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Mindful Artmaking in Elementary Classrooms:

A Path to Emotional Regulation

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January 2024

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Abstract

In an era dominated by technological advancements and mounting external pressures, the emotional and mental well-being of the younger generation is a growing concern. This research paper explores the intricate relationship between mindfulness, art-making, and emotional regulation within the context of elementary classrooms. The modern world, filled with a plethora of stimuli, has escalated stress levels among individuals, especially children, leading to a surge in mental health issues. Mindfulness, deeply rooted in ancient traditions, teaches individuals to stay present, fostering a non-judgmental awareness of their thoughts and emotions. Art-making, on the other hand, serves as a medium for emotional expression and self-discovery, providing a platform for individuals to externalize and process their feelings creatively. When combined, these tools form a potent strategy to help children understand, express, and regulate their emotions. This study delves into the foundational theories of mindfulness, art-making, and emotional regulation, investigating their relevance and applicability in today's educational settings. Furthermore, the paper underscores the symbiotic relationship between these themes, emphasizing their collective role in fostering emotional balance and mental well-being. As the complexities of the modern world continue to unfold, embracing the therapeutic potential of mindful art-making becomes imperative for cultivating resilience and emotional stability among the younger generation.

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Mindful Artmaking in Elementary Classrooms: A Path to Emotional Regulation

Throughout centuries humans have harnessed the power of artistic endeavors to articulate their emotions, beliefs, and personal narratives. Historically, the creation of art has served as a vital means for individuals to make sense of their lived experiences, communicate profound sentiments, and navigate the intricate web of human emotion. Beyond mere expression, the act of art-making has evolved as a potent tool for emotional regulation. The immersion in the artistic process, be it painting, sculpture, writing, or music, allows individuals to center themselves, channeling feelings in a constructive and transformative manner. Drawing from contemporary psychological paradigms, it is evident that art-making can also be framed as a form of mindfulness practice. Engaging in the arts encourages a focused attention on the present moment, fostering a state of flow and reducing external distractions. This, in turn, facilitates self-reflection, emotional balance, and cognitive clarity.

In a rapidly evolving world, the pressures and challenges confronting today's youth have grown both in complexity and intensity. With increased access to information and heightened societal expectations, children often find themselves facing numerous stressors. The continuous flow of information, increased work demands, social pressures, and the enduring global pandemic have significantly impacted mental health. Consequently, mental health issues, ranging from anxiety and depression to stress-related disorders, have become increasingly common. Coupled with the inherent challenges of cognitive and emotional growth, it is no surprise that concerns about the mental well-being of our younger generation are mounting. In this context, it is important for educators to identify, understand, and use strategies that not only support academic performance but also promote student well-being. Among the various strategies and

practices known for their effectiveness, mindfulness, art-making, and emotional regulation has gained prominence in fostering mental well-being.

These three practices, mindfulness, art-making, and emotional regulation, although distinct in nature, share a common thread – they offer individuals a means of understanding, expressing, and managing their emotions. Together they help build resilience in children. This paper will delve into the primary themes of these practices, explaining their importance in addressing the unique demands faced by children in today's schools.

Mindfulness, rooted in ancient contemplative traditions, teaches individuals to live in the present moment with non-judgmental awareness. It encourages introspection, allowing individuals to acknowledge their thoughts and emotions without being consumed by them. Mindfulness has been proven to reduce stress, improve focus, and enhance emotional regulation, making it a valuable tool for individuals.

Art-making offers a pathway for emotional expression and self-discovery. It is a sensory experience that promotes mindfulness. Whether it be through painting, drawing, writing, music, or other forms of creative expression, art allows individuals to externalize their inner thoughts and emotions. It provides a safe haven for authentic self-expression and emotional release.

Emotional regulation is the ability to recognize, manage, and respond to emotions in a constructive and adaptive manner. As emotions can be overwhelming in the face of stressors, learning how to regulate them is crucial for maintaining mental health. Emotional regulation strategies encompass a range of skills, from self-soothing techniques to cognitive reappraisal, which can be enhanced through mindfulness practices and art-making.

By connecting art-making and mindfulness, children learn to regulate their emotions and develop their capacity for mindful awareness of themselves and others. This paper will emphasize the critical role they play in supporting the mental health of students.

Mindfulness: An Overview

Defining mindfulness presents us with a complex, multi-faceted task. Various scholars and practitioners of mindfulness have provided insights into its meaning, laying the groundwork for understanding its profound benefits.

In his book *Mindfulness in Plain English*, Bhante Gunaratana reveals the nuances of mindfulness. The term mindfulness is the English translation of the Pali word, *sati*, and *sati* is considered an activity (2019). Gunaratana emphasizes that mindfulness is an experience (an activity) that can be described but is perplexing at best to define in words (2019). According to him, the characteristics of mindfulness include but is not limited to:

- Mindfulness is mirror-thought as it only reflects what is presently happening in the exact way it is happening (2019).
- Mindfulness is an impartial watchfulness that does not take sides or have biases (2019). It just perceives.
- Mindfulness is nonconceptual awareness in that it does not get caught up in thinking or concepts but rather an attention that is stripped of all labels and categorization. (2019).
- Mindfulness is present moment awareness because it is in the here and now of each moment (2019).

- Mindfulness is non-self-attentiveness because it never refers to the me, my, or mine and always observes without adding or subtracting to its observations (2019).

Jon Kabat Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program, offers a widely recognized definition: “Mindfulness is the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat Zinn, 2016, p. xxxv). Kabat Zinn acknowledges the complexity of defining mindfulness and its’ practice. Although awareness might seem like the same as thinking, it is not. Awareness “is a complementary form of intelligence, a way of knowing that is at least as wonderful and as powerful, if not more so, than thinking” (Kabat Zinn, 2013, p. xxxv). The practice of mindful awareness allows us to hold our thoughts to look at their content with a new perspective. Mindful awareness is developed through building our capacity for attention and discernment (Kabat Zinn, 2013). “Mindfulness is not merely a concept or a good idea. It is a way of being. And its synonym, awareness, is a kind of knowing that is simply bigger than thought and gives us many more options for how we might choose to be in relationship to whatever arises in our minds and hearts, our bodies, and our lives” (Kabat Zinn, 2013, p. xxxv).

Most people understand mindfulness to mean present moment awareness which Joseph Goldstein writes that is the opposite of absentmindedness (2016). He also uses the imagery of listening to music to expand our understanding of another aspect of mindfulness: the quality of bare attention, also referred to as non-interfering awareness. “When we’re listening to music, our minds are open and attentive, not attempting to control what comes next, not reflecting on the notes just past” (Goldstein, 2016, p. 14).

In her book, *Teach Breathe Learn*, Meena Srinivasan defines mindfulness as a way of being in which teachers and students must practice. This state of being is “a kind, curious, nonjudgmental awareness that we try to bring to each moment” (2014, p. 18).

Thich Nhat Hanh, in collaboration with Weare in, *Happy Teachers Change the World*, perceives mindfulness as “a kind of energy that helps us to be fully present in the here and now, aware of what is going on in our body, and our feelings, and our mind, and in the world, so that we can get in touch with the wonders of life that can nourish and heal us” (2017, p. xviii). He emphasizes that mindfulness always has an object of attention (2017). For instance, if we are practicing art-making in a mindful way, then we are practicing mindfulness of art-making.

Moreover, organizations like CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) underscore the importance of social and emotional awareness. Mindfulness fits seamlessly into this framework, encouraging not only self-awareness but also social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The multifaceted nature of mindfulness means that its definition and practice might vary, but its core remains the same: a deep, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. Whether through the lens of traditional Buddhism, modern psychology, or the teachings of renowned mindfulness practitioners, the benefits of mindfulness - for compassion, understanding, and emotional well-being - are universally acknowledged and celebrated.

Benefits of Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been recognized for their positive impact on children's overall well-being. Hanh and Weare (2017) highlighted that, when appropriately taught, mindfulness practices can substantially enhance a child's mental, emotional, social, and

physical health. This sentiment is echoed by several studies that have been conducted both prior to and after the publication of books on the integration of mindfulness into educational settings.

One core benefit of MBIs is the ability to teach children how to concentrate their attention, facilitating an awareness of their immediate thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (Coholic, Schwabe & Lander, 2020). Practicing MBIs with a mindset of non-judgment, children look at their emotional states, both pleasant and distressing, to better understand, regulate, and express their emotions more constructively. Furthermore, Coholic et al. (2020) emphasized that MBIs play a pivotal role in helping children develop resilience and rebound from adverse situations. However, to ensure enduring positive effects, the MBIs introduced to children should be both developmentally suitable and easily accessible. In this context, teachers ought to consider sharing MBIs using arts-based strategies.

Coholic and Eys (2015) advocate that acquiring mindfulness skills fosters a deeper understanding of one's emotions and thoughts. With this foundational knowledge, a child can make more conscious decisions regarding their emotional reactions. Such healthy emotional expression can further boost their performance at school and interactions at home and with peers (Coholic, 2015). In Coholic and Rys' 2015 study, they found that many vulnerable children easily become frustrated and disengaged, have trouble with listening skills, and cannot remain physically still while in lessons (2015). However, in educational environments, strategies effective for challenged students often benefit the entire class. This underscores the universal applicability of the interventions developed by Coholic's team for all young children, irrespective of their individual vulnerabilities. Furthermore, while Coholic and Eys (2015) acknowledged the inherent value of mindfulness techniques, they proposed that combining these interventions with arts-based strategies enhances their efficacy for children.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation stands as a pivotal aspect of human psychology, encompassing the capacity to manage and react appropriately to various emotional situations. The foundation of emotional regulation is laid during early childhood. As children grow, they encounter diverse situations that test their emotional responses, shaping their overall development and mental well-being (Thompson, 1994). Emotional regulation in children is multifaceted; it transcends merely recognizing feelings. Rather, it involves understanding, interpreting, and navigating these emotions in various contexts. A significant enhancer of this process is the practice of mindful awareness, wherein children are guided through these steps, from Hanh and Weare's chapter on Taking Care of Our Emotions: recognize, accept, embrace, look deeply and last, get the insight that we are more than our emotion (Hanh & Weare, 2017). We eventually experience more ease when practicing mindful awareness toward sensations and emotions that arise in our experience (Goldstein, 2016).

Merriam-Webster explains emotion as a conscious mental reaction—ranging from anger and fear to happiness—that manifests as a strong feeling typically targeted towards specific stimuli and is often accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes. Sensation, in contrast, emerges from the stimulation of sensory organs, translating into our conscious awareness. Both sensation and emotion are inherently intertwined, often leading to reciprocal causation. For instance, the sensation of hunger might precipitate feelings of irritability, while a profound feeling of sadness at the loss of a loved one can induce physical sensations like nausea.

The significance of emotional regulation transcends momentary reactions. A child adept in emotional regulation is primed for greater success in academic and social spheres. Their enhanced ability to manage stress, establish meaningful relationships, and make considered

decisions equips them for a well-rounded life (Blair & Raver, 2015). In this context, art-making emerges as a promising avenue. Art allows for an expressive freedom beyond the confines of language, anchoring children in the present and serving as a bridge to mindfulness and emotional regulation.

Engaging in art allows children to convey their emotions and experiences, fostering both self-expression and self-awareness. More than a mere activity, art-making introduces children to the realm of mindfulness, enabling them to recognize and manage their emotions better. With art-making, children learn to process their feelings, providing an innovative approach to enhancing emotional regulation.

The Sensory Experience of Art-making

Art-making offers a unique path towards mindfulness, allowing children to reset their nervous systems and attain a balanced mental state. This practice cultivates a clarity that can assist in managing daily stressors, much like the calming and centering effects of physical exercise. Indeed, research supports the idea that art-making positively impacts emotional regulation and self-awareness, largely due to its immersive sensory nature (e.g., the tactile feeling of a pencil on paper or the visual experience of blending colors).

According to Marilina Maraviglia, the definition of art is open, subjective, and debatable, which makes any definition we could agree on based on opinion (2010, para. 4 & 5). Maraviglia uses a working definition that resonates with this investigation of the intersection of art and mindfulness. Here, she discusses the meaning of art:

Art is often considered the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions. It encompasses a diverse range of human activities, creations, and ways of expression, including music, literature, film, sculpture,

and paintings. Art is generally understood as any activity or product done by people with a communicative or aesthetic purpose—something that expresses an idea, an emotion, or, more generally, a worldview. It is a component of culture, reflecting economic and social substrates in its design. It transmits ideas and values inherent in every culture across space and time. Its role changes through time, acquiring more of an aesthetic component here and a socio-educational function there (2010, paras. 1-3 & 7).

After rigorous exploration, Maraviglia simplifies the definition of art as "a form of human expression of a creative nature" (2010, para. 9). For this discussion, art is further restricted to expressions using traditional mediums like paint, graphite, textiles, ink, paper, wood, clay, and the like (Congdon, 2019).

The concept of utilizing sensation for emotional regulation is an ancient practice. The five primary senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch—can both intensify and alleviate human emotions. The incorporation of sensation in regulating emotion stands as a significant enhancement to arts-based mindfulness techniques. Sensation, mindfulness, and artmaking are deeply intertwined.

Koon Hwee Kan engaged in a qualitative study of art students in Singapore to explore how these students interact with meaning in school art. Although Kan's work diverges from the art-based mindfulness interventions this paper is reviewing, this work discussed the kinesthetic relationship of artmaking. The sensory effects of artmaking were noted in the art studio: art students work as hard as any athlete getting ready for field events on the track. Although art students are not move their bodies to jump, throw or race, their bodies move with into a state of attention and hand-eye coordination. (Kan, 2011). Both athletes and artists achieve a union of

mind and body, a state experienced through focused attention and continual skill refinement. Kan repeatedly draws comparisons between the flow states observed in artists and athletes.

Precision of bodily movement in sporting activities is measured against competitive factors such as time and scores. Practice makes perfect means mastering bodily skills to achieve absolute accuracy in every action, stroke, and motion in space – time. Does rendering paint through the brush or any cultural tool to express oneself requires such accuracy? (2011, p. 164)

Kan highlights the profound sensory connection between the hand, including the palm and fingers, when interacting with artistic tools. Art, akin to athletic endeavors, is a profound sensory journey capable of immersing the artist in a state of mindfulness. This state of awareness and embodiment is a byproduct of the art-making process, ultimately leading the artist to a harmonized state of mind and body.

In their 2023 review, Rodriguez and Kross explore the pivotal role of sensation as a tool for emotional regulation, prompting a deeper examination of the intricate relationship between the sensory experience and emotional states. The authors examine into the ways each of the five senses contributes to the modulation of emotions, presenting compelling evidence to support the potential of sensation as both an up- and down-regulation tool.

This study advocates for a heightened recognition of sensation within clinical settings as a viable and underexplored avenue for emotion regulation (Rodriguez & Kross, 2023). The authors not only make a case for the significance of sensation in shaping emotional experiences but also poses thought-provoking questions and ideas to promote further inquiry into sensory emotion regulation models.

One promising area that could be integrated into this field of study is art-making. As a multisensory activity, art creation stands out as a potentially valuable strategy for emotional regulation. By engaging multiple senses simultaneously, art-making offers a holistic and immersive experience that could significantly contribute to the understanding and application of sensory emotion regulation. As researchers embark on further investigations, exploring the intersection of art-making and sensory emotion regulation may reveal innovative therapeutic approaches and deepen our understanding of the interplay between sensory stimuli and emotional well-being.

Art and Mindfulness: The Connection

When it comes to artmaking, most people have had experience in childhood and classes in school. It often brings up a range of emotions. If you loved getting your hands on any materials to start creating, you may have experienced a pleasant emotion. If you began art with a teacher, parent, or friend looking over your shoulder at every scribble, art may have induced an unpleasant feeling that resulted in anxiety. Releasing the expectation of how a piece of art should or should not look when finished is a critical aspect of using art-making to regulate our unpleasant emotions. If we are mindful of how we create the environment for the artmaking process, children will let their imagination flow into artistic movements. Art-making can interact with mindfulness to help children navigate their emotions, and creating art can bring them into a mind state of awareness of why they are feeling the way they feel.

Developing Mindfulness Through Art-making

Teaching mindfulness through arts-based methods can help young people develop skills in a non-threatening and enjoyable way (Coholic, 2011). Coholic and her research team designed a curriculum that delivered mindfulness strategies to children in need once a week over six

weeks. They hypothesized that by providing an arts-based approach to learning mindfulness skills, children would learn in a non-threatening way while having fun. Some of the team's intended goals were "to help young people to understand and tolerate their feelings more effectively; to learn to improve coping skills and self-awareness; and to develop feelings of gratefulness and compassion" (Coholic, 2011, p. 314). Children are naturally playful, and arts-based learning can be playful, lending it to present the content in an appropriately developmental way. Results, determined through parent, foster parents, and child interviews, showed that through having fun and enjoying themselves, "children were helped to develop self-awareness and to feel better about themselves, and to learn emotional regulation and healthy expression of feelings, which in turn enable more effective coping with a variety of challenges including school" (Coholic, 2011).

Social Emotional Learning and Art-making

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a framework for learning about five core competencies that include self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills and social awareness. Schools all over the United States have been integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into school curriculum using the CASEL framework which has been shown to have positive benefits for children behaviorally, socially, and emotionally (Morgo-Wilson & Tredinnick , 2020). While a majority of implementation of CASEL's framework for social-emotional learning has been in the lower grades as well as in the general education classrooms, there has been growing interest in how arts' classrooms might support social-emotional learning.

In a 2020 study, researchers Morgo-Wilson and Tredinnick hypothesized that visual arts and music interventions would positively influence adolescents' social and emotional awareness

and empathy, directly impacting their mindfulness skills. This investigation involved students participating in the Connect with Kids program within their art and music classes. The findings supported the hypothesis, revealing that students who engaged in these interventions demonstrated increased social and emotional competencies compared to a comparison group. (Morgo-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020). Noteworthy changes were observed in perspective-taking and empathetic concern, both vital components of social and emotional wellness (Morgo-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020). The study demonstrates that “art and music offer a unique setting through which adolescents could develop these transferable life skills as a result of these subjects’ transformative power” (Morgo-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020, p. 118).

The observed enhancements in mindfulness skills further emphasize the potential of arts-based interventions in promoting a comprehensive approach to education. By recognizing the diverse learning styles of students and providing alternative channels for self-expression and skill development, incorporating visual arts and music into SEL programs can contribute to a more inclusive and effective educational landscape. Ultimately, this study invites educators and policymakers to consider the valuable role that art and music can play in nurturing the holistic development of students, transcending the boundaries of traditional academic domains.

Observation Skills from Mindfulness and Art-making

A reciprocal relationship between art-making and mindfulness occurs when observing a piece of art or an object as the subject of one's art-making and the intrinsic observation developed during mindful awareness practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness reminds us that the skill of observation is used as a primary tool for developing moment-to-moment self-awareness. Kabat-Zinn specifically uses the phrase paying attention, and this phrase and watching and examining are synonyms for observation. Children are using and increasing

their learning of this skill while making art. If they also use mindful attention while creating art, their art-making process is usually quite satisfying. It could be argued that observation in art-making and mindfulness practice is mutually beneficial to developing self-awareness of emotional states and self-regulation of those states. In a 2020 study on the role of mindfulness in observing and making art, Zabelina, White, Tobin, and Thompson found that practicing a mindfulness strategy before viewing and making art increased students' memory, and they were more creative and expressive in their art-making process (2020).

Art Therapy

When investigating art-based interventions for emotional regulation, it is imperative to distinguish between mindful art-making and formal art therapy within a clinical context. Art therapy, informed by extensive research, has been a recognized approach for regulating emotions through creative expression. While mindful art-making draws on insights from art therapy studies, it is important to emphasize that a facilitator engaging in this practice should not assume the role of a licensed art therapist. Furthermore, unqualified individuals should refrain from interpreting another person's art as a basis for mental health diagnosis or specific therapeutic needs.

In the context outlined in this rationale paper, art-making serves solely as an invitation to utilize a creative tool for emotional regulation. The intent is not to replicate the comprehensive framework of art therapy but to explore how the act of creating art, inspired by principles from art therapy, can lead individuals to a state of calm and regulated mindfulness. Recognizing the benefits of art therapy, this paper aims to investigate how the incorporation of art-making supports the journey toward a tranquil and regulated state of awareness, without assuming the complexities inherent in formal art therapy practice.

Art therapy encourages using art materials to express emotions and our feelings about them in a caring setting (Haiblum-Itskovitch, Czamanski-Cohen, & Galili, 2018). The process of art-making in art therapy to express emotions has a well-known basis and benefits for many patients. Therefore, art materials used in these settings vary in their fluidity, allowing an art therapy participant to express an emotional response in different ways including a mindset of openness or intensity as well as physically through using more or less pressure on the material used (Haiblum-Itskovitch et al., 2018). In a fascinating 2018 study, Haiblum-Itskovitch, Czamanski-Cohen, and Galili were curious to discover if the more fluid an art material, the more expressive the emotions for participants. They designed the study to test participants' heart rate variability (HRV) using different art materials, including pencils, oil pastels, and gouache paint. Their findings were informative. They found the material that produced the most positive mood when using the gouache paint. "Surprisingly, the largest suppression of the parasympathetic nervous system and augmentation of the sympathetic nervous system" may indicate increased emotional engagement during artmaking with oil pastels (Haiblum-Itskovitch et al., 2018, p. 1). Although additional studies are needed to grasp the impact format and presentation of materials as well as the content of artwork have on the artmaking process, this study is a reminder that the use of certain materials in support of using arts-based mindfulness techniques with children should be considered (Haiblum-Itskovitch et al., 2018).

Artistic Mindsets

There are convincing connections between the framework developed by Hetland, L., Sheridan, K. M., Veenema, S. & Winner, E. in their book Studio Thinking 2 and emotional regulation strategies that support mindful art-making. Three habits of mind from the eight habits

in the framework—Stretch and Explore, Express, and Engage and Persist—contribute to emotional regulation.

Stretch and Explore: This habit encourages learners to go beyond their comfort zones, to playfully experiment, and to be open to making mistakes (Hetland, L., Sheridan, K. M., Veenema, S. & Winner, E., 2013). Engaging in creative activities that involve stretching and exploring can be a powerful way to foster resilience and emotional regulation. It teaches individuals to embrace challenges rather than fear them, promoting a growth mindset. Mindful art-making in this context could involve encouraging students to be present in the moment, focusing on the process rather than the end result. Mindfulness practices, such as paying attention to their breath or senses while creating art, can help students manage stress and anxiety.

Express: The act of expressing oneself through art provides an outlet for emotions, thoughts, and personal meanings (Hetland, L., Sheridan, K. M., Veenema, S. & Winner, E., 2013). Artistic expression can be a form of catharsis, allowing individuals to communicate and process their feelings in a non-verbal way. Mindful art-making in the context of expression involves guiding students to be aware of their emotions as they create. Encouraging them to reflect on the emotions that arise during the artistic process and express them authentically can contribute to emotional self-awareness and regulation.

Engage and Persist: This habit involves tackling relevant problems and persevering through challenges (Hetland, L., Sheridan, K. M., Veenema, S. & Winner, E., 2013). Engaging in art tasks that are personally meaningful encourages focus and persistence, important components of emotional regulation. Mindful art-making in this context could involve teaching students techniques to stay present and focused when facing difficulties in their artwork. Mindfulness

practices can help them manage frustration and maintain a positive attitude, contributing to emotional resilience.

The Studio Thinking 2 framework supports developing emotional regulation skills through mindful art-making with focus on these three studio habits of mind. By integrating mindfulness practices into art education, educators can support students in cultivating self-awareness, managing emotions, and developing a positive and resilient mindset.

Author's Positionality

Positionality is a critical dimension of scholarly and practical work, as it provides insight into the perspectives and biases that a researcher might bring to a study. Understanding one's positionality allows for greater reflexivity and helps the audience gauge the potential influences on the research process and outcomes. In this regard, my positionality greatly informs the lens through which I approach this work.

As a teacher of both art and mindfulness, my connection to the subject of this study is deeply personal and professional. In the classroom and workshop settings, I have consistently observed students navigating their emotional landscapes through the act of art-making. I've witnessed firsthand the transformational power of the creative process, as students find pathways to self-regulation, fostering emotional balance, and enhancing their interpersonal skills. Such observations are not mere theoretical or abstract concepts for me; they are lived experiences, grounded in the real-life context of teaching and mentoring.

Moreover, on a personal level, art-making has served as a pivotal mindfulness tool for me. It has become an avenue for introspection, self-expression, and self-soothing. The process of creating art offers a space of presence, where the chatter of the mind is hushed, and one can be

fully immersed in the moment. The tangible and intangible benefits I have derived from merging art with mindfulness practices further fuel my passion for exploring this nexus in greater depth.

While my personal experiences and observations provide a rich foundation and genuine enthusiasm for this research topic, it is crucial to acknowledge potential biases that may arise from this deep-seated connection. I am inherently inclined to view artmaking as a positive force for emotional regulation due to my background. Recognizing this, I strive to maintain a balanced approach, continuously seeking to question my assumptions and ensure that my interpretations are grounded in evidence and the voices of the participants.

It is my hope that by laying out my positionality transparently, readers can better understand the lens through which this research is approached, appreciate the depth of personal and professional experience that informs the study, and critically engage with the findings in a meaningful way.

Firsthand Experience with Mindful Art Practices for Children

In considering the intersection of art-making, mindfulness, and emotional regulation, my research has led me to a rich array of mindful art practices, many of which will be integrated into the creative project segment of this thesis. Implementing these practices in my art classroom across various grade levels has not only reinforced my belief in the emotional regulatory impact of art-making in general but has also provided me with firsthand experiential evidence that aligns with the emergent research on this subject.

What stands out most vividly in my experience is the palpable energetic shifts that occur when the entire class engages in these mindful art practices. It is a testament to the transformative power of these techniques, and the unexpected depth to which students connect with them has been both surprising and gratifying. Particularly noteworthy is the mandala-

making practice, originally planned as a brief lesson with a focus on the process, which unexpectedly evolved into an identity project. The older children embraced it wholeheartedly, weaving it into their end-of-school-year portfolios, complete with artist reflections and evaluations. They understood that the journey from process to product was a valid expression of their engagement with mindful art-making.

The engagement of middle school children in exploring their identities through mindful art-making is an educator's dream. The transformative nature of color meditations, for instance, was evident in the fourth and fifth-grade artists who not only participated willingly but also fervently requested to continue the practice. The classroom, filled with the silence of focused minds and bodies, echoed the success of the session. Even during the cleanup, their enthusiasm spilled over as they debated leaving for their next class, leaving the classroom teacher noting the positive impact on their overall day.

These initial encounters with sharing mindful art practices with children have left an indelible mark on my teaching journey. Witnessing the emotionally regulating effects on my students has reinforced my commitment to integrating these practices into my pedagogy. As I approach the conclusion of my education at Lesley University, I carry with me the conviction that this work will persist, guiding both myself and my students in further exploration of mindful art practices that foster emotional regulation for both adults and children alike.

Conclusion

Mindful art-making serves as a connection point for self-expression, emotional regulation, and self-awareness, with profound implications for individuals, especially children navigating the complexities of modern life. As the world grows more connected yet simultaneously more fragmented, the challenges faced by children are multifaceted. Amidst the

clutter of the information age and the societal pressures, there is a critical need for tools that help individuals ground themselves.

This paper explored the realms of mindfulness, art-making, and emotional regulation, both as distinct entities and as intertwined tools for personal growth. Rooted deeply in ancient practices, mindfulness offers a pathway to introspection, fostering a deep awareness of the present moment. When this is paired with art-making, a medium for externalizing thoughts and emotions, the results are powerful. Not only does art provide an outlet for emotional expression, but when approached mindfully, it can be transformative.

Emotional regulation, which has increasingly become a pivotal skill in today's stress-laden world, finds a strong ally in both mindfulness and art-making. The tools provided by these practices not only help individuals manage their emotions but also offer avenues to understand them, leading to enhanced resilience and well-being.

The empirical studies and literature presented underscore the significance of integrating these practices, especially in educational environments. They offer promising results in enhancing focus, promoting holistic well-being, and enabling children to thrive amidst adversity.

Furthermore, the sensory experience of art-making offers a tangible, immediate pathway into mindfulness. Every brushstroke, every shade of color, and even the tactile sensation of molding clay or sketching on paper, becomes an avenue into the present moment. When children are guided to approach art-making with mindful awareness, they learn to merge the external act of creation with internal introspection.

As educators, policymakers, and caregivers, understanding and integrating these practices into the foundational years of children's lives becomes paramount. The implications extend

beyond just individual well-being. A generation of emotionally balanced, self-aware, and resilient children can lead to healthier communities and societies.

In conclusion, while technology, societal pressures, and global challenges will continue to evolve, the human need for expression, understanding, and emotional balance remains constant. Mindful art-making offers a timeless, holistic approach to meet these needs, fostering a future where individuals are not just surviving, but thriving.

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mindful art
practices for
children

cc gober

A hand-drawn circle in black ink, centered on a white rectangular piece of paper. The circle is slightly irregular and has a thick, dark stroke.

Mindful art
practices for
children

cc gober

introduction

Hello! As an art teacher in a small rural school, I have the privilege of guiding all ages of children through the magical world of creativity. Through my experience in teaching art, I have observed the deep impact that the act of creating art has on both children and adults. When children move into the flow of art-making, the classroom is transformed into a serene space where imagination flourishes.

In the pages that follow, I delve into the realm of Mindful Art Practices for children. This innovative approach merges the joy of artistic expression with intentional mindfulness guidance throughout the creative process, culminating in a moment of reflection at the end of each practice. Through this journey, children discover a harmonious connection between their artistic endeavors and their mental and physical well-being.

Witnessing young artists engrossed in the creative flow, it is not uncommon to hear protests when it is time to tidy up for the next class. The protests speak volumes about the profound impact art has on their state of mind. As they engage in mindful art, children often find themselves centered, grounded, and at peace. Heart rates steady, minds clear, and the collective energy within the classroom becomes a tranquil force. Reported emotions lean towards the positive, and the shared calm in a room filled with children engaged in a common process is palpable.

This book advocates for a shift in focus from the final product to the artistic process itself. Children are encouraged to immerse themselves in the journey, understanding that this time is for personal exploration, not merely to produce a showcase piece, although sharing is certainly encouraged.

The guide, whether a teacher or anyone assuming the leadership role, plays a crucial part in cultivating the mindful atmosphere. The journey requires a delicate balance of focused instructions and gentle observations of the artwork. While preparedness with materials and guidance is essential, the true value of the leader emerges in facilitating group reflections, allowing participants to delve into the significance of their shared creative experience.

As you embark on this journey through mindful art practices, the pages that follow offer practical advice on how to utilize this book to its fullest potential, ensuring a meaningful and transformative experience for both you and the young artists you guide.

how to use this book

each practice includes similar sections, in this how-to section, you will find helpful hints to prepare you.

getting ready

materials

be sure to prepare all the materials you will need for each practice so that you can intentionally create the environment for mindful art-making and reflection at the end.

creating a mindful environment

there is a reminder in the getting ready section of each practice to remind the leader to prepare a mindful environment for the children.

the goal is to create a relaxed, supportive, and non-judgmental environment, allowing children the freedom to express themselves creatively and also mindfully.

atmosphere tone environment arriving settling landing centered

creating a mindful environment conducive to these art practices depends on which practice you are doing. use your discretion to decide which of these are appropriate for each practice. here are some ideas:

sound:

- sometimes a quiet room is helpful.

- sometimes playing soothing background music or nature sounds can be supportive.
- sometimes playing upbeat music might be effective to build an atmosphere of positivity.

breath:

- start with a short breathing exercise to help children relax and focus their minds and center their bodies on the practice.

grounding:

- begin with a short mindfulness exercise to help children settle into the present moment such as the grounding technique 5-4-3-2-1.

children will silently name in their minds:

- 5 things they can see
- 4 things they can feel
- 3 things they can hear
- 2 things they can smell
- 1 thing they can taste

leading the workshop

introduce

this section helps the facilitator mindfully prepare the children for the practice and introduce them to what they will be doing.

the art practice

this section starts the practice, it is where the children start “doing”.

reflecting on the practice

this section is in each practice and sometimes there are thoughts to help facilitate the leader through the reflection process. for other practices, there is a reminder to come back here and use the ideas presented:

encourage the children to reflect on their progress and experience by sharing their reflections individually with whole group, with partners or small groups (emphasize to all the children a positive and supportive atmosphere is important when others are sharing).

here are some questions you might ask to prompt their thinking:

- please share your observations.
- how did this practice feel in your body? your mind?
- what was your breath doing while you were participating in this art practice?
- which parts of your piece are you proud of and areas you might want to change?
- what are some challenges you faced?
- what parts of the practice did you enjoy?
- how did it feel to create with **watercolors** (insert any art medium used) mindfully?
- what emotions or thoughts came up during the activity?
- what was your favorite part of the process?
- did a feeling of gratitude arise, if so what for?

reflect consider ponder wonder think about

* * * the leader might choose to end the session sharing a gratitude they have for the time spent together practicing mindful art-making.

variations

this section offers variations or additions that might enhance the practice after you have practiced it once. feel free to change up the practices with your own ideas.

share and celebrate art and artistic process

choosing to display

although these practices focus on artistic process rather than art product, allow children to share their mindful art-work with the group during the reflection time if they feel comfortable and consider displaying the artworks in a designated space. maybe you create a mindful art-making document board in the school or maybe your child wants to display their work on a wall in your home to remind them of the peaceful state they feel when making art.

things to remember when working with children

- remember that you can adapt the instructions based on the age, developmental level and individual needs of the children or the whole group. the goal is to create a positive and enjoyable experience that fosters creativity and mindfulness.
- emphasize the importance of the process over the product, encourage the children to enjoy the process without judgment.
- encourage participants to carry the mindfulness learned during slow drawing into their daily lives at school and home.

- emphasize that these practices are something they can do anytime or incorporate into a morning, evening, or Saturday morning artistic routine.
- remember, the goal of these practices is not perfection but engagement and presence in the artistic process.

enjoy this mindful artistic journey! cc

drawing your breath

getting ready

materials:

- drawing paper: sketch paper...size can vary
- drawing tools: pencils, colored pencils, or markers

create a **mindful environment**: see the introduction for ideas . . .

leading the practice

introduce the concept of drawing your breath, explaining that the goal is to visually represent the rhythm and patterns of one's breath through art.

begin with a short, guided breathing exercise to help children become aware of their breath. instruct children to pay attention to their breath. ask them to notice the inhales and exhales, the pace, and any sensations associated with breathing.

the art practice: start the drawing session by having children pick any drawing tool to represent their breath on paper. initially, start with a circle to represent their breath. pass out another paper and start another drawing where they can choose to draw lines, shapes, or patterns that mimic the rhythm of their breath.

reflect: once the art pieces are completed, gather the children for a reflection session. facilitate a group discussion about the experience. ask children to share how they chose to represent their breath and if they noticed any changes in their breathing during the activity.

give children a moment to reflect individually on their breath drawings. ask them to consider what they discovered about their breath and how the act of drawing it made them feel.

emphasize the connection between art and mindfulness. encourage children to explore drawing their breath as a regular practice for relaxation and self-expression.

variations

if using colored pencils or markers, invite children to add color to their breath drawings afterward. discuss how different colors might represent different feelings or sensations.

encourage experimentation with line thickness, shading, and color blending to express the uniqueness of each child's breath.

drawing your breath



variations



slow drawing

getting ready

materials:

- drawing paper: sketch paper (size can vary)
- drawing tools: pencil & eraser or use a thin black marker
- drawing board & clip or tape: to secure the paper while drawing
- timer: managing time intervals during the slow drawing
- natural objects or inspiring images: serve as inspiration for the drawings

create a **mindful environment**: see the introduction for ideas. . .

leading the workshop

introduce: explain the idea of slow drawing as a meditative and mindful practice & emphasize the importance of taking one's time to observe details, textures and patterns and capturing what they notice.

the art practice: pick a subject: choose a simple and visually interesting subject for everyone to draw for example a feather, shell, leaf.

demonstrate: show the children how you observe and draw the textures and patterns you see.

encourage slow, deliberate drawing, paying close attention to the details of the subject.

throughout the session, offer gentle prompts to guide participants in exploring different aspects of their drawings, such as focusing on experimenting with line variations.

save time for reflection and sharing: see the introduction for ideas...

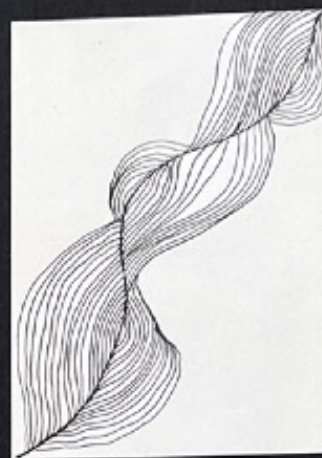
once the art pieces are completed, gather the children for a reflection session.

variations

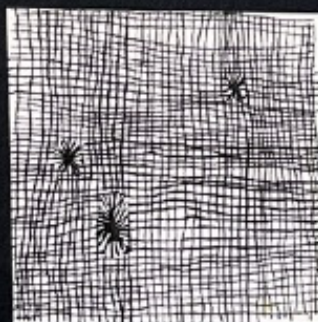
adding color - if colored pencils or markers are available, allow children to add color to their drawings. Emphasize the use of color to enhance their observations.

repeat the slow drawing process several times with different time intervals, regularly at the beginning of each art class or as a transition into another subject allowing the children to add to their drawings or start new ones.

slow drawing



variations



watercolor meditations

getting ready

materials:

- small piece of watercolor paper or thick drawing paper
- watercolor paint set
- small round paintbrush
- water dish
- paper towels or cloth for blotting brushes
- palette for mixing colors (optional)
- artist's mat (larger piece of construction paper) for gluing surface

create a **mindful environment**: see the introduction for ideas. . .

leading the workshop

introduce: explain to the children that they will be engaging in a mindful art practice using watercolor painting. share the idea that this activity is not about creating a specific picture but about exploring colors and expressing feelings through the medium of watercolor.

the art practice: encourage children to choose colors that resonate with their current emotions or whatever colors they are attracted to in this moment.

instruct children to dip their brushes in water and then gently into the chosen color. they should get a good amount of pigment on their brush so that the first mark is very saturated (dark) with color. with each successive mark they should dip the tip of their brush in the water. each mark will get lighter and lighter as a new drop of water is added to the brush, but no more pigment is added. they should try to make four to five values of this one color before cleaning their brush and starting a new color. when they look at their paper, they will see a value gradient of each color they chose to use.

guide them to make slow and deliberate brushstrokes on the paper, focusing on the sensation of the brush moving and the colors blending.

save time for reflection and sharing: see the introduction for ideas. . .

once the art pieces are completed, gather the children for a reflection session.

note: teach the children how to mindfully care for their art materials by cleaning them with care.

variations

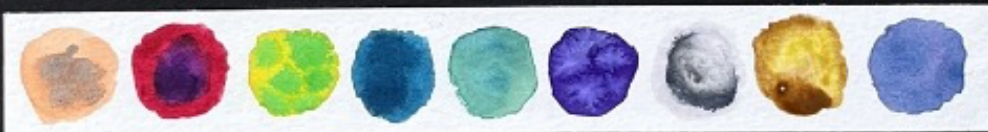
although you might choose to start the whole group with one shape, children can choose from many different shapes to use as they paint.

vary the amount of time you give for this practice, once children understand the process, you can do it for shorter or longer times.

watercolor meditations



variations



Torn paper emotions

getting ready

materials:

- colored construction paper
- glue sticks
- small piece of drawing paper for base of collage
- artist's mat (larger piece of construction paper) for gluing surface

create a **mindful environment**: see the introduction for ideas. . .

leading the workshop

introduce: explain the concept of expressing emotions through art. discuss different emotions and ask the children to share times when they felt those emotions.

emphasize that emotions can be complex and that it's okay to feel a range of them.

the art practice: provide each child with colored construction paper. ask them to think about an emotion they want to express and choose a color that represents that emotion for them. then, instruct them to tear the paper into pieces. this tearing process can be therapeutic and help release tension.

give each child a piece of base paper (often white or black). instruct them to arrange the torn paper pieces on the paper to create a composition that represents their chosen emotion. encourage creativity and experimentation with different arrangements.

once the children are satisfied with their compositions, provide glue sticks and ask them to glue the torn paper pieces onto the paper. this step helps solidify their creations and allows for further expression.

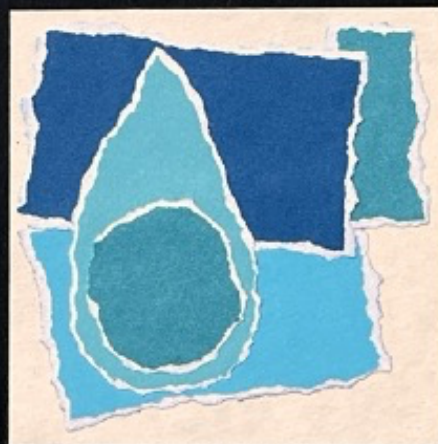
save time for reflection and sharing: see the introduction for ideas. . .

once the art pieces are completed, gather the children for a reflection session.

variations

experiment with using magazines, newspapers, or catalogs for tearing out colors.

Torn paper emotions



mandalas

getting ready

materials:

- drawing paper cut into squares or pre-cut circular paper
- drawing tools: pencil & eraser, colored pencils, markers
- rulers: straight edges or compass for creating precise circles
- guiding tools: mandala templates or stencils

create a **mindful environment**: see the introduction for ideas...

leading the workshop

introduce: begin with a brief explanation of mandalas, describing them as geometric shapes that represent the universe or a wholeness within oneself. also share examples of mandalas from different cultures (these can be found online by searching for mandala images).

explain the concept of mindfulness, emphasizing being present in the moment without judgment.

the art practice: instruct children to start by drawing a small shape or symbol in the center of their paper. this will serve as the focal point.

***depending on the children's ages, you may want to use the mandala template. they can create their designs within each circle.

guide children to expand outward from the center, creating patterns and designs. encourage them to experiment with different shapes.

once they have completed their designs, they can mindfully color their mandala.

this art practice can be done over a series of shorter times until they have completed their piece.

save time for reflection and sharing: see the introduction for ideas. . .

once the art pieces are completed, gather the children for a reflection session.

pause and ask the children to observe their mandalas mindfully. encourage them to notice the details, colors, and patterns they've created.

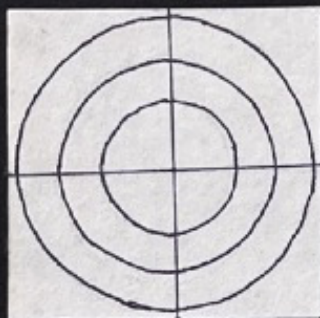
ask the children to reflect on their experience:

- what did they enjoy about creating the mandalas?
- how did they feel during the process?

for those comfortable, allow children to share their mandalas with the group.

encourage positive feedback and appreciation for each other's creativity.

mandalas



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