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Mindfulness Practice/Mindful Breathing in the Classroom: The Effect on Unwanted Behaviors in the Classroom

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Teaching Non-Cognitive Skills through Mindfulness Practice in Elementary School

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether implementing mindfulness and mindful breathing, in a classroom setting, would decrease the number of unwanted behaviors in that classroom. The setting for this study was a first-grade classroom of 26 in suburban southeast Minnesota. The study took place for six weeks, two weeks without intervention, and four weeks with three mindfulness intervention techniques (mindful breathing, social-emotional stories, and mindful movement/meditation). Data was collected in five ways: an unwanted behavior tally chart, researcher field notes, specialist teacher questionnaires, individual student mindfulness journals, and one-on-one student conversations. After the six-week intervention, the researcher found that three of five unwanted classroom behaviors had decreased. The researcher also found that students were able to put mindfulness practice into action in various real-life situations. The researcher concluded that mindfulness practice does help to decrease unwanted behaviors in the classroom, and will continue to be used in the classroom.

Keywords: mindfulness, mindful breathing, behaviors

Non-cognitive (behavioral) skills help to improve academic success (Tough, 2016). Students are taught social-emotional coping skills in their primary classrooms, through programs, as well as simply from being a part of a classroom of many children. In this setting, children, among many other things, learn how to wait their turn, understand that they will not always get their way, listen to others, follow directions, work together, problem-solve, and navigate difficult situations and emotions for themselves and others.

COVID-19 prevented students from having the opportunity to practice these social-emotional skills, as schools closed and students participated in distance learning. Now that students have come back to the classroom, COVID-19 and isolation from peers could be the cause of the teacher's self-perceived rise in disruptive classroom behaviors, perhaps due to an inability to regulate one's self, resulting in students acting out their emotions in inappropriate ways. Mindfulness and mindful breathing could be a practice that helps students learn to regulate their emotions and decrease disruptive classroom behavior.

Mindful breathing is a practice that involves slow and controlled breathing. It asks that participants be present in the moment and that they slow their thoughts and body (Tarrasch, 2018). Mindful breathing allows its participants time to pause and focus their attention on being present in their body- how it feels physically and emotionally (Tarrasch, 2018). This could allow students the time and space to process their emotions before acting out inappropriately.

In order to test the effectiveness of mindful breathing in the decrease of disruptive classroom behaviors, a first-grade classroom in southeast Minnesota practiced mindful breathing techniques, did mindful movements/meditation, and read and discussed social skills as they relate to mindfulness. This classroom was comprised of low to middle-class students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Behaviors were tracked daily. The students were also given time

daily to reflect on their own behavior and whether they thought mindfulness practice influences it. The goal was to give students strategies to use to help regulate their emotions before they become disruptive behaviors in the classroom, and overall, to help students achieve academic success. The research question guiding this study was, does mindfulness practice/mindful breathing decrease unwanted behaviors in a first-grade classroom?

Theoretical Framework

This research is built around two different theoretical frameworks. The first is metacognition. Metacognition is thinking about one's own thinking. The process of using mindfulness techniques, asks participants to change how they react to the information and stimuli that they take in (Learning Theories, 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand ones' thoughts and reactions at a heightened state, so that they can address them in a mindful way, and then use mindfulness techniques and strategies to get themselves back to a regulated state. In other words, in order to change ones' responses, one needs to understand their thought process in different states of emotion.

The second theory is Positive Psychology. This theory speaks to things that make life worth living, by looking at things like "happiness, optimism, self-esteem, well-being, motivation, flow, strengths and virtues, hope, resilience, mindfulness, and positive thinking (Learning Theories, 2022)." The purpose of any Social Emotional Learning/Mindfulness program used in schools is to help students find connection and to foster and appropriately use these non-cognitive skills to ultimately help them be successful throughout their life.

Literature Review

Introduction: Non-Cognitive Behavioral Skills Definition and Social Context

In his book Helping Children Succeed (2016), Paul Tough defines non-cognitive skills as “qualities like perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, and optimism (p. 4).” Another definition says that social and emotional skills are “children’s ability to learn about and manage their own emotions” (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 4). Both speak to a skill set outside of traditional academic thinking. The academic achievement gap is the difference in school performance between low-income students and minority students in comparison to their white or middle-class counterparts. Growing bodies of research suggest a link between non-cognitive behavioral skills and the minimizing of this achievement gap (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

The connection between the two is not a new or recent idea. One well-known study linking social-emotional and behavioral learning to academic and positive lifetime effects dates back to 1962. The Perry Preschool Project aimed to study the impacts of high-quality preschool on low-income African American children (Derman-Sparks & Moore, 2016). The study took place in Ypsilanti, Michigan from 1962-1967. Participants were African American children ages three to four. They came from a segregated neighborhood in Ypsilanti and had an IQ test score in the range of "educable mentally retarded" (Derman-Sparks & Moore, 2016, p. 83). The teachers created a classroom environment and curriculum that fostered both cognitive skills as well as social and emotional skills, the foundation of which was a warm teacher-student relationship. They respected their students and had high expectations for them. They believed in their ability to learn and gave plenty of opportunities for the students to practice social-emotional and behavioral skills on their own through dramatic play and large motor play (Derman-Sparks &

Moore, 2016). They also fostered strong relationships and valued input from each student's family through regular home visits.

The longitudinal study then tracked these students at different points throughout their life after preschool. In comparison to the control group (all chosen on the same criteria) who did not receive high-quality preschool, students of the Perry Preschool had higher graduation rates (especially among females). Later, they were more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, have steady housing, own a car, and have a savings account. They were also less likely to have been arrested or have a history of drug use (Manning & Patterson, 2006/2007).

More recently, Tough (2016) argues that one of the American school system's primary goals should be helping low-income students be successful. He says that one way that can be achieved is through the improvement of these non-cognitive skills. As seen in the Perry Preschool Project, Tough (2016) also argues that these non-cognitive skills are not skills that are explicitly taught, but skills that can be gathered through a child's environment. Children living in poverty or having experienced trauma may not have an environment at home that promotes non-cognitive skills. Therefore, if the goal of an educator is to educate a whole person, close the achievement gap, and promote positive life outcomes, the educator must create an environment in the classroom that will improve non-cognitive behavioral skills.

This paper will examine the existing literature on the implementation of two strategies for improving non-cognitive behavioral skills in the classroom, mindfulness practice and Social-Emotional Learning curriculums.

What Is Mindfulness Practice?

Mindfulness-based practices teach people to control their attention so that they can focus on the present (Tarrasch, 2018). Rozalski, Stewart, Andrus, and Interlichia (2021, p. 8) expand this definition to include, “two key questions – What are you feeling in your body? and What emotions are you experiencing?” Mindfulness practice is shown to benefit physical and mental well-being as it can “reduce anxiety, depression, stress, avoidance and rumination, cognitive reactivity and sleep disturbances” (Tarrasch, 2018, p. 1). Since attention, self-regulation, and coping skills all fall into the category of non-cognitive and behavioral skills, it is important to examine existing literature on the use of mindfulness practice in schools.

Implementation: What works?

Studies involving mindfulness practice in elementary classrooms have looked at the effect of the practice on many non-cognitive behavioral skills including, but not limited to, “sustained and selective attention” (Tarrasch, 2018), mindfulness coping strategies (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018), the effect of mindfulness practice on prosocial behaviors, internalizing behaviors [emotional symptoms and peer problems] and externalizing behaviors [hyperactivity and conduct] (Sciutto, Veres, Marinstein, Bailey & Cehelyk, 2021), and attention, self-control, participation and respect (Black & Fernando, 2014). They have also highlighted the importance of having trained teachers to implement the mindfulness program, classroom teacher involvement, the extent to which the practice is implemented in the classroom, and the duration of mindfulness practice.

The first study to examine looks at the effects of mindfulness practice on a group of 101 third, fourth, and fifth grade students. Participants took part in a ten-week study, wherein, once a

week, they participated in a mindfulness session taught by mindfulness-trained student instructors from Tel Aviv University (Tarrasch, 2018). Mindfulness sessions included, but were not limited to, “breathing awareness, mindful eating, walking meditation, listening to the here and now, basic yoga, imagining one’s own safe peaceful place and meditation bubble” (Tarrasch, 2018, p. 4). Sessions got progressively longer through each week of the study and included homework that would involve parents and other family members. For example, students might be asked to teach a parent a mindfulness exercise from the session (Tarrasch, 2018).

The goal of the study aimed to examine “the effects of mindfulness practice on sustained and selective attention” (Tarrasch, 2018, p. 4-5). Participants were tested on a computer, using two different assessments, before completing the ten-week mindfulness sessions and after. The first test, the Computerized Continuous Performance Task (CCPT) looked at continuous attention. The task lasted for twelve minutes and students were asked to respond to the presence of a “target object” (red square). The red square would be included in some images among other shapes of different colors or a black background, and not shown in others. Students were asked to press the spacebar when the “target object” was present, and do nothing when it was not. The change of image got progressively faster through the duration of the test.

The second task, the Conjunctive Visual Search Task “aimed to evaluate selective attention” (Tarrasch, 2018). Here students were asked to respond to the presence of the “target object,” a blue square, with their right finger and the absence of the “target object” with their left finger.

In both cases, the students who had participated in the mindfulness sessions performed with more accuracy (Tarrasch, 2018). Therefore, connections between the mindfulness practice, the tests, and non-cognitive skills can be made. The commission rate, in the CPT task, (choosing

“target object” when it was not present), “measures the ability to inhibit responses” (Tarrasch, 2018, p.7). The commission rate went down significantly in the mindfulness group, suggesting less impulsive and more thoughtful thought-through responses, and thus, more self-control (Tarrasch, 2018). “The Conjunctive Visual Search Task measures selective attention” (Tarrasch, 2018, p.7). Using selective attention helps one to focus on the immediate task in front of them and ignore unimportant stimuli (Tarrasch, 2018). Therefore, higher accuracy in this test by the mindfulness group indicates a link between mindfulness practice and better selective attention skills.

Though results on the computer tests did improve for the mindfulness group, the author indicates that there were some drawbacks to the study. All of the data that was collected was quantitative; there were no reports gathered from participants' parents or teachers to show whether the mindfulness practice had altered their behaviors in "real-life" situations (Tarrasch, 2018).

Another study showing a link between mindfulness practice and attention is David S. Black and Randima Fernando's 2013 study in Richmond California. Within the school, some classrooms received fifteen-minute mindfulness sessions three times per week for five weeks, and some received the same fifteen-minute sessions for a total of seven weeks (Black & Fernando, 2013). The sessions were based on the Mindful School Curriculum and were taught in the classroom by two teachers trained in mindfulness (Black & Fernando, 2013). Classroom teachers were also given a one-hour training on mindfulness and participated in the mindfulness practices taught in the classroom. This study looked at the effect of mindfulness practice on several behavior skills including attention, self-control, participation, and respect (Black & Fernando, 2013). Before the study and post-study, teachers rated each student on each of the

four categories mentioned above. Teacher ratings showed improvement in all areas in the first five weeks of the program, and only attention continued to increase in ratings through the seven-week program (Black & Fernando, 2013).

Like Tarrasch (2018), this study shows that mindfulness can improve focus and attention (an important non-cognitive behavioral skill) in students. This study, like Tarrasch's (2018) also lists its data source as an area of limitation, as all data was collected based on classroom teachers' perceptions of student behavior (Black & Fernando, 2013). This suggests that when implementing mindfulness in the classroom, having more data collection points (including qualitative and quantitative data) may give a better picture of the effect it has on students.

A similar study by Mark Sciutto, Denise Veres, Tovia Marinstein, Brooke Bailey, and Sarah Cehelyk (2021), outlines a similar mindfulness program based on the Mindful Schools Curriculum given to eight kindergarten through second-grade classrooms in one school. The mindfulness sessions were broken down into sixteen twenty-minute sessions and were delivered twice a week in each classroom by a trained instructor (Sciutto, et. al, 2021). Teachers also participated in the practice. Sessions were similar to the ones seen in Tarrasch's (2018) study and included but were not limited to "breath, thoughts, gratitude, emotions, mindful communication/kind words, and mindful eating (Sciutto, et. al, 2018, p. 1519). Teachers completed a rating scale of each student's behaviors pre-intervention and post-intervention. The rating scale asked about each student's prosocial behavior, externalizing behavior (hyperactivity and conduct), and internalizing (emotional symptoms and peer problems) behavior (Sciutto, et. al, 2021). Teachers' reports showed an increase in prosocial behavior and a decrease in internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Sciutto, et. al, 2021).

One unique area of this study included polling classroom teachers on their interest in mindfulness and their mindfulness practice. All teachers reported that they were either “moderately, very, or extremely interested in learning mindfulness techniques to use in their classrooms (Sciutto, et. al, 2021, p.1518).” This suggests again, that the classroom teacher’s involvement and competence in mindfulness practice may have an effect on the outcome of the practice for the students.

Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni, and Milman (2018) also performed a study on mindfulness with 646 elementary-aged students (ages nine to twelve). Their study looked at a whole-school approach to mindfulness practice and students’ mindfulness-based coping strategies. In the study, they compared three schools, one that had incorporated mindfulness practices for more than three years, one that had incorporated mindfulness practice for just one year, and one that had not incorporated mindfulness practice at all (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018). Students attended a mindfulness session, taught by a trained mindfulness instructor, once a week for forty-five minutes. A school-wide approach to mindfulness practice meant that in addition to students practicing mindfulness, teachers and staff must also be trained and use the practices as well. Therefore, homeroom teachers attended sessions with their students weekly. The sessions used mindful language. "Mindful Language classes integrate mindfulness-based practices, mindful yoga-based movements and postures, and specific imagery processes. Students are guided to pay attention to posture, breath, sensations, body boundaries, movements, sounds, emotions, images, and self-talk" (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018, p. 3319).

At the end of the school year, students were given a five-item questionnaire, based on five situations where they may use their mindfulness training. The five situations included "feeling stressed before an upcoming exam, finding it difficult to fall asleep, encountering

someone angry or annoying, needing to concentrate, and being disappointed in one's self" (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018, p.3320). Homeroom teachers gave questionnaires in homeroom classes. Once completed researchers scored each questionnaire. Students were given two points if their response to a situation was a traditional mindfulness approach, one point if it used a mindfulness mindset, but not a traditional mindfulness approach, and zero points if there was no mindfulness coping strategy used (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018).

Students in the school that had been participating in the mindfulness program for three years or more, showed significantly more use of mindfulness coping strategies and self-talk across all five situations. Students in the school that had used the program for one year showed slightly more use of mindfulness coping strategies and self-talk than in the school that had implemented no mindfulness program (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018). The authors cite a limitation of the study to be students' self-reporting and reporting in hand-written form.

One specific finding from this study is that the scores for using mindfulness coping strategies were higher in all three schools in the areas of exam stress and concentration (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018). These areas are skills that seem to be traditional school skills, whereas sleep, facing anger, and disappointment are not as directly linked to a school setting. This could suggest perhaps, as did Tarrasch's study, that results are situational, and more research needs to be done to get students to use mindfulness strategies outside of the classroom setting.

One unique finding from this study includes that girls showed more use of mindfulness coping strategies than boys did regardless of age, and years of implementation (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018), suggesting an area for further research. Another interesting finding from the study is that the school that had implemented whole-school mindfulness

practice for more than three years, had homeroom teachers who “participated in monthly mindfulness sessions and freely integrated mindfulness-based sessions into their practice” (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018, p. 3318). Teachers at the school who had implemented a whole-school mindfulness practice for only one year also attended weekly sessions with their students and monthly sessions but had not yet begun to implement them in their teaching (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018). This suggests that a teacher's confidence in using mindfulness skills independently and in their practice will also affect student usage and outcomes. This finding agrees with Jennings and Greenberg (2009) who found support for the idea that “teacher social and emotional competence (SEC) and well-being...can be examined in relation to student and classroom outcomes (p. 3).” This also agrees with the studies done by Black and Fernando (2013), and Sciutto, et. al (2021). Finally, in the school that had implemented the whole-school-based mindfulness program for more than three years, parents were involved in the program as well. The school that had participated for only one year had parent involvement in its early stages. “They knew of and supported the program, were invited to an introductory evening, and received updates” (Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, 2018, p. 3318). The higher likelihood of those in the three or more years program, along with thoroughly involved parents, suggests that when mindfulness is implemented in more than one setting, the likelihood to use the strategies increases. This finding agrees with Tarrasch’s study as well as students involved in that study were asked to teach and practice their mindfulness strategy with a parent at home.

Social-Emotional Learning Curriculums

Social and emotional learning (SEL) or competence has a broad definition. According to Jones and Doolittle (2017), “At its core, SEL involves children’s ability to learn about and

manage their own emotions and interactions in ways that benefit themselves and others, and that help children and youth succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships and citizenship (p.4).” They also say that, “to effectively manage emotions and social interactions requires a complex interplay of cognitive skills” (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, pg. 4). These would include “attention and the ability to solve problems; beliefs about the self, such as perceptions of competence and autonomy; and social awareness, including empathy for others and the ability to resolve conflicts” (Jones & Doolittle, 2017, p. 4). There are many social and emotional standards and curriculums, which draw on different frameworks (Jones & Doolittle, 2007). Because Social-Emotional Learning Curriculums often incorporate mindfulness practices, we need to examine the literature on SEL.

One meta-analysis conducted by Blewitt et. al (2017), studied the effectiveness of seventy-nine studies with 18,292 participants. It looked at early childhood learning centers that implemented social-emotional learning curriculums for students, ages two to six. Programs and studies were included if they met the criteria of 1) delivering a “universal, curriculum-based SEL program” in a childcare setting to students ages two to six, 2) the purpose of the program was to “increase social-emotional skill development,” 3) they assessed skill levels after the intervention, and 4) “they used experimental design” (Blewitt et. al, 2017, p. 7). Though different schools used different curricula, they were drawn from similar theories about child development and had the goal of increasing non-cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Blewitt et. al, 2017). They implemented the SEL program through “explicit and active instruction, modeling, opportunity for practice, and reinforcement” (Blewitt et. al, 2017, p. 7). The program was typically integrated into the regular classroom schedule, such as morning meeting time, playtime, and small group times, and used developmental appropriate methods such as singing, stories, and puppets

(Blewitt et. al, 2017). Students were then assessed in four categories: social competence, emotional competence, behavioral and emotional difficulties, and self-regulation (Blewitt et. al, 2017). Students were assessed by parent, teacher, and instructor reports and on individual-focused tasks (Blewitt et. al, 2017). Improvement was found in each of the four areas, with emotional competence showing the most significant improvement in behavioral and emotional difficulties showing the least. The author suggests that this is because of the students' ages; they know the skills but are still practicing how to incorporate them into daily life (Blewitt et. al, 2017).

One finding of interest in this meta-analysis, that agrees with both studies in mindfulness practice, is that students performed better on tasks and assessments given by trained instructors, rather than classroom teachers (Blewitt, et al, 2017), again suggesting that a teacher's level of and knowledge of social-emotional skills will have an impact on the outcome in his or her classroom. Another point of interest is that reports from parents about a child's behavior and skill level tended to be lower than that of instructors or classroom teachers (Blewitt et. al, 2017). This supports the authors of the previously mentioned studies in that students perform better in the context in which they are taught, and that having parents involved in and supporting the learning outside of the school context could increase the children's skills.

Conclusion

As seen from the literature, both mindfulness practices and social and emotional learning curriculums can help students improve their non-cognitive skills, and, if non-cognitive skills are improved, better outcomes in school and life can be seen. Themes throughout the literature also tell us that these outcomes can be enhanced when programs are implemented as part of the regular classroom routine, with parent and classroom teacher involvement, are taught by

confident and competent teachers and instructors, and with the amount of time spent with each practice. All of these could lead to areas for more research. As educators, it is important to examine the literature in the area of mindfulness programs, best practices, and strategies to implement in the classroom so that we can continue to provide students with the best opportunities to succeed.

Methodology

The setting for this study was a first-grade classroom in suburban, southeast Minnesota. The classroom was comprised of 26 students (the data of 24 is represented, two families opted out). The students came from lower-middle to middle-class families and had a variety of cultural backgrounds. The school is a small Charter School and the classroom is representative of the school as a whole.

The research question guiding this study was, “What effect does mindfulness practice/mindful breathing have on the decrease of unwanted behaviors in a first-grade classroom?” To test this question, a six-week intervention was put into place. The study involved the teacher, the students, and three teachers outside of the homeroom classroom (Art/Latin, Music/Media, and Physical Education). The study began in late September and concluded at the end of November. The teacher chose this time frame because it allowed for consent forms to be signed and gathered (two families opted out), and for classroom routines and procedures to be learned and understood prior to the intervention.

During the first two weeks of the study, mindfulness/mindful breathing interventions were not performed. In weeks three to six, mindfulness/mindful breathing strategies were used

several times throughout the day. Each week had a theme or question that surrounds mindfulness (see Appendix A).

Students were introduced to two different mindful breathing strategies per week (see Appendix A). They practiced each for two days and were allowed to vote on their preferred technique of the two to practice on Fridays. The breathing was practiced daily at the start of the regular classroom morning meeting. Students were seated on the outside edge of the classroom carpet facing each other to complete the breathing practice. On the first day, the teacher modeled the breathing technique first followed by the students completing five rounds of the breathing exercise. On the second day, students were led to complete five rounds of the breathing technique without a model from the teacher first.

The second part of the practice was to read a social skills story. This was completed once daily in the mid-day. Students were asked several questions, including but not limited to, “What does mindfulness have to do with this story?” and “How could we use mindfulness to solve the problem in the story?” The teacher, daily, recorded student answers (after the reading or at the end of the day).

The final part of the mindfulness/mindful breathing practice was a mindful meditation or mindful movement. This was also practiced mid-day. The teacher felt that this would be a good transition and “reset” for students after completing the morning academics and moving into afternoon academics. One mindful movement or meditation was chosen per day to accompany the week’s theme (see Appendix A). Students were either seated at their table spots or standing behind their chairs. Movements were chosen from GoNoodle or Cosmic Kids Meditation, both pre-existing, online applications. Students watched the screen and followed along.

Data was collected using five different tools. The first was an unwanted behavior tally chart (see Appendix B). Unwanted behaviors were broken into five categories: talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time (1), out of seat or line/not sitting or walking correctly (2), negative peer interaction (unkind words/physical) (3), negative teacher interaction (talking back/not following directions) (4), and not using materials correctly (5). The teacher chose these specific unwanted behaviors because they can be disruptive to the classroom flow, and are in line with the behavior expectations of the school. Each behavior was coded with a number (as seen above), and each student's name was included on the chart. Each time a student displayed an unwanted behavior the corresponding number was written next to their name. This was completed each day of the six-week study, both prior to the intervention and while implementing the intervention. This data tool was only used by the classroom teacher in the homeroom classroom. The purpose was to gather quantitative data on the number of unwanted student behaviors daily and to see if there would be a decrease in these behaviors throughout the intervention, meaning that mindfulness practices helped students to regulate before an unwanted behavior presented itself.

The second data-collecting tool was field notes from the classroom teacher (see Appendix C). The teacher reflected daily (two weeks pre-intervention and four weeks during the intervention) on questions including but not limited to "What positive/negative behaviors did you observe today," "What specific changes have you noticed in student behavior before/during/after mindfulness practice today," and "What, if anything of note, took place during the literature discussion today?" The purpose of this data-collecting tool was to provide the teacher's anecdotal thoughts and observations of the students' use of mindfulness practice and any teacher-perceived changes in behavior. It also provided qualitative data about how students were

applying mindfulness practice/mindful breathing to real-life situations presented in the social skills stories.

The third data-collecting tool was a specialist teacher questionnaire (see Appendix D). This was given to three specialist teachers: Art/Latin, Music/Media, and Physical Education. The questionnaire was completed on Friday of each week of the study (six times – two times prior to the mindfulness/mindful breathing intervention and four times throughout the intervention). Specialist teachers were asked to reflect on student behaviors (positive and negative), behavioral strengths and areas of growth for the class overall, changes in behavior once the intervention had been implemented, and whether or not students were applying mindfulness practice/mindful breathing in their classrooms. The purpose of this data tool was to see if students were using mindfulness practice/mindful breathing in situations outside of the homeroom classroom and whether teachers outside of the homeroom classroom perceived changes in the number of unwanted behaviors in their classroom. Specialist teachers were also asked to account for things outside of the intervention that could have caused perceived changes in student behavior. Throughout the study, the Art/Latin teacher left the school and a series of substitutes were in the classroom. Therefore, data from that specialist teacher is incomplete. However, data from the other two specialist teachers was gathered and completed as described.

The fourth data-collecting tool used was student journals (see Appendix E). Each student had a mindfulness journal that was passed out to him or her daily. Each day, for two weeks, prior to the mindfulness practice/mindful breathing intervention, students were asked to reflect on their behavior in the classroom. They were asked to think about whether they had raised their hand to talk, walked in line correctly, sat correctly, were kind to friends, listened to their teacher, and used materials correctly. The teacher chose these behavioral skills because they were in line

with the unwanted behaviors marked in the tally chart data-collecting tool. The students were asked to rate themselves on each behavior by coloring in a corresponding face; a smiling face for completing the behavioral task always, a straight face for completing the behavioral task sometimes, and a sad face for completing the behavioral task never. The purpose of this data tool was to see how students perceived their own classroom behavior as well as to allow them time to reflect on it daily. When the mindfulness practice/mindful breathing intervention started, another question was added to the daily journal (see Appendix F). This was “Today’s mindfulness practice was helpful to me.” This question was added by the teacher to see if there was any correlation between each student’s perception of the helpfulness of mindfulness practice and his or her perception of their behavior that day.

Each student completed one journal page daily near the end of the school day. The teacher chose the end of the day so that students could have completed all three mindfulness/mindful breathing tasks, and could reflect on their behavior throughout the whole day. One limitation to this time frame was that students were completing their journals prior to snack time or Physical Education (PE). Students were excited about these parts of their day, so in order to ensure completion of the journal that was not rushed, the teacher made sure to plan at least ten minutes prior to these events solely for the reflection and journal.

The fifth and final data-collecting tool was a one-on-one conversation with each student participant (see Appendix G). This was completed post-intervention, and the teacher recorded (wrote) student responses on the questionnaire. Students were asked many questions, including but not limited to, “What is mindfulness,” “Has mindfulness affected your behavior at school,” “What was your favorite/least favorite part of our mindfulness practice,” and “Have you used mindfulness outside of the classroom or taught it to anyone else?” The purpose of this data tool

was to see which parts of the practice students enjoyed (for continued use) and which they did not, as well as to see if students perceived the practice to be helpful in regulating their own behaviors. The teacher also wanted to know if the students had applied mindfulness practice/mindful breathing to situations outside of the classroom.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to determine whether using mindfulness practice/mindful breathing in a first-grade classroom would reduce the number of unwanted, disruptive behaviors in that classroom. The research took place and data was gathered between September and November of 2022. Students took part in the research for six weeks – two weeks with no intervention, and four weeks with mindful breathing, social-emotional skills story books, and mindful movement/mediation interventions.

Findings

Quantitative data was collected in two ways. The first way was using a tally chart (see Appendix B). A tally sheet of five unwanted behaviors (talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time, out of seat or line/not sitting or walking correctly, negative peer interaction (unkind words, physical), negative teacher interaction [talking back/not following directions), and using materials inappropriately) was kept by the researcher daily to track the number of unwanted behaviors for each student. Each time a behavior was displayed by a student, the number corresponding to the behavior was marked on the chart.

Figure 1

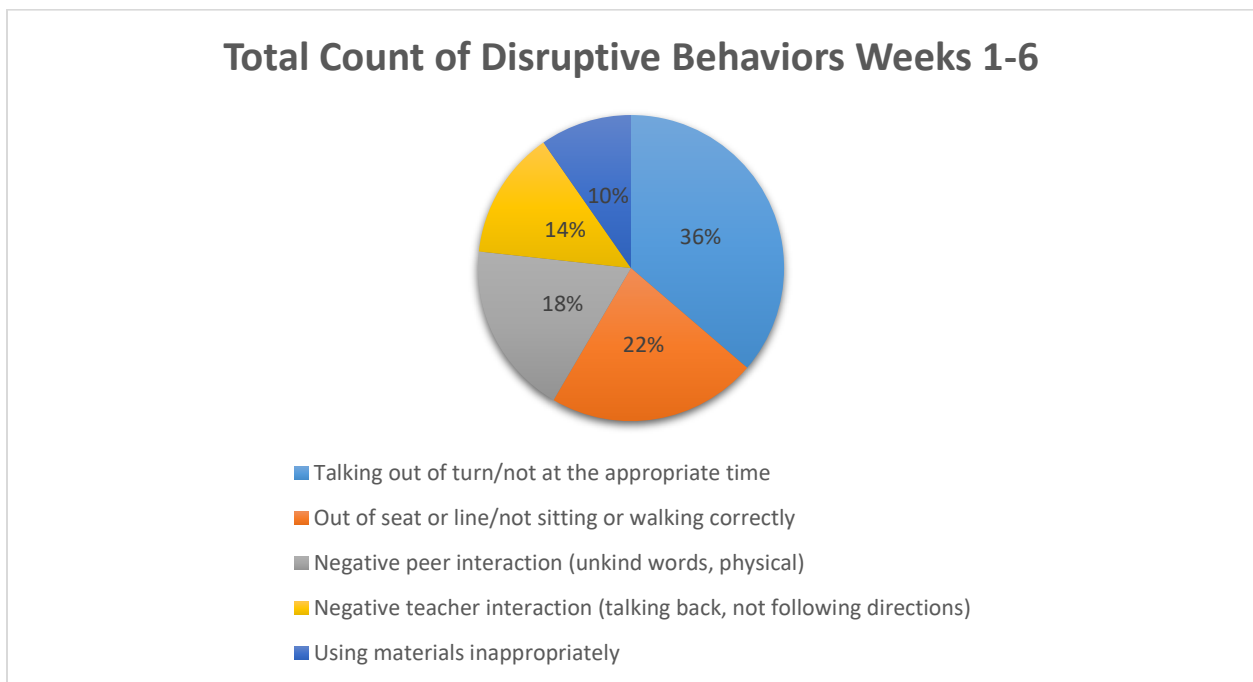
Unwanted Behavior Tally Chart Code

Unwanted Behaviors Tally Chart Code
Talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time = 1
Out of seat or line/not sitting or walking correctly = 2
Negative peer interaction (unkind words, physical) = 3
Negative teacher interaction (talking back, not following directions) = 4
Using materials inappropriately = 5

Both pre and post-intervention, the most displayed unwanted behavior was talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time and out of seat or line/not sitting or walking correctly.

Figure 2

Total Count of Disruptive Behaviors Week 1-6

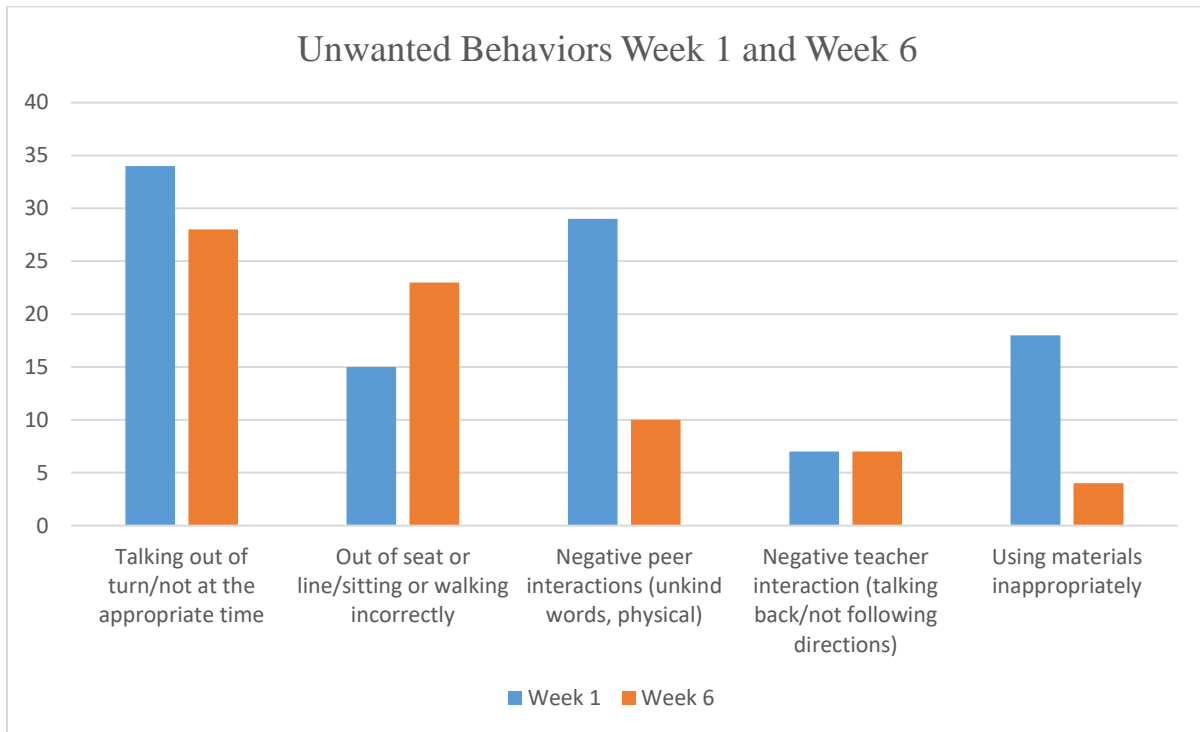


In weeks one to six, talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time was tallied 131 times, out of seat or line/not sitting or walking correctly was tallied 80 times, negative peer interaction (unkind words, physical) was tallied 66 times, negative teacher interaction (talking back, not

following directions) was tallied 49 times, and using materials inappropriately was tallied 35 times.

Figure 3

Unwanted Behaviors Week 1 and Week 6



Three of the five behaviors showed a decrease from week one to week six. Talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time decreased from 34 in week one to 28 in week six. Negative peer interactions (unkind words, physical) decreased from 29 in week one to 10 in week six. Using materials inappropriately decreased from 18 in week one to 4 in week six. One behavior stayed the same from week one to six. Negative teacher interactions (talking back, not following directions) had seven week one and seven week six. One behavior showed an increase from week one to week six. Out of seat or line/not walking correctly went from 15 week one to 23 week six.

Quantitative data was also collected using student mindfulness journals (See Appendix E). Each student was asked to rate themselves on questions related to the five unwanted behaviors shown in the tally chart. They were asked to rate themselves by coloring a smiley face for doing the behavior always, a straight face for doing the behavior sometimes, and a sad face for doing the behavior never. Once the intervention (mindful breathing, social-emotional stories, and mindful movement/mediation) was added, an extra question was added to the journal to rate the helpfulness of that day's mindfulness practice (See Appendix F).

Figure 4

Total Always, Sometimes, Never Behavior Ratings from Student Mindfulness Journals

Pre-Intervention	Number of Student Ratings
Always	1,213
Sometimes	219
Never	29
Intervention	
Always	2,936
Sometimes	325
Never	34

From these numbers, we can see that students most often rated themselves as always performing the behavioral skills asked of them. The researcher did remind students that there were no wrong answers and that they should be thoughtful, reflective and truthful in their responses.

Qualitative data was collected in three ways, through researcher field notes (see Appendix C), specialist teacher (Art/Latin, Music/Media, Physical Education) notes (see Appendix D), and student interviews (see Appendix G). The researcher kept daily field notes reflecting on the behavioral strengths of that class that day, areas for growth, and notable pieces

of discussion around the mindful movement/meditation and social-emotional storybook. Specialist teachers were also asked to reflect weekly about behavior strengths and areas of growth for the class, any notable changes in behavior, and any mention of, or use, of mindfulness practice in their classrooms. Specialist teachers were asked to account for things outside of the study that may affect student behavior. Teachers mentioned having more time to learn and practice school routines and expectations. Finally, students were interviewed upon completion of the intervention. They were asked questions including, but not limited to, what mindfulness is, when they might use it, if they have used it outside of the classroom, and if they have taught anyone else about mindfulness.

Qualitative data was collected and coded using the five-step process of familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and reporting (Braun & Clark, 2008). Upon completion, four themes emerged in the data.

Emotions

It is clear from qualitative data gathered that students see mindfulness as a management of emotions. When asked by the researcher what mindfulness is in the first week of intervention, students mentioned feelings, being kind, being helpful, and being curious. These ideas were mentioned again in the second week of intervention. Student M defined mindfulness in their post-intervention interview as “being kind,” while student P said mindfulness is, “something that helps you control yourself.” All three specialist teachers noted, pre-intervention, that the class has a behavioral strength of empathy and taking care of each other. Having this innate quality to care and notice those around them may have made the connection between mindfulness and emotions an easier one for the group. The emphasis on and understanding of empathy could be one reason that the negative peer interactions (unkind words, physical) behavior saw a decrease

throughout the study. Ten of 24 students said in their post-intervention interview that they would use mindfulness when they or someone else is sad, angry, stressed or frustrated.

Calmness and slowing down

Students also defined mindfulness as the ability to calm down or slow down. Ten of 24 students defined mindfulness as calming down, slowing down or keeping calm in their post-intervention interviews. In weeks one through four of data collection, the researcher notes many instances of silly, unsettled behavior from the class as a whole. By week five of the study, more notes about calmness were added (especially concerning being able to settle into a mindful movement/mediation). By week five of the study all three specialist teachers noted that the class was able to transition more quickly, that stamina for sticking with a problem had grown, and that they were able to get students focused more quickly. The Physical Education teacher also noted that the students had an overall “more calm demeanor,” by week five and that students seemed to be taking more time to process information before raising their hands to answer questions or blurt (talk out of turn). This ability to slow one’s body and process before acting could be contributing to the lower number of unwanted behaviors tallied in week six of the study.

Awareness of actions

Though most students rated themselves as always performing the behavioral skills asked of them, two students stand out. Student O reported a total of 114 always, 29 sometimes, and 17 nevers in during the four weeks of mindfulness intervention. Student Q reported 76 always, 84 sometimes, and 0 nevers. These students are showing an awareness and reflection on their behavior which could be linked to mindfulness practice.

In post-intervention interviews, 11 of 24 students said that they did not think that mindfulness practice affected their behavior at school. However, when asked in student journals if that day's mindfulness practice was helpful to them, there were 351 always (very) responses, 40 sometimes (a little) responses, and 13 never (not at all) responses.

Mindfulness as a concept and mindfulness in action

Many examples of putting mindfulness into practice can be seen from the data. For example, 17 of 24 students, in their post-interview, were able to describe a time when they have used mindfulness outside of the classroom. Most situations involved a friend or sibling that they were frustrated with and students used a breathing technique to calm down.

The researcher noted several instances where students used mindfulness practice throughout the school day. One incident included three students arguing over line spots. Students were asked to figure the problem out on their own. However, the researcher did ask what we could do to make it better, and student T answered, "I think we could do dragon fire breath. It will make us feel better." Students also saw connections between their regular social-emotional weekly lessons (Second Step) and mindfulness practice, pointing out that using an attentiscope (students place hands in tube-like shape to imitate binoculars) to block out distractions was a lot like using mindful breathing to calm down. The researcher also noted the excitement in week four of the class when a cartoon character in the show Hero Elementary was frustrated and was reminded to take a deep breath. Many students shouted out "Yeah! Do the hand thing! (5 finger breathing). The researcher also noted that during parent-teacher conferences a parent noted that they appreciated the work the students were doing in class, that their student was teaching them the techniques at home, and that they were trying to use them at home as well.

Finally, in post-intervention interviews, 14 of 24 students reported that they had taught a mindfulness skill to someone else.

Conclusion

The data from this research project shows that mindfulness practice/mindful breathing did have some positive effects on students' behavior, suggesting a higher ability to understand and regulate emotions before acting. Three of five unwanted classroom behaviors, talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time, unkind peer interactions (unkind words, physical), and using materials inappropriately, all showed a decrease from week one of the interventions to week six. One behavior, negative teacher interactions (talking back, not following directions), stayed the same from week one to week six of the intervention. Only one behavior, out of seat or line/sitting or walking incorrectly, saw an increase from week one to week six.

The researcher's and specialist teachers' field notes indicate that students were able to positively apply mindfulness practice/mindful breathing to situations in their daily life as well. Finally, the class as a whole was also described as calmer, more focused, and easier to redirect the longer the intervention took place. The students, themselves, also overwhelmingly reported that the mindfulness practice/mindful breathing interventions were helpful to them, according to their individual student mindfulness journals.

Action Plan and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine whether mindfulness practice/mindful breathing would reduce the number of unwanted behaviors in a first-grade classroom of 26 students. Data was collected using several methods including a tally chart of unwanted behaviors, researcher field notes, specialist teacher field notes, individual student mindfulness journals, and one-on-one conversations (post-intervention) with each student.

Supported by the literature on mindfulness practice and social-emotional learning in the classroom, the researcher implemented three mindfulness practices into the first-grade classroom routine. The first was a mindful breathing activity, purposely planned as a part of the regular classroom Morning Meeting. Students were introduced to two different breathing practices throughout the week that they practiced for two days in a row. On the last day of the week, the class was able to vote on the practice that they liked best to complete that day. The researcher chose the morning time in order to start the day with a calming activity. Allowing students to vote on their preferred breathing activity informed the researcher about which techniques to continue using post-study, as well as creating more excitement and buy-in on the part of the students. The breathing activities were the intervention mentioned as a favorite part of mindfulness practice by most students, and the most put into practice in real-world situations when asked if students had used mindfulness outside of the classroom and could give an example. Researchers wishing to replicate this study may note this.

The second mindfulness practice the researcher implemented was a read-aloud of stories focusing on social-emotional skills. This allowed students to discuss how mindfulness/mindful breathing could be applied to situations that they may encounter in their lives. One limitation to this intervention is the amount of time needed to complete it. Though rich and valuable discussions did take place, researchers wishing to replicate this study should be sure to plan an ample amount of time in their daily schedule for this activity, or find other areas of curriculum to make connections to in order for the reading to serve dual purposes. For example, in addition to questions having to do with mindfulness and social-emotional skills, questions having to do with reading comprehension skills (making connections, visualizing, asking questions and inferring) could also be asked.

The last intervention was a mindful movement/meditation activity. These came from GoNoodle or Cosmic Kids, both pre-existing applications. These activities varied in length from two minutes to 15 minutes. Researchers wishing to replicate this study should be mindful of the length of these activities, and build students' stamina, from shorter activities to longer activities, as the researcher noted in their field notes on several occasions that students had a hard time settling into many of these activities (especially the meditation activities).

Finally, according to the literature, mindfulness practice/mindful breathing sees more positive effects the longer it is practiced. In their study, Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni & Milman, (2018) noted that schools that had implemented mindfulness programs for three years or more, had students using mindfulness coping methods and self-talk significantly more than schools who had implemented mindfulness programs for only one year. This suggests that researchers who want to continue to see the positive effects of mindfulness practice and mindful breathing through the replication of this study, should consider a longer intervention period. This study lasted six weeks, however, to see even larger results a longer intervention would be suggested. The more students are able to use mindfulness coping methods and mindful self-talk, it seems, the more likely it would be for them to mitigate a behavior before it disrupts the classroom. With less behavior disruptions, more focus can be spent on learning content. Also, as Tough (2016) stated, the more non-cognitive skills students have, the more academically successful they will be, with a higher likelihood of closing the achievement gap, and the more successful they will be throughout their life. Therefore, mindfulness practice and mindful breathing should be incorporated into classrooms to ensure that students gain the non-cognitive skills they need to be successful throughout their lives.

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Appendix A – Mindfulness/Mindful Breathing Lesson Plans

Week 1:

Topics: What is mindfulness? What is mindful breathing? What do we focus on when we do mindful breathing (counting breaths, body)?

Day 1: 4-Count Box Breathing (from Breathing is my Superpower book), From Mindless to Mindful (Go Noodle, Flow), ABC Mindful Me (by Christiane Engel)

Day 2: 4-Count Box Breathing (from Breathing is My Superpower book), Refresh Your Senses (Cosmic Kids Meditation, Peace Out), What Does It Mean to Be Present (by Rana DiOrio)

Day 3: Five-Finger Breathing (from Breathing is my Superpower book), Rainbow Breath (Go Noodle, Flow) Breathing is my Superpower (by Alicia Ortego)

Day 4: Five-Finger Breathing (from Breathing is My Superpower book), The Body Scan Meditation (Cosmic Kids Meditation, Zen Den) Listening to My Body (By Gabi Garcia)

Day 5: Class can choose 4-count box breathing or five-fingerer breathing, Live in the Moment (Go Noodle, Empower Tools), Our Class is a Family (By Shannon Olsen)

Week 2:

Topics: What can mindfulness (mindful breathing) teach us about how to treat ourselves? What can mindfulness teach us about how to treat others?

Day 1: Bubble Breathing (from Breathing is My Superpower book), Be Kind To Yourself (Go Noodle, Empower Tools), I Am Enough (By Grace Byers)

Day 2: Bubble Breathing (from Breathing is my Superpower book), Own Your Power (Go Noodle, Empower Tools), You Are Enough (By Margaret O’Hair) or There’s Only One You (By Kathryn Heling)

Day 3: Lazy 8 Breathing (from Breathing is my Superpower book), Have Compassion (Go Noodle, Empower Tools), What Does It Mean To Be Kind? (By Rana DiOrio)

Day 4: Lazy 8 Breathing (from Breathing is my Superpower book), Make People Happy (Go Noodle, All the Feels), Try A Little Kindness (By Henry Cole)

Day 5: Class can choose – Bubble Breathing or Lazy 8 Breathing, Friendly Wishes (Cosmic Kids Meditation, Peace Out), Meesha Makes Friends (By Tom Percival)

Week 3:

Topics: How can using mindfulness (mindful breathing) help us manage our emotions?

Day 1: Dragon Fire Breaths (From Cosmic Kids website), Get Back on Track (Go Noodle, Flow), The Boy with Big, Big Feelings (By Britney Winn Lee)

Day 2: Dragon Fire Breaths (From Cosmic Kids Website), Manage Frustration (Go Noodle, Empower Tools) My Mouth is a Volcano (By Julia Cook)

Day 3: Bumble Bee Breaths (from Cosmic Kids Website), Swirling or Relieve Anxiety (Go Noodle, Flow), Wemberly Worried (By Kevin Henkes)

Day 4: Bumble Bee Breaths (from Cosmic Kids Website), Time Out (Cosmic Kids Meditation, Peace Out), The Girl Who Never Made Mistakes (By Mark Pett and Gary Rubinstein)

Day 5: Class can choose Dragon Fire Breaths or Bumble Bee Breaths, Sleeping Dragon (Cosmic Kids Meditation, Peace Out), Everyone Feels Angry Sometimes (By Dr. Daniela Owen)

Week 4:

Topics: How does mindfulness (mindful breathing) help us grow (keep trying, be curious, ask questions, take risks)?

Day 1: Tumble Dryer Breathing (from Cosmic Kids Website), Franklin Plays the Game (By Paulette Bourgeois)

Day 2: Tumble Dryer Breathing (from Cosmic Kids Website), Victorious (Go Noodle, Flow), I Can Do Hard Things (By Gabi Garcia)

Day 3: Tongue Tube Breathing (from Cosmic Kids Website), Climbing Up (Cosmic Kids Meditation, Peace Out), What Do You Do With A Chance? (By Kobi Yamada)

Day 4: Tongue Tube Breathing (from Cosmic Kids Website), Be Kind To Yourself (Go Noodle, Flow), What Do You Do With A Problem? (By Kobi Yamada)

Day 5: Class can choose Tumble Dryer Breathing or Tongue Tube Breathing, Weather the Storm (Go Noodle, Flow), Trying (By Kobi Yamada)

- I will also have a bulletin board or wall space where I will add a visual of each type of breathing that we talk about. Located there, I will keep all of the books we have read as a class as well as the many books I have on behavioral skills. Students will have access to the board when they need it, and access to the books to read during Daily 5 Read-To-Self time.

Appendix B – Unwanted Behavior Tally Chart

Student:	Monday:	Tuesday:	Wednesday:	Thursday:	Friday:

Behavior Code:

1. Talking out of turn/not at the appropriate time
2. Out of seat or line/not sitting or walking correctly
3. Negative peer interaction (unkind words, physical)
4. Negative teacher interaction (talking back, not following directions)
 5. Using materials inappropriately

Appendix C – Researcher Field Notes

Teacher Field Notes:**Date of Observation:**

What positive student behaviors did you observe today? Specific students?
What negative student behaviors did you observe today? Specific students?
What, if any, specific changes did you notice in students' behavior before/during/after mindfulness practice today? Specific students? (When intervention has started)
What, if anything of note, took place during the literature discussion today?
Other Observations:

Appendix D – Specialist Teacher Questionnaire

Date of Completion:

There are no right or wrong answers. Please provide your honest, thoughtful responses.







1. What are some behavioral strengths of Ms. Banitt's First Grade Class?
2. What behaviors can Ms. Banitt's First Grade Class work on?
3. What positive (prosocial) behaviors do you see most often from Ms. Banitt's First Grade Class?
4. What disruptive (unwanted) behaviors do you see most often from Ms. Banitt's First Grade Class?
5. What change, if any, do you see in behavior from Ms. Banitt's first grade class since the implementation of the mindfulness practice intervention?
6. What factors, outside of the intervention, could account for these behavior changes?


7. Has anyone in Ms. Banitt's First Grade Class talked about mindfulness in your class? If so, please explain.

Appendix E – Student Mindfulness Journal Pre-Intervention

Date: _____

Remember: There are no right or wrong answers. Please reflect honestly about your day.








1. I raised my hand to talk in class.	
2. I sat in SLANT.	
3. I walked correctly in line (eyes forward, hands at sides, behind the person in front of me).	
4. I said kind things to my classmates.	
5. I kept my body to myself.	
6. I listened to my teacher.	


<p>7. I used materials correctly.</p>	
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Appendix F – Student Journal during Intervention

Date: _____

Remember: There are no right or wrong answers. Please reflect honestly about your day.

1. Today's mindfulness practice was helpful to me.	
2. I raised my hand to talk in class.	
3. I sat in SLANT.	
4. I walked correctly in line (eyes forward, hands at sides, behind the person in front of me).	
5. I said kind things to my classmates.	
6. I kept my body to myself.	
7. I listened to my teacher.	

<p>8. I used materials correctly.</p>	
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Appendix G – One-on-one Student Conversation

Student-Teacher Conference (Post-Intervention):

1. What is mindfulness?
2. When might someone use mindfulness?
3. What has mindfulness taught you?
4. Has mindfulness practice effected your behavior at school?
5. What did you like best about our mindfulness practice at school?
6. What did you like least about our mindfulness practice at school?
7. Have you used a mindfulness practice outside of Ms. Banitt's classroom? If so, tell me about it.
8. Have you taught anyone else about mindfulness?