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Mindfulness in Schools Research Project: Exploring Students' Perspectives of Mindfulness

—What are students' perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school?

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the cultivation of mindfulness has become a common part of the curriculum in classrooms around the world. A recent survey indicates that nearly 50% of teachers are sharing mindfulness with children. To date, researchers have predominately used outcome-based trial designs to understand the practice's efficacy for improving wellness in children. Less research has been directed towards understanding how children perceive mindfulness experiences. This gap inspired the research question—What are students' perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school? Thematic analysis was employed to understand and interpret 38 elementary school students' mindfulness journals. Findings suggest that mindfulness enhances student wellbeing and helps children develop a greater awareness of their body, mind and emotions. Implications of these findings are discussed. Future research is required to determine how mindfulness practices enhance and sustain student wellbeing and learning.

Keywords

Well Being, Wellness, Mindfulness, Student Engagement, Conflict Resolution, Happiness, Peace

Introduction

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that suggests mindfulness is an essential life skill for all children (Albrecht, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2014). Mindfulness techniques help focus attention and have the potential

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to enhance student wellbeing (Albrecht, 2015). Mindfulness practices center on awareness of the mind, body and emotions and hence the development of the whole person. Recent statistics from the United Kingdom indicate that nearly 50% of school-age children engage in some form of mindful activities (Stone, 2014).

Mindfulness is also a burgeoning area of academic interest. Research investigating the phenomenon commenced in the early 1980s and by the close of 2012 there were approximately 2500 journal articles on the topic (Black, 2014). Due, in part, to positive findings in adult populations, mindfulness programs have been implemented in schools around the world (Albrecht, 2014) and there are now a substantial number of studies reporting on how mindfulness programs impact school communities (Albrecht, 2014; Burke, 2010; Harnett & Dawe, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2014).

Studies to date have predominately been outcome-based, with less focus on in-depth explorations using qualitative methodologies. In particular, there has been minimal research examining how young children (five to 12 years old) perceive the practice. It has been suggested that there is a critical need to explore this growing field of educational practice by using qualitative research methods (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012). This gap in the field inspired the current research study, which focuses on understanding elementary school students' perspectives of learning mindfulness for the first time in an independent school located in New Zealand. The following research question was posed: *What are students*' *perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school*?

In the current article findings from the research are presented. However, first the authors define mindfulness, give examples of child-centric mindfulness practices, outline a wellness conceptual framework for understanding the findings, and review qualitative research on the topic.

Mindfulness Definition

"Mindfulness is mostly used to refer to a way of 'being', which has prescribed characteristics, activities and programs designed to cultivate this way of being, as well as ancient meditation techniques rooted in various religions" (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012, p. 1). It may be broadly described as a natural human capacity, which involves observing, participating and accepting each of life's moments from a state of equilibrium or loving kindness (Albrecht et al., 2012). Mindfulness can be practiced through meditation and contemplation, but may also be cultivated through paying attention to one's every day activities (such as eating, gardening, walking and listening) and school-based activities (such as class work) (Albrecht et al., 2012). Mindfulness is not just about paying *more* attention; but it's about the *kind* of attention we pay (Williams, Teesdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007).

Classroom Practice

There is estimated to be at least 30 different mindfulness programs for children around the world (Albrecht, 2015). In a text analysis of programs that included hard-copy books, substantial differences were found in the types of activities presented (Albrecht, 2015). This reflects the myriad of ways mindfulness can be experienced, integrated and applied to daily life (Snel, 2013). An example of one activity that could readily be practised by a teacher without an extensive mindfulness, or meditation practice is called "Time In"—time to check in with yourself—to refocus awareness and attention (Schoeberlein & Seth, 2009, p. 91). Schoeberlein and Seth (2009), the authors of the mindfulness book, "Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A guide For Anyone Who Teaches Anything", present a range of simple exercises that can be easily incorporated within a lesson. For example, one activity involves inviting students to listen to the ambient sounds in the room for 30 seconds, without making any new sounds themselves (Schoeberlein & Seth, 2009, p. 92).

Another activity that children can practice at home or in the classroom, from Snel's (2013) text, "Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids", involves asking children to notice their breathing, when watching a scary film, when they are happy and relaxed, riding a bike and so on. Students are then invited to reflect on what their breathing is telling them (Snel, 2013, p. 26-27).

Mindfulness practices presented in some school-based programs also include short meditations (Albrecht, 2015) and have the core properties associated with classifying a practice as a meditation technique (see Albrecht, 2011; Cardoso, de Souza, Camano & Leite, 2008). Such practices, which may require teachers to undertake meditation classes, or practice the technique at home before sharing in the classroom, are self-induced; have a "focus" or "anchor"; involve logic-relaxation and also involve muscle relaxation somewhere during the process.

A Wellness Conceptual Framework for School Based Mindfulness Programs

A number of researchers have suggested the need to find a conceptual framework to guide our understanding of mindfulness (Albrecht et al., 2012; Harnett & Dawe, 2012; Ospina, 2007). Given the popularity and prevalence of wellness frameworks in schools around the world (Cruchon, 2009; The State of South Australia, 2007; Hollingsworth, 2009; McQuaid, 2012; Yager, 2011), wellness theory and models have been suggested as a framework to guide and enhance our appreciation of some aspects of mindfulness practice and research (Albrecht, 2015). Mindfulness is also overwhelmingly considered in both academic (see Campion & Rocco, 2009; Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2008) and popular literature (see Rechtschaffen, 2014; Sigel, 2008) to be "wellness-orientated" and a "wellness intervention", targeting a wide range of social, emotional, physical, spiritual and cognitive outcomes (Schoeberlein & Seth, 2009; Willard, 2010).

What Is Wellness?

Wellness, a term often used interchangeably with wellbeing (Mackey, 2000), is not a new concept. It is a state of being that humans innately strive for and have theorized about for centuries (Cohen, 2010; Compton & Hoffman, 2013), with key tenets often forming an integral role in First Nation culture (Weaver, 2002). Wellness is today commonly described as an active, life long and ever-lasting process of becoming aware of choices, making decisions and taking responsibility towards achieving a balanced and fulfilling life. It is multi-dimensional in nature, unique to the individual and centered on the premise that the mind, body, spirit and community are all interrelated and interdependent (Synthesized from Corbin & Pangrazzi, 2001; Definition of Wellness, 2009; Freston, 2008; Wellness Society, 2009). The term has been used in the English language since the 1600s (Miller, 2005), however, it has only been in the last two decades that the concept has received significant attention.

A number of theorists have employed simple metaphors and diagrammatic explanations to help convey core principles. One method is to use "wheels", pie graphs or hexagons to depict how different dimensions, such as spiritual, cognitive, emotional, environmental and physical aspects combine to form wellness as seen in **Figure 1**.

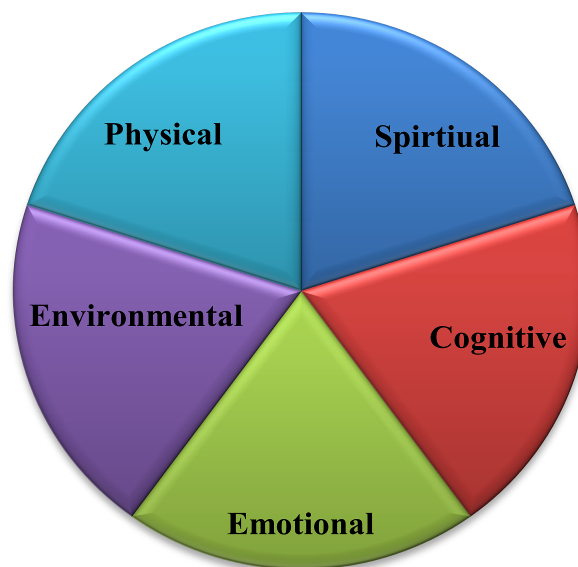


Figure 1: Wellness Wheel example.

When a person, for example, over exercises and then neglects spending time with friends, the wheel is represented in a lop-sided fashion—flat in some quadrants and the individual's overall level of wellness is said to be impaired (Greenberg, Dintiman, & Oakes, 2004). An individual may experience "High-Level Wellness" when he/she has awareness, knowledge and the ability and motivation to take active steps to keep the tire "inflated"

in regards to all dimensions of wellbeing (Greenberg et al., 2004; Travis & Ryan, 2004).

Building on a range of wellness models the second author, Albrecht, proposes seven dimensions of wellness—physical, emotional, social, cognitive, spiritual, environmental and creative wellness. The seventh dimension, "creative wellness" is associated with the pursuit and exploration of creative and imaginative interests with a trusting, tolerant and accepting mindset. For further information on wellness dimension characteristics refer to Albrecht (2014).

Together with the first author, Ager, the second author, Albrecht, developed a seven-dimension wellness educational model (see **Figure 2**). The seven dimensions of wellbeing are considered in the context of four domains of education practice: learning environment—the ethos/culture and aesthetics of the school, infrastructure and physical environment; curriculum and pedagogy—the twin process of teaching and learning; partnerships—the numerous relationships that exist to support learners; and policies and procedures—system and local statements and directions on significant issues that affect learner well-being. Global consciousness and sustainability is an awareness that we are connected to a global family and that sustainability in our own lives depends on and transcends borders. The wellness model shows that children flourish when all dimensions are favorable.

Figure 2: Student Wheel of Wellness.

Qualitative Mindfulness Research

Mindfulness research in both child and adult populations has predominately been outcomes based. There has been little qualitative research directed towards listening to "children's voices"; that is, how children perceive the practice—their thoughts, feelings and reflections. Without negating the value of outcome-based research, it could be argued that this type of research does not explore how children think and feel, what program improvements could be made, or the difficulties and challenges faced during the process. In order to understand prior qualitative studies conducted in the area, database searches were completed as a means of locating primary research articles investigating mindfulness practices from an elementary school child's perspective. The search was limited to the English language, with no time restrictions and was conducted during April 2013, October 2013 and May 2014. The following databases were searched: Google Scholar, Health Collection (Informit), Humanities & Social Sciences, ProQuest RMIT database, PubMed and SAGE Journals Online. Search terms used were: Mindfulness AND the Child's Perspective, Mindfulness AND the Child's Voice, Mindfulness AND the Classroom, Mindfulness AND Children; Mindfulness AND Elementary Schools; and Mindfulness AND Adolescents. All fields were searched. In addition, a number of articles were recommended by colleagues that were not found in the search. Literature was sparse, with approximately nine articles located exploring mindfulness from the child's perspective. Of the nine studies, one was a review article and eight were original research articles. Only studies exploring mindfulness in elementary school children were chosen for review. These are outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1:
Summary of the qualitative research studies reviewed.

Research	Methodology	Method	**Outcomes** of the children's experiences of mindfulness
Carelse (2013)	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis-IPA	Illustrations and interviews using IPA of experiences and thematic analysis	Heightened awareness of body and emotions Assisted concentration
Coholic (2011)	Grounded Theory	Interviews using thematic analysis	Lower emotional reactivity (a measure of resilience)
Cruchon (2009)	Mixed Methods	Student journal writing, teacher-researcher journal writing, questionnaire, and mood inventory were tools for thematic analysis The short version of the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC-10)	Affirmative feelings of calmness and fun emerged as major themes
Smith (2010, 2013)	Case Study	Student journal writing, and happiness scale questionnaires were tools for thematic analysis	Heightened awareness of body and emotions; affirmative feelings of calmness, enhanced feelings of mental focus and clarity

The authors found that the Coholic (2011) study provided a rich source of data that endeavored to explore the processes, purpose and outcomes of a youth-based mindfulness program. Coholic's deeply caring voice and commitment to helping children in need shone through her writing. The "qualitative thrust" of the research, as Coholic (2011, p. 308) describes, was guided by grounded theory. Approximately 50 children and adolescents aged from eight to 15 years, involved with child protection and/or mental health systems in Canada, voluntarily took part in a 12-week arts-based mindfulness program, which also incorporated indigenous elements. Children participated in small groups of four, due to behavior problems, over a two-hour period. At the end of the program, participants were interviewed about the course experience. Coholic (2011) describes the conundrums associated with trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research and addresses the majority of points expressed by Elliott et al. (1999) in the evolving guidelines on publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields.

The take home theme from the interviews with the youth was that they felt mindfulness lessons were "fun." **Figure 3** depicts aspects of the program the participants thought were "fun." "Fun" is a broad term that children

use to describe something they like doing. In Coholic's 2011 study, a child expressed that she was able to appreciate the "beauty of her inner being". Children articulated improvements in:
- academic achievement;
- expanded range of knowledge in regards to emotions;
- the ability to regulate emotions;
- paying attention and focus;
- self-efficacy, which lead to the ability to stand up to bullies;
- relaxation;
- empathy and
- compassion.

Figure 3: Youth perceptions of engaging in an arts-based mindfulness program.

One point of concern that Coholic (2011) expressed in her work was that children could not always clearly remember their immediate thoughts and feelings about the lessons. This may be due to the delay between the lesson and subsequent interview, however, the time lag involved was not reported. Timing is an important aspect to take into account when planning research in regards to hearing a child's voice. When teaching adolescent and adult populations the second author, Albrecht, suggests to students that they write their thoughts, feelings, sensations in their body, insights and epiphanies in a journal directly after they finish a meditation session and then at the end of the program. Albrecht then asks them to re-read their entries and reflect on their comments to arrive at new insights. This encourages meta-cognition and enables the lived meditation experience to be documented as close as possible to when it occurred.

Cruchon (2009), using a mixed-method design, investigated the effects of a mindfulness/relaxation and yoga program with 20 students from her Grade One class in the Montreal area in Canada. The students included 14 boys and six girls ranging from six to seven years of age. Children practiced yoga and mindfulness/relaxation for 12 thirty-minute sessions (two per week) over a six week period. Thematic analysis was utilized in order to understand the vocabulary used by the children when expressing their response to the practice in a journal. The most commonly used affirmative words were "fun", "enjoy", "great", "good" and "happy." Students' feelings of calmness were expressed through vocabulary such as "calm", "sleepy", "tired" and "relaxed." Cruchon (2009, p. 50) concluded that "it would appear that yoga and mindfulness/relaxation has the potential of helping young children feel more relaxed, less afraid, less tense, less sad and more happy." A limitation of the study was that the dual role of mindfulness instructor/classroom teacher may have introduced bias (Cruchon, 2009).

Carelse (2013) researched children's experiences of learning mindfulness in the United Kingdom. Six children, aged nine years old from a Year Five conventional elementary school participated in the study. Each child had been identified as having mild attention issues. Skills to develop attention were taught through mindfulness experiences and students recorded their feelings by completing pictorial and written narratives. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze data. Children used words such as "calm", "relaxed" and "happy" to describe their emotions and embodied feelings during the mindfulness practice. The children also expressed heightened awareness of the senses, especially physical sensations and sounds. Later, students were able to apply mindfulness practices to help them with concentration. Carelse (2013) found it necessary to amend her methods during the study and increased the frequency of mindfulness practice from one weekly session over 10 weeks to twice weekly sessions over five weeks.

The last qualitative study to be reviewed was a case study by Smith (2010, 2013). The study involved analysis of a Buddhist education program conducted in 10 metropolitan government primary or elementary schools in Melbourne, Australia. The program commenced in 2004 and focused on imparting Buddhist principles and practices through storytelling, plays, meditation, mindful movement, loving kindness visualisations, connecting with the body, and observing and understanding the implications of interconnectedness. Using action research methodology, Buddhist teachers from the schools together with Smith, developed and refined the program so it would be suitable and engaging for all children, irrespective of belief systems. Data was gathered from 2006 until 2007 with a focus of understanding and interpreting teachers', parents' and students' perceptions in relation to the spiritual educational initiative. In the current article the authors will concentrate on discussing findings in relation to the students' reflections.

From 2004, over a hundred children, each school year, from Year One and Six took part in half hour weekly lessons. Data was gathered from children in Year Five and Six, across two of the schools that participated in the program. Students completed a happiness scale, designed by Smith (2010, 2013, p. 96) prior to and after each session. The happiness scale included three measures of happiness. Faces reflected sad, neutral and happy feelings. Students then placed themselves on the scale and wrote about their thoughts, feelings and perceptions in a workbook. Smith (2010, 2013) collected 522 workbook entries over a two year time period and used coding and thematic analysis to listen to and interpret the children's voices. According to the results from the scale, approximately 87% of the entries showed either no, or some positive change. However, scale readings need to be interpreted together with students' narrative workbook entries in order to understand the perceptual shifts that occurred (Smith, 2010, 2013). Smith (2013, p. 102) writes:

> When considered in combination even negative scale recordings have indicated active engagement in the process of cultivating awareness, sustaining effort, and learning about some of the vagaries of ongoing meditative practices. From a Buddhist practitioner point of view these are necessary learning outcomes.

Smith (2010, 2013) includes in her research results a plethora of the students' comments, which from the current authors' perspective, reveals the inner wisdom of children as they cultivate mindfulness and meditation. For example, at the end of the school year, Corey shares his thoughts about meditation:

"It felt a bit too long, but when I settled my mind I felt my kindness getting bigger and bigger, it was even bigger than me."

Methodology

Thematic analysis is a popular approach used in qualitative psychology research. Thematic analysis is a foundational qualitative analytic research method. Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 6) write that it is used for: "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail."

Thematic analysis is a relatively new methodology. However, it has historical origins in the older quantitative tradition of content analysis which dates back to the early twentieth century. Thematic analysis uses many of the same principles and procedures as content analysis by categorizing frequency of occurrences (Joffe, 2011). However, thematic analysis adds an experiential and emotional dimension to the material which illuminates intricacies of meaning.

In thematic analysis, the researcher plays an active role in identifying patterns and themes. In the current research, themes were analysed in the context of the research question, "*What are students*' *perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school*?" Researchers used an essentialist, or realist method "which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9) to explore student perspectives of mindfulness. Within the data set, patterned responses constituted a theme and reflected "the most salient constellations of meanings present in the data" (Joffe, 2011, p. 209).

A comprehensive guide to the six phases of conducting thematic analysis is outlined in Braun & Clarke's paper entitled "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology" (2006).

Method

Participants

Study participants consisted of 18 students ranging in age from six to seven years, and 20 pupils ranging in age from nine to 10 years, from a co-educational Kindergarten—Year 12 independent school located in Auckland, New Zealand. Students participated during the second half of 2013. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, individual data was de-identified by school staff. Therefore, the cultural background and academic performance of the participants is not known. It is also not known whether students had any prior mindfulness experiences.

Program

The mindfulness program students took part in was called, "Meditation Capsules: A Mindfulness Program for Children" developed in Australia by Etty-Leal (2010). The program is presented in a text book together with an accompanying CD in a familiar lesson-style format that teachers can readily grasp and put in to action (Albrecht et al., 2012). The book is divided into 10 sessions and sequentially builds awareness of how to implement mindfulness in the classroom (Albrecht et al., 2012). Etty-Leal (2010) has integrated a range of techniques with core curriculum subjects to enhance academic performance, compassion and general wellbeing. The book shares with children and teachers:

- Relaxation, Meditation and Self-awareness.
- Getting to Know the Body.
- Awareness of the Breath.
- Understanding the Stress Response.
- Words and their Emotional Power.
- The Sense of Sight, Smell, Sound, Taste and Touch.
- The Sense of Humor.
- Observation of Thoughts.
- Creativity.
- Stillness Meditation.

Meditation Capsules is designed to suit a range of ages from four to 18 years of age. The program and book caters for teachers that have no experience with meditation, or practicing mindfulness techniques but also is designed to suit individuals with an extensive mind-body wellness background (Albrecht et al., 2012).

Data Collection and Procedure

The school's Counselor and the Well-Being Director delivered the mindfulness program, with the general classroom teachers participating in some of the activities. Student journals were recorded throughout the 10-week mindfulness program in a journal designed by the second author, Albrecht (see Ager, Bucu, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2014) and served as the main point of data collection. All activities were age appropriate and participants had the option to use text and/or illustrations.

Prior to the commencement of the mindfulness program parental permission for participation in the program and research was received to collect and analyze the data obtained. Ethics approval was then obtained in February 2014. Journals were de-identified and sent by the school's counselor to Ager. The first author, Ager, searched for prominent themes voicing pupils' perceptions of mindfulness, and interpreted the data within the context of her own experience of sharing mindfulness with children in an elementary classroom.

The focal areas of the Mindfulness Journal included:

- Illustrating and/or writing feelings and thoughts about the mindfulness session.
- Interpreting how others are feeling in pictures.
- Drawing representations of body feelings such as stress, happiness, loving kindness, focused attention.
- Illustrating and/or writing when mindfulness exercises would be helpful.
- Illustrating and/or writing about favorite feelings, places, parts of the mindfulness program.

Thematic analysis is a flexible methodology. It is "not wed to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and so it can be used within different theoretical frameworks" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, the journals provided a guiding framework for recording student perspectives and experiences. **Figure 4** provides an example of a page from the Mindfulness Journal.

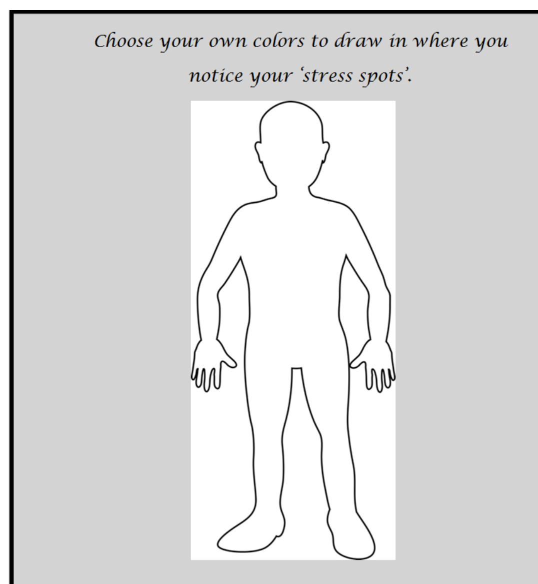


Figure 4: Example of Mindfulness Journal page.

In order to elicit natural responses from the participants, students were instructed that there was no right or wrong answer to the journal questions. Classroom teachers were responsible for giving students time to complete their journals during, or after the lessons.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Thematic analysis involves searching a data set for themes and patterns of meaning. Thematic analysis varies in its form and therefore needs to be driven by a series of questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis and reporting in this project was steered by the research question, "*What are students*' *perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school*?"

Student journal entries were coded and analyzed. The search for meaningful themes was directed by prevalence and significance. The number of different students who articulated the theme across the data set measured prevalence. Themes (patterns) within the data were identified using "theoretical thematic analysis" at a semantic level. This means that themes were organized by the explicit meaning of the data, and interpreted according to their significance and their implications in relation to current research and literature (Patton, 1990). The coding of data was completed manually by writing notes on "post-its" and color coding once repeated patterns formed themes.

The second author, Albrecht, writes that analysis and reporting also generally includes:

- demonstrating, if applicable, both convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance, for single participant cases and then subsequently across cases;
- paying attention to the detail; how words are used, how often certain terms are used and repeatedly reading journal entries and other illustrative material, searching for new layers and deeper levels of meaning;
- focusing on individual texts and then taking into account other participants' views and how they are related and;
- connecting participants' accounts to relevant literature that complements their perspectives and shared experiences (Albrecht, 2015).

Qualitative Guidelines

Qualitative guidelines that informed the study were based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) "Using thematic analysis in psychology" article, and Attride-Stirling's (2001) article "Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research."

Overview of Findings

Three main interrelated themes were established in the analysis of students' journal responses, being.

- Theme 1: Students' Perspective on Their Wellbeing.
- Theme 2: Students' Mindful Engagement.
- Theme 3: Conflict Resolution.

Within the theme of *Students*' *Perspective on Their Wellbeing* five sub-themes emerged:

- Awareness.
- Happiness and Love.
- Calmness and Inner Peace.
- Stress and Anger Management.
- Readiness to Learn and Creative Wellness and Flow.

Within the theme of *Students*' *Mindful Engagement* three sub-themes emerged:

- Heightened Awareness of Self.
- Heightened Awareness of Others and Mindful Word Choices.
- Heightened Awareness of Environment.

Within the theme of *Conflict Resolution* two sub-themes emerged. These included an explicit awareness by the students of the strategies used to solve problems with:

- Siblings.
- Friendships.

A small number of children initially resisted mindfulness activities, writing things such as, "This is boring," however, journal reflections demonstrated that as the program continued, reluctant students gradually became more engaged with the lessons.

In the current article, the authors discuss the above themes and how they relate to their students' experiences of mindfulness activities in the classroom.

Theme 1: Students' Perspectives on Their Wellbeing

1.1 Awareness

All participants in the study expressed the view that mindfulness experiences boosted their awareness of their happiness and their feelings of happiness. Happiness is a component part of wellness. In the wellness conceptual framework, this could be interpreted as moving towards higher levels of wellness, or wellbeing. Students felt mindfulness experiences helped them to feel joyful. After the first mindfulness practice, Sophia writes,

"I felt sleepy, relaxed and nice." Her favorite word was "*happy*" which she repeatedly used to describe how

she feels during the activities. While Sam writes: "It felt a bit weird, and calm and happy and very good."

After session one, Eloise, a Grade Two student, uses illustrations to express her thoughts and feelings by drawing three pictures of young girls with smiles on their faces and an arrow pointing from the word happy to the illustrations. Her picture is displayed in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: Example of Grade Two student, Eloise's perspective of her wellbeing and her awareness of happy feelings.

1.2 Happiness and Love

The recurring themes of happiness and love were also used to describe how most students felt about themselves when they were with their family and friends. To help create awareness of these inner feelings, and as part of Mindfulness Capsule Five (Etty-Leal, 2010), students were asked to list favorite words and feelings. An awareness of their own feelings of happiness and love was mostly indicated when writing about family and friends. Students wrote about feelings when they received a hug, and their desire to express their love through the words such as saying to family members "I love you."

Inherent in the happiness theme was the association of happiness with playtime and friendship. When Cinzia asks someone, "Can you play again with me? Can you be my friend?" she writes, "I feel happy." This awareness of her inner thoughts and feelings indicates a connection with happiness and her own wellbeing. Cinzia was expressing mindfulness of happy feelings.

Happy feelings were also often described by students in words, and pictures immediately after a mindfulness activity such as when walking mindfully, and during mindful eating.

1.3 Calmness and Inner Peace

Following session eight of Mindfulness Capsules, students were asked to write, or draw about their thoughts. Abdul writes, "I like happy thoughts."

Many participants' journals reflected an increased ability to gauge their own need to use mindfulness strategies to regain inner peace. When asked about favorite parts of the mindfulness journey, Matthew writes, "pressing on my pause button because it made me calm." While Cinzia comments, "learning the pause button because it helps me be calm."

Students in the study also expressed the view that mindfulness experiences increased their awareness of their ability to self assess their inner calmness. When focusing his attention on a simple object such as a flower in Mindfulness Capsule Six (Etty-Leal, 2010), Sebi writes, "When I smelt the flower I felt relaxed and calm." After practising walking meditation, Alex uses words such as "calm", "relaxed", "floating" and "steady" to describe her inner calm.

1.4 Stress and Anger Management

The use of mindfulness strategies to manage stress was a common sub-theme of "Students' Perspective on Their Wellbeing", "Student Engagement" and "Conflict Resolution". After completing the awareness of the breath activity in Mindfulness Capsule Three (Etty-Leal, 2010), students remarked that they would use this strategy before going to bed, at playtime, after school, on the weekends and during a sports game. Eloise in Grade Two remarks that she thinks breathing would be useful, "when friends are crying"; while Abdul writes that it's useful "when friends are hurt." Alex's journal says that he'll find the awareness of breath exercise helpful "when he is worried." Joe writes that he'll use the breathing when he is "tired and angry."

Other students' reflections show how the mindfulness lessons extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Kiara writes, "I help dad to breathe when he is feeling stressed." Within the broad theme of Conflict Resolution another recurring comment from many students was that they would use *mindfulness of breathing* when fighting with a sibling and/or when they were angry. The use of the breath to manage stress, and anger is apparent in many of the major themes in this paper.

1.5 Readiness to Learn/Creative Wellness and Flow

Readiness to learn also emerged as a sub-theme in Students' Perspectives on Their Wellbeing and within the sub-theme of "Self" in Students' Mindful Engagement. *Before* completing Mindfulness Capsule One (Etty-Leal, 2010), students were asked, "Do you feel like learning this afternoon?" In the journal Troy writes, "I feel tired, stressed and anxious." While Jacob comments, "I feel excited for the ski weekend." After the relaxation session, Troy remarks, "I feel happy to learn" and Jacob says, "I feel I'm ready to learn." Another student writes, "I feel calm and curious." Subsequent journal entries indicated that the students were fully engaged and open to pursuing the novel activities, signifying high levels of creative wellness and flow. Eloise writes a caption above her picture, "I was happy." Sophie's illustration in **Figure 6** depicts a smiling, joyful child who carefully chose colors, and details such as red bows on her shoes, to depict her happy, energetic feelings woven into a well-designed backdrop. Attention to such details suggests that Sophie was experiencing flow when she was drawing.

Figure 6: Example of Grade Two student, Sophie's creative flow while drawing her feelings about Mindfulness.

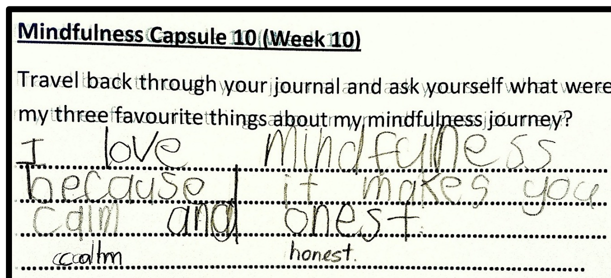
Theme 2: Students' Mindful Engagement

Most students appeared to readily engage with the activities. Their favorite experiences were:

- mindful eating;
- mindful breathing;
- mindful walking.

2.1 Heightened Awareness of Self

Key areas of student growth appear to be a greater awareness of one's self and others and of the surrounding environment. Kiara comments, "I love mindfulness because I liked the chocolate. It helped me to do slow eating. I eat slower now." The majority of children expressed through text and illustrations that they liked the mindful eating experience the most. The heightened awareness of self was expressed adeptly by Matthew when reflecting on Mindfulness Capsule 10 in **Figure 7**.



Mindfulness Capsule 10 (Week 10)

Travel back through your journal and ask yourself what were my three favourite things about my mindfulness journey?

I love mindfulness because it makes you calm and onest

calm honest.

Figure 7: Matthew's Grade Two perspective about mindfulness and inner connection.

2.2 Heightened Awareness of Others and Mindful Words

A heightened awareness of other people's feelings was apparent in Mindfulness Capsule Five (Etty-Leal, 2010), where students engaged in writing favorite words or expressions. These included "happy, good job, I love you and you can do it." Mindfulness of others and of word choice emerged as a sub-theme in journals. The students wrote lists of phrases they could use to check in with each other. Matthew's list includes, "Are you okay?" "I am sorry", and "Hello". Kiara writes, "Do you want to play with me?" "Are you okay?" Cinzia says, "You are nice" and Sam remarks, "You can play with me." While Steve's illustration in **Figure 8** depicts mindfulness of word choice and peer encouragement.

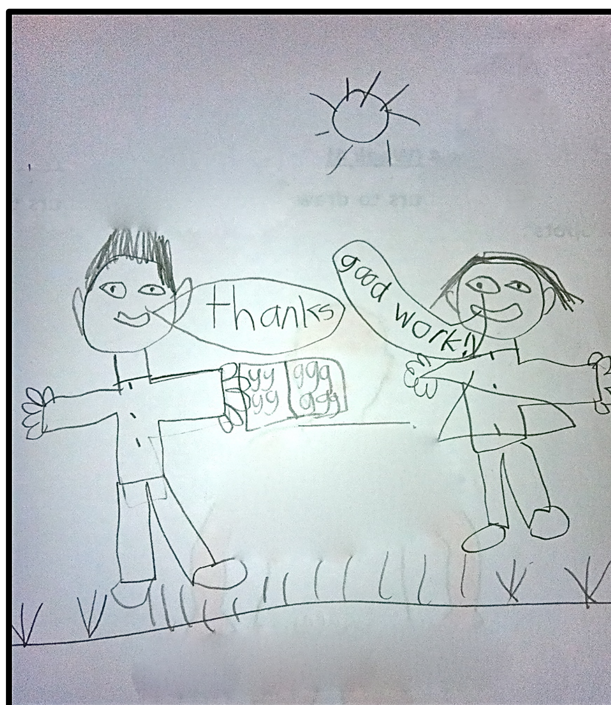


Figure 8: Example of mindfulness of words and peer encouragement by Steve in Grade Two.

2.3 Heightened Awareness of the Environment

One of the stronger sub-themes of Students' Mindful Engagement was a greater awareness of the children about their environment. For example, Ahmed a Grade Two student commented, "If I am not allowed to play on my play station I feel angry so I press my pause button."

The first author, Ager, a researcher and veteran teacher of 26 years, has been integrating mindfulness activities into her daily class routine for 18 months and she has observed that an awareness of the learning environment has emerged in her students. In Ager's mindful classroom, Francis (Grade Four) comments, "There are no scares in here." Another writes, "It's a place where you are free to be wherever you want." Shayla, another student in Ager's Grade Four class depicts this awareness in the illustration shown in **Figure 9**. The words "a place where you belong" are inscribed in the heart of the tree trunk in between the word "peace' which is on each side of the trunk. In describing her engagement with Ager's mindful classroom, she defines the learning environment as a "safe place."

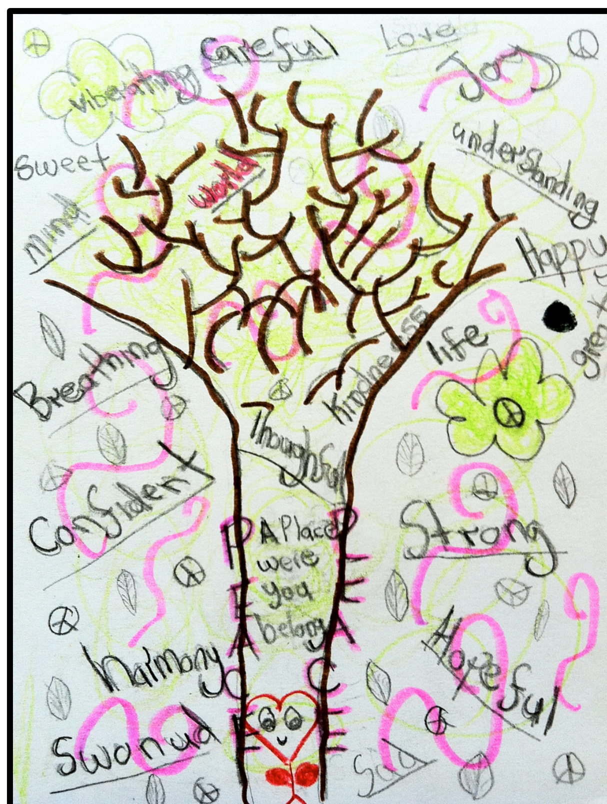


Figure 9: Shayla's Grade Four perspective of mindfulness and a mindful classroom.

Theme 3: Conflict Resolution

Within the theme of *Conflict Resolution* two sub-themes emerged. These included an explicit awareness by the students of the strategies used to solve problems with:

- Siblings;
- Friends.

3.1 Conflict Resolution with Siblings and Friends

An explicit awareness of the mindfulness strategies such as breathing, using the pause button, saying "are you okay?' and "you can be my friend" were apparent in the majority of student journals. When reflecting on Mindfulness Capsule Three and *the awareness of the breath exercise* students answered the following question, "Are there any times when you think it would be helpful for you, your friends or family to practice the awareness of the breath exercise?' Fernando, a Grade Five student wrote, "Yes, because I mostly get in a fight with my brother and sister." Eloise in Grade Two wrote that she would use her breathing "at playtime and when your

friends are crying." Many student responses also included using self-regulating strategies to resolve conflicts during sport, and when they felt tired or angry. This correlates with sub theme 1.4 Stress and Anger Management.

Discussion

The discussion focuses on the outcomes of the research question, "*What are students*' *perspective of learning mindfulness practices at school*?"

Findings from the study suggest that students perceived that the 10 week program enhanced their awareness and knowledge of wellness concepts and enabled them to develop strategies to independently and positively influence their own wellbeing. For example, a number of children referred to using the "pause button" and breathing to self-regulate. This heightened state of awareness seemed to naturally extend beyond the "self" and expanded to caring and a deeper connection for the wellbeing of friends and family and their environment.

This was apparent in the students' perspectives on self-regulation and the use of mindfulness strategies to help them with conflict resolution and in the careful choice of words with friends such as Matthew's remarks, "Are you okay?" "I am sorry", and "Hello" and Kiara's and others empathetic questioning such as "Do you want to play with me?" As seen in **Figure 9**, Shayla's illustration of her mindfulness tree depicts her perspective of a mindful classroom and reflects how this influences student happiness and confidence. Shayla's descriptors include *joy*, *happy*, *hopeful* (emotional wellness); *sad*, *understanding*, *confident* (social wellness); *kindness*, *thoughtful*, *breathing*, *harmony* (spiritual wellness); *a place where you belong*, *love*, *life*, *world* (environmental wellness). These are elements commonly associated with wellness characteristics that combine to form wellbeing (Albrecht, 2014).

Student journals indicated that mindfulness activities may enable them to connect with each wellness dimension in a more meaningful way, encourage deep reflection and foster self-trust, responsibility and love. Mindful experiences may also help to nurture trust with others. Connecting with "self" through mindful breathing, eating and walking may also enable students to calm their "whole self." Students appeared to value this and expressed a desire to share this awareness to help family and friends feel calmer and less stressed. This was apparent in Kiara's comment, "I help dad to breathe when he is feeling stressed."

This consciousness seems to enable students to feel more deeply connected to self, others and their environment and may be due to a heightened state of awareness of body, mind and emotions. This correlates with the outcomes of children's experiences of mindfulness in research by Carelse (2013), Coholic (2011), Cruchon (2009) and Smith (2010, 2013). Cruchon (2009, p. 50) notes that mindfulness "has the potential to help young children feel more relaxed, less afraid, less tense, less sad and more happy." This aligns with Carelse's (2013, p. 101) research where "all the participants mentioned calmness, relaxation, happiness or peacefulness in their experiences of mindfulness." It also supports the notion of connection.

"Current literature reveals additional terms corresponding and interrelating to the concept of wellness, such as wellbeing, life satisfaction, quality of life, human development, flourishing, and happiness ... High levels of wellness involve progress toward a higher level of functioning, an optimistic view of the future and one's potential" (Larson, 1999, p. 129), and this involves the "integration of the total individual—body, mind and spirit—in the functioning process" (Neilson, 1988, p. 4).

Travis and Callander (2009, p. 8) suggest that to understand the underlying causes of disease we must recognize the levels of disconnection around us. They state "full-spectrum wellness is a multidimensional approach to health and wellbeing that extends from the individual to the collective and ultimately planet itself" (Travis & Callander, 2009, p.7-8). It is about the connections between our state of wellbeing." Student reflections on mindfulness practices indicate an increasing understanding of the connection between emotions, state of mind, the surrounding environment and sense of wellbeing. Eloise's drawing (see **Figure 5**) of three girls with smiles on their faces and an arrow pointing from the word happy to the pictures illustrates this.

Mindfulness Practices Develop Awareness of Wellbeing and Connection

Shapiro & Carlson (2009) note that enhanced wellbeing moves along a continuum from concerns about self to an expanded worldview of how individual decisions can benefit others. A greater awareness, understanding and connection to one's self may lead to enhanced student wellbeing and relationships.

Travis (personal communication, October 2013) writes that "it's not just connection, but it's the *kind* of con-

nection" that is important. Findings of this study suggest that the practice may be more impactful and likely to influence choices when mindful experiences connect to the emotions of the students and enhance feelings. According to Cruchon (2009) and Smith (2010, 2013) research participants expressed affirmative feelings as an outcome of the children's experiences of mindfulness.

Travis & Ryan (2004) suggest that self-trust, love and learning are essential principles of wellness. Francis, a student in Ms. Ager's mindful classroom comments, "There are no scares in here." While a kindergartener writes, "It's a place where you are free to be wherever you want."

Mindfulness Experiences Enable Awareness of Attentional Processes

Another key area of student growth appears to be a greater awareness of attentional processes, of one's self and others and of the surrounding environment. After the relaxation session, Troy remarks, "I feel happy to learn" and Jacob says, "I feel I'm ready to learn." Another student writes, "I feel calm and curious." The first author, Ager, also notes that following mindful breathing, most students in her class seemed better able to manage distractions, sustain their attention and demonstrated an awareness of the need to stay on task, particularly during assessments. This correlated to increased reading success in Ager's class, with some students advancing five reading levels in one academic year. This may be attributed to learners being more meta cognitively aware. This supports the findings of Gioia, Isquith, Guy & Kenworthy (2000) whose study determined that awareness of self-regulation strategies were of particular importance in the process of learning reading and writing skills.

High Level Wellness, Mindfulness and the Whole Child

Dunn (1961, p. 789) wrote, "High level wellness cannot be achieved in fragments, ignoring the unity of the whole." Best practice teaching and learning cannot be achieved in fragments, ignoring the unity of the whole child—the mind, body and emotions—which are essential components of optimal learning. From the students' perspective, mindfulness experiences seem to unify and bridge the gap between these three dimensions and highlight the need for a holistic outlook when teaching mindfulness.

Mindfulness, Self-Realization and Wellness

One of the strengths of the study was the ability to analyze the unique responses to mindfulness from the students' perspective. Thematic analysis, a popular approach used in qualitative psychology research, enabled the identification of student patterns, but also allowed for authentic personal perspectives.

The option to draw, or write responses cultivated genuine, intuitive student insights, and added to the depth of their perspectives. The option to draw enabled students who did not feel confident about their writing skills to have a forum to express themselves, and to make sense of how they were feeling.

The interconnectedness between the three main themes of Student Wellbeing, Engagement and Conflict Resolution is apparent through the students' similar perspectives on mindfulness experiences. Examples of similar perspectives in the findings were apparent in Theme 1: Students' Perspectives on Their Wellbeing. The use of descriptors such as *happy*, *calm*, *relaxed*, *joyful*, were views shared by the majority of children in the study. Student self-realizations were apparent in sub-theme 1.4 Stress and Anger Management, where students found the use of the breath helpful for anxiety and anger. In Theme 2: Students' Mindful Engagement, self-realizations were evident as learners described their heightened sense of self. Grade Two student Matthew writes "mindfulness makes you calm and honest" (see **Figure 7**).

Further examples of self-realization in the research subjects was apparent in the children's awareness of the importance of using mindful words (sub-theme 2.2), and in Theme 3: Conflict Resolution. Fernando, a Grade Five student, and Eloise, in Grade Two, each journaling about using mindfulness practices to self-regulate in times of conflict, or when they are upset.

Limitations

There were multiple blank pages left in journals in one class, which may indicate that the support of the homeroom teacher is desirable during journal reflections.

Another limitation of the study was the difficulty of measuring participants' emotions. For example, if their written journal response said they were "happy" after a mindfulness experience, how happy were they and how

long did this state last?

Recommendations

Findings indicate that there is value in the integration of mindfulness practice across student populations within the elementary school, and early learning settings. It may be important to start the program with teachers who already have an established mind body wellness, or mindfulness practice, or who are interested in participating in the program. Mindfulness practice also needs to include classroom teachers-not just counselors.

Effective implementation of mindfulness practice should have flexibility and enable teachers and students to trust their intuition and to go with the flow. Further research is recommended to assess the affects on students of an ongoing application of mindful awareness, intention and presence techniques, and how mindfulness practices help to nourish and sustain student wellbeing.

It is suggested that elementary student wellbeing be gauged on a regular and timely basis. Simple smiley face self-appraisal rubrics could help to capture the student's voice, and measure student thoughts and feelings immediately after mindfulness activities; and student wellness throughout the academic year. Such self-evaluations may also serve as a personal wellbeing index for the children and are recommended for further research. Additional studies on how to measure the long-term benefits of mindfulness on student wellness are also recommended.

Conclusion

Mindfulness benefits the whole child—the mind, body and emotions and research suggests that mindfulness can affect academic performance, executive functioning, and feelings of connectedness with self, others and the environment. Mindfulness programs such as "Meditation Capsules" can positively impact the wellbeing of student populations in schools. The Meditation Capsules program has been shown to reduce stress, support the development of core character traits such as empathy and awareness of self, others, and the environment, and improve the happiness and wellbeing of students. It may also help to move individuals towards higher levels of wellness, to focus the attention of both the mind and body, and to assist with conflict resolution.

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