessons and the students, who initially were apprehensive about participating, quickly realized that they were actually the minority. Another reported barrier was some students were unable to or unwilling to close their eyes or had difficulty tolerating quiet. Participants who faced this challenge often gave students; especially the students who they knew had difficulty, a private conversation, prior to the lesson, with the student to ease any anxiety. The findings of this research appear to indicate that mindfulness can be an effective means to combat the various challenges that students face on a daily basis.

### **Recommendations**

Based on this research study, it appears that mindfulness in the classroom can be integrated in a variety of ways. Mindfulness integration can include a simple three-minute exercise or an hour-long formal lesson. According to the data collected in this study, participants

usually start off with a bell followed by a breathing exercise. Given the flexibility in teaching methods and styles of mindfulness, educators have the ability to integrate mindfulness in an adaptable way into their classrooms, whether that is through formal lesson plans or integrated according to the classroom climate. The data collected in this research study recommends that mindfulness lessons include mindful listening, mindful eating, guided meditation, palm breathing, or stuffed animal belly breathing. Further research and an increase in sample size would add to these recommendations.

### **Limitations**

Although the sample size was relatively small, the research study goal of recruiting ten participants was met. In order to expand upon this pilot research study and draw more supporting data on educators' perception of the effects of mindfulness on students' academic skills, behavior, and overall well-being, the sample size would need to be expanded. Additionally, this study was unable to answer the question of the effects of mindfulness on academic skills. Therefore, again, in order to answer this question a future study would need to focus specifically on the effects that mindfulness does or does not have on academic scores.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Teacher's Introduction to Mindfulness Practices
  - a. When did you implement mindfulness in your classroom? What was the driving force behind the implementation?
  - b. What was your initial reaction to the implementation of mindfulness practices in your classroom?
2. Mindfulness Training
  - a. How much and what kind of mindfulness training did you receive from the your school district, outside practitioners, organizations, etc.?
  - b. Do you feel that there was a specific source of training and/or education that best prepared you for integrating mindfulness into your classroom? If yes, what did the training and/or education provide that was so useful?
3. Classroom Integration
  - a. When do you typically practice mindfulness exercises with your students? How often do the mindfulness exercises occur during a typical school day/week?
  - b. Going off of the previous question, do you solely practice mindfulness during allocated time periods or are you able to integrate mindfulness exercises when you notice the classroom climate starting to change?
  - c. What is the typical length of a mindfulness session?
  - d. Walk me through what you do in a typical mindfulness session in your classroom.
4. Challenges with Integrating Mindfulness in the Classroom
  - a. What challenges have you encountered with students when you do the mindfulness exercises? Tell me about some of these challenges. How do you respond to these challenges?
  - b. Do you feel that mindfulness is suitable for a variety of students (i.e. students on IEP's/405 Plans, those with social-emotional learning difficulties, ADHD, autistic, etc.)?

5. Educators' Perceptions of Students' Academic Skills, Behaviors, and Well-Being
  - a. In what ways have your students benefited academically from mindfulness practices during the school day?
  - b. Have there been changes in academic scores (math tests, reading comprehension, spelling memorization, etc.)?
  - c. In terms of behaviors, have students differently handled themselves in difficult situations (i.e. test anxiety, peer conflict, school avoidance, transitions, etc.)?
  - d. Have you seen a change in students' social-emotional learning? If so, how?
6. Suggestions
  - a. Do you have any final comments and/or suggestions about integrating mindfulness into classrooms and the effects that it has on students?

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

Title of Research: Implementing Mindfulness in K-12 Schools: Exploring Educators' Perceptions of Students' Academic Skills, Behavior, and Well-Being

Researchers:	Dr. Denise Howley	Social Work	1-508-531-2551
	Sara Gottfried	Social Work	1-508-838-0226

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Bridgewater State University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of this project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

### **1. Nature and purpose of the Project**

This project seeks to understand the effectiveness of a mindfulness program in the K-12 educational setting, specifically in regards to educators' perceptions of students' academic skills, behavior, and overall well-being.

### **2. Explanation of the Procedures**

You will be asked a series of questions about your implementation of mindfulness in public schools. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. All of your responses will be audio recorded. You will be given an alias name, which will be used throughout the recording and research study. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes and takes place at your school or a location that works best. All materials will be stored in a file cabinet with a key lock. Dr. Howley and myself, Sara Gottfried, will be the only ones to have access to the materials.

### **3. Discomfort and Risks**

Although there are not any intended and foreseen discomforts and risks, you have the ability to discontinue the interview at any time, in which you feel uncomfortable.

### **4. Benefits:**

The anticipated benefit is an increased awareness and understanding of how incorporating mindfulness into the public school educational setting may be beneficial for students. Study



findings may provide information about the effectiveness of a mindfulness program within the educational setting.

**5. Confidentiality:**

Your information will be kept confidential. All files will be stored in a file cabinet with a key lock. You will choose an alias name, which will be used throughout the interview and research study to protect your personal identity. Dr. Howley and I will be the only ones who will have access to research materials.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:**

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

By signing below I am indicating that I understand that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Any questions regarding the conduct of the project, questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or research related to injury, should be brought to the attention of the IRB Administrator at (508) 531-1242.

Any questions about the conduct of this research project should be brought to the attention of the principal investigator:

Dr. Denise Howley    (508) 531-2551    dhowley@bridgew.edu

Sara Gottfried        (508) 838-0226        sgottfried@student.bridgew.edu  
(Co-Investigator)

**Appendix C**Audio Consent Form

I hereby indicate, as specified below, my consent to use audio recording of myself during this research project. I understand that I may withdraw permission for audio material to be used in this research project at any time. PLEASE CHECK ONE BOX AND SIGN BELOW.

I agree to have my audio recording available for the research project and educational use in the classroom and laboratory settings.

I do not agree to make audio recording available for the research project and educational use in classroom and laboratory settings.

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

## Appendix D

### Post-Interview Questionnaire

#### Education & Experience

1. What is the highest degree or level of schooling you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Master's Degree
  - Doctorate Degree
  
2. How many years have you been teaching?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Years
  
3. What grade do you currently teach?
  - K
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4
  - 5
  
4. Have you consistently taught this grade?
  - Yes
  - No
  
5. If you answered "no" to Question 8, what grade(s) have you taught in the past? Please list all.  
 \_\_\_\_\_

#### Mindfulness Training & Education

6. Have you taken any specific mindfulness trainings? If yes, please list the name of the training(s) and where the training(s) took place.
  - No
  - Yes; \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Are you currently enrolled in any mindfulness trainings? If yes, please name the training(s).
  - No
  - Yes; \_\_\_\_\_
  
8. How many years have you been integrating mindfulness in your classroom?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Years
  
9. Has mindfulness become a school-wide and/or district-wide implementation? If yes, please explain.
  - No
  - Yes; \_\_\_\_\_