Improving Student Well-being in Education:

_Incorporating Mindfulness into Elementary Classrooms_

By

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Abstract

Mindfulness is the practice of present moment awareness without judgement. This research study aims to illuminate why mindfulness should be infused into Ontario elementary classrooms, and how teachers can incorporate this practice. This qualitative research study investigates the ways teachers are practicing mindfulness in their classrooms and the perceived impacts it has on the life experiences of both students and teachers. It identifies some of the barriers that teachers face when implementing mindfulness in the classroom. The existing peer reviewed literature on mindfulness practices with children show that it has the ability to improve neurological processes, and relieve physical health issues while supporting Ontario Ministry of Education’s goals to decrease and prevent mental health issues. Literature on mindfulness indicates that evident changes occur following this practice which can contribute to improving student well-being, and in turn, learning. The changes include, but are not limited to: improved classroom management, improved school culture, and improved student ability to learn in a positive manner. Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with three Ontario elementary teachers. This study discusses the qualities of a mindful teacher and draws connections between mindfulness and current Ontario elementary curriculum. Lastly, this study provides implications and recommendations for the next steps on using mindfulness as a way to support student well-being in education.

Key Words: mindfulness, well-being, education, awareness, meditation, resilience, attention.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

“Education is not a linear process of preparation for the future: it is about cultivating the talents and sensibilities through which we can live our best lives in the present and create the future for ourselves,” (Robinson, 2011, ch.10, para.1). Mindfulness incorporated into the education system may allow students to do just what Robinson is referring to. Mindfulness has been defined as the “intentional cultivation of moment-by-moment non-judgmental focused attention and awareness” (Kabat-Zinn., & University of Massachusetts Medical Centre/Worcester, 1991). Emerging research suggests that through the incorporation of mindfulness in the education system, we can prepare students for their futures while cultivating their awareness and teaching them to live compassionately in the present.

Some people believe that today’s youth experience an increasing pressure to excel. Youth and adults alike move around at such a fast pace that they often fail to observe what is going on around them. Judgments and stereotyping are prevalent. Students struggle with shifting family dynamics, issues of poverty, media influences and peer pressures. All of these factors play a role in the rise of mental health issues among youth. At any time there are approximately 1.2 million youth affected by mental illness and anxiety in Canada (Kirby & Keon, 2004). Such facts indicate that the role of educators must not only be to teach academic skills but also life skills. It is vital for the education system to promote proactive approaches to tackle mental health issues, as well as social, emotional and physical concerns. The Ontario Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) mandates social-emotional learning (SEL) as an imperative part of the curriculum. Mindfulness intervention aligns with the Ontario curriculum as it is a way to mentally, physically, and emotionally promote the well-being of students. When the well-being of both teachers and students is cared for, teacher-student relationships will flourish and academic achievement will rise (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

A wide range of benefits from mindfulness have been documented through a number of research studies (Burke, 2010; Harnett & Dawe, 2012; Black, 2011; Weare, 2013, etc.). As such, I was motivated to conduct this research to help illuminate to others the ways that teachers infuse
mindfulness into elementary classroom, and why. This research investigates the ways teachers are practicing mindfulness in their classrooms and the perceived impacts it has on the life experiences of both students and teachers. This study also aims to identify some of the barriers that teachers face when implementing mindfulness in the classroom.

I believe it is a responsibility of educators to teach their students the skills and coping mechanisms needed for successful and healthy lives. Aside from children’s parents and caregivers, it is educators who spend the majority of time with them. Therefore, the importance of educator support and influence in promoting well-being is essential to having a healthy future generation. I have had the experience of teaching and observing many elementary school students in educational settings; I found that many could benefit from a greater sense of self-awareness, of being present, and of practicing compassion and empathy towards themselves and their peers, all components of leading a healthy life. I plan on using the insights drawn from these cases to support my understanding of the role mindfulness can play in classrooms.

1.2 Research Questions

This study investigates three teachers’ experiences of bringing mindfulness into their classroom setting. My questions are: How is mindfulness being implemented in elementary classrooms? What are elementary teachers’ experiences with mindfulness in their classrooms? How does mindfulness impact the life experiences of teachers and students? Do teachers see connections between mindfulness and current Ontario curriculum guidelines? What strategies, resources or approaches are teachers using in their classrooms to support mindfulness?

1.3 Rationale for the Study

Practicing mindfulness has a wide range of benefits and the research in this field has been on the rise. Mindfulness has been practiced by Buddhists dating back to 624 BC (About Buddhism, 2007), yet has been rising in popularity in the last fifteen years among the medical community (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). It has become more mainstream in North American society and is now being incorporated in the fields of politics, healthcare, business, military and education. John Kabat-Zinn (1991), a pioneer in the field of mindfulness, founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic and is known “internationally for his work as a scientist, writer, and meditation teacher; he is engaged in bringing mindfulness into the
mainstream world of medicine and society of professionals (Mindfulness Meditation, 2015). Kabatt-Zinn provides an alternative theoretical framework to common views held by the Western healthcare system, and is influential in my own thinking in this field. Therefore, I will be drawing on many studies that have been based on his foundational way of thinking.

Due to the rise in the popularity of mindfulness based practices, extensive peer-reviewed empirical literature now exists exploring the nature, application, and potential efficacy of mindfulness-based practices. There have been recent controlled longitudinal studies that investigate the pre and post changes in the brain’s grey matter concentration after participants took part in the most widely used mindfulness training program, the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1991; Holzel, et al, 2011; Weare, 2013). A study conducted by Harvard medical researchers (Holzel, et al, 2011) suggests the grey matter changes are in the regions involved with “learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing and perspective taking” (p. 36). The research on mindfulness raised a new scientific notion that brain’s neural systems are modifiable networks that can be changed during adulthood (Holzel et al., 2011).

A large portion of this research looks at the benefits of relatively short and non-disruptive mindfulness based programs (Black & Fernando, 2014). Black & Fernando’s (2014) naturalistic field observation studies on mindfulness training in elementary classes demonstrate how it has a direct positive impact on classroom behaviour and teacher-based perception of classroom behaviour. Not only are the effects of mindfulness fairly quick and with long-term sustained benefits, but mindfulness implementation is very inexpensive. The Journal of Children’s Services released a paper that drew on twenty good quality studies that teach mindfulness to young people (Weare, 2013). These results show that mindfulness leads to improvements in academic performance, problem behaviour, increased positive emotions, awareness, clarity, emotion regulations, and decrease in aggression, oppositional behaviour, aches, pains, and tiredness (Weare, 2013). The study concludes that mindfulness implementation in educational settings could also reduce the burden on health spending (Weare, 2013).

A theme that arises throughout the research on mindfulness in educational is the variety of approaches that mindfulness implementation can take in classroom settings; Arts-based methods, Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT), and yoga have been found to support findings that mindfulness based training, even when practiced non-traditionally, leads to
positive changes in child behaviour (Coholic et al., 2012). Lastly, the literature on incorporating mindfulness into educational settings has lead me to three main elements that are critical in promoting mindfulness programs: administrative support, teacher involvement, and student engagement (Mendelson et al., 2013). This study suggests that in-school mindfulness interventions (rather than after-school programs) are beneficial, effective, feasible and sustainable to incorporate into Ontario elementary classroom settings.

1.4 Introduction to Methods

I conducted this qualitative research project using the case study method. I gained in-depth knowledge on mindfulness through analyzing authentic cases. I gained the perspectives of different teachers through an in-depth exploration of classrooms where mindfulness is practiced. My primary means of collecting data was through semi-structured interviews with teachers that provided insight on the impact mindfulness has on student well-being. The interview questions I asked were based on the themes that arose during my extensive study of the literature. The participants of my study were chosen based on their diverse experiences incorporating mindfulness in their Ontario elementary classroom. Following the face-to-face and Skype interviews, chosen at locations of the participants’ choice, I transcribed, coded and analyzed the data to find common themes. Through the case study method, I have drawn conclusions and suggestions for future research, which are included at the end of this research paper.

1.5 Background of the Researcher

Throughout my time as a student in the Masters of Teaching program, my personal experiences as a yoga teacher and swim instructor and teacher at a York Region District Summer school, I witnessed students’ high levels of anxiety, stress, breakdowns, poor emotion regulation and difficulty paying attention. I know from firsthand experience the importance of a cultural shift in direction on our mental models of well-being. I have practiced yoga for over a decade and this form of mindfulness has made me more aware and conscious of my thoughts and actions. When I am consistently practicing yoga and meditation I feel more connected to myself, my emotions and the people around me. I am not as quick to react with negative emotions; I am more attentive, less stressed and happier over all.
My undergraduate degree was in Media, Information and Technoculture (MIT) at Western University. In this program I studied how “media institutions, technologies, and content inform the development of society and culture and influence our activities and behaviours” (Media, Information and Technoculture, 2012). It was through my personal experience and the lens of my undergraduate degree that I realized people lead unhappy lives and do not always practice empathy or compassion. I have witnessed people close to me get treatment for emotional disorders with medication rather than through the use of non-traditional methods such as improving their coping mechanisms, looking to the root of the issue, or changing their perspective. This has helped me recognize the importance of instilling in young children these life-long skills, helping them find happiness in the present moment while also being able to deal with uncomfortable and stressful situations. I think childhood is the time to learn mindfulness techniques because this is when humans are in the prime stages of brain development and thus the skills will have a lasting impact.

I attended an Arts-Based elementary school, Baythorn Public School, where we were encouraged to think and learn through alternative methods. I believe the arts-infused curriculum encouraged high levels of personal growth and self-awareness skills. My teachers were passionate about the subjects they were teaching and their enthusiasm inspired me. I consider the mind-body relationship important for fostering positive learning experiences and academic achievement. I want to teach students how to lead meaningful lives and become passionate members of society. To me, it only makes sense that mindfulness become part of the education discourse. As stated by Joseph Goldstein (2007) in A Heart Full of Peace, “Mindfulness is the basis for wise action. When we see clearly what is happening in the moment, wisdom can direct our choices and actions, rather than the old habits simply playing out our patterns of conditioning” (p. 66).

Throughout my time spent researching and writing this paper, I took a 250-hour intensive yoga teacher training course. This strengthened my personal mindfulness based practice through meditation, yoga and in depth studying of mindfulness philosophies. I learned about the history of mindfulness and yoga. I studied Vedic history, pre-classical era, classical (2nd century CE), post-classical, and modern yoga. I learned in depth about Patanjali’s Yoga Philosophy and the eight limbs of yoga while also studying ancient Vedic texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. During this time, my love for mindfulness deepened as I experienced firsthand the benefits it can have in
my life and the lives of those around me. I also began teaching mindfulness yoga flow classes which verified the impact this practice has on improving the well-being of my students. This notion is based on verbal feedback I would receive from my students. I hope to continue building on this practice and sharing mindfulness with students, teachers and others who are interested in improving their overall well-being.

1.6 Overview

This body of research is organized into five chapters. Chapter one includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter two contains a comprehensive review of past and present literature that addresses the concepts and issues raised in this paper. Chapter three outlines the methodology of this research and the procedural process I used in this study. It identifies the research participants, data collection instruments, steps to writing an analysis of the data, ethical review procedures and the potential limitations of the study. Chapter four identifies the participants of this research and describes the data collected and the themes that emerged in relation to the research questions. Chapter five outlines what was learned, insights, recommendations for practice and further study. References and a list of appendices are found at the end of this paper.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This literature review was conducted in relation to my main research question: How and why is mindfulness being incorporated into elementary classroom learning. Based on a review of current research in the field, five key themes emerged relating to mindfulness, youth and education: (a) the background of mindfulness; (b) research on mindfulness that takes place neurologically, physically and mentally; (c) mindfulness practice with children; (d) the social and emotional learning through mindfulness; and (e) the academic incorporation and implementation. There is an abundance of research on the topic of mindfulness; I have separated the information into themes as they relate to my topic on mindfulness integration in elementary classroom learning.

2.1 Background of Mindfulness

According to the available literature, mindfulness is said to have originated over two and a half thousand years ago through Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice (Weare, 2013). The mission of Buddhist monks was to look at and relieve suffering that is often caused by people’s habitual response to their experiences (Weare, 2013). Mindfulness has become more mainstream in North American societies (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). It is now being incorporated in the fields of politics, healthcare, business, military and education.

John Kabat-Zinn (2015) is a pioneer in the field of mindfulness. He founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic and is known “internationally for his work as a scientist, writer, and meditation teacher, engaged in bringing mindfulness into the mainstream world of medicine and society of professionals” (Mindfulness Meditation, 2015). Through his work, Kabat-Zinn provides an alternative theoretical framework to common views held by the Western healthcare system, which is influential in this field; in this chapter I draw on many studies that have been based on his foundational way of thinking.

Weare (2013) asserts that according to Kabat-Zinn, the act of being mindful is difficult to convey using words because it is about developing a meta-cognitive form of awareness that is not verbal. Weare’s (2013) findings from a meta-analysis of twenty high-quality mindfulness studies reported that this form of awareness includes being cognizant of your inner processes on
thinking, feeling and doing, while also noticing one’s impulses, feelings and thoughts as they go through that individual’s body and mind (p.142). As stated by Kabat-Zinn, everything has an “influence on us in ways that affect our well-being and mental health” (Gazella, 2005, p.59). The Ontario Language curriculum includes metacognition as a strand which must be taught to students from grade one to eight (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). This government document defines metacognition as “the process of thinking about one’s own thought process. Metacognitive skills include the ability to monitor one’s own learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p.156). Kabat-Zinn’s view is in accord with the Ministry of Education; he explains that the very heart of mindfulness is about the “art of conscious living” which is something that can be introduced to children of any age (Gazella, 2005, p. 59).

2.2 Research on Mindfulness

This section is broken into three parts: the neurology of mindfulness, the physical health effects and the mental health effects. Mindfulness has demonstrated to have an impact by: altering the brain’s shape and functions; changing the body physically; and also producing profound mental health improvements on issues related to anxiety, stress and depression. Studies on the effects of mindfulness among elementary students are not as extensive as the studies done on adults; however this is a rapidly growing field of research (Burke, 2010). Harnett and Dawe (2012) prove the growth of this field of research, specifically among child and adolescent mindfulness-based studies; they found seven peer reviewed articles on this topic in 1990, fifty-five in 2009 and 116 research articles in 2010 (p.195). Burke (2010) refers to the growing body of research on mindfulness approaches for children and adolescents; he suggests that research needs to shift away from the feasibility of mindfulness studies and towards “larger, well-designed studies that would allow for replication and comparisons to be made” (p.1). I believe the concepts of replicability and comparability are pivotal for conducting scientifically sound research as it ensures accuracy.

Promoting health and well-being in schools has been a goal of many international organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Educations, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Wei, Kutcher, & Szumilas, 2011). It is also a goal of the Ontario Ministry of Education, and is explicitly stated in the updated Health and Physical Education Curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The documents state
“students’ health and well-being contribute to their ability to learn in all disciplines, including health and physical education, and that learning in turn contributes to their overall well-being (p.3). I intend to support these goals and promote a healthier way of life for students through my research on mindfulness in elementary schools.

Although I am separating the following section into parts, many of the ideas presented are interrelated and connected to the function of the whole person. The child is not divided into separate entities, but is a whole person (physically, intellectually and mentally) which will cause for some overlap in looking at why and how mindfulness relates to elementary classroom learning.

2.2.1 Neurological Changes

Although mindfulness practices have been around for generations, the scientific community has been empirically studying the construct of mindfulness for approximately forty years (Black, 2011). The brain is the controlling organ for the body’s reaction to stress, coping and the recovery processes (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). Observing changes in the key regions that are in control of these functions, the hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex, is important in proving the impact of mindfulness practices. Holzel et al. (2011) note the structural changes in this area after “mindfulness practice [which] may reflect improved function in regulation emotional responding” (p. 40). The activation of this region helps educators teach students about issues related to compassion and understanding their peers.

Through current research, the concept of mindfulness has been translated into measurable terms, such as the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), the scientific community has increasingly been dedicating attention to this topic (Burke, 2010). Accordingly, the findings that support tangible brain changes are growing. While the changes are most dramatic among people who have been meditating for many years, there are also perceptible brain changes among people who have practiced mindfulness for shorter periods (Weare, 2013). Black and Fernando (2014) studied a five-week mindfulness intervention among students in grades four to six that was 15 minutes long for three times a week. It had a significant impact on the measured behavioural changes, such as attention and focus, self-control, and participation. This supports the notion that brief mindfulness implementations can have a positive impact on students while also supporting the current curriculum guidelines.
Another neurological change that comes about from mindfulness practice is plasticity in the brain. Two studies have shown that the adult nervous system “has the capacity for plasticity, and the structure of the brain can change in response to training” (Gage, 2002; Draganski et al., 2004). This research supports the notion that big structural changes can happen in the brain after mindfulness practice impacting mind and body. Overall, findings from various studies identify “candidate structural neurobiological pathways” which link mindfulness with decreased stress levels and negative affectivity (Taren, Creswell, & Gianaros, 2013)

With the purpose of improving happiness among children, The Hawn Foundation (2010) created the MindUp curriculum (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Based on a diverse range of mindfulness activities/practices, this foundation worked in collaboration with neuroscientists, positive psychologists and educators to create the MindUp training program for students and teachers. Dr. Schonert (2010) found that students who took part in the five month MindUp program had lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone in the body (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Overproduction of cortisol can disrupt your bodily processes and lead to sleep issues, depression, anxiety, digestive problems, etc. The results of this study showed an increase in students’ executive function, which leads to faster reaction times and often proves an increase in one’s ability to self-regulate.

2.2.2 Physical Health Effects

While not all mindfulness practices involve physical movement other than breathing, there are still profound physical health benefits that come about from the emphasis of breath awareness. Breathing is a tool that children and teens will always have with them. Therefore, the breath is a tool that can help control stress, promote ease and resilience, and is a very accessible and practical skill to teach. Greenberg and Harris (2011) state that the common goal of mindfulness practice is to sustain the focus of attention on mental concepts or particular objects, the breath being one of them (p.2). In one of Kabat-Zinn’s books based on basic guided meditation techniques, Wherever You Go, There You Are, he states that:

It helps to have a focus for your attention, an anchor line to tether you to the present moment and to guide you back when the mind wanders. The breath serves this purpose…Bringing awareness to our breathing we remind ourselves that we are here now (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).
This breath awareness through mindfulness not only affects our bodies neurologically but also physically.

Gregoski, Barnes, Tingen, Harshfield, and Trieber (2011) studied the effects of mindfulness on adolescents who were at risk of cardiovascular disease and found a large reduction in systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure and heart rate compared to the adolescents in the control group. A study by Kabat-Zinn et al. (1998) revealed that people who have psoriasis (a chronic inflammatory skin condition irritated by stress) and started mindfulness practice while receiving ultraviolet treatments heal at approximately four times the rate of control subjects who only get the light treatment. Other meta-analytical findings indicate moderate success when using mindfulness on children and adolescents who suffer from other somatic illnesses such as chronic pain, fibromyalgia, coronary heart disease and cancer (Bauer, 2003). As proved through single randomized trials or studies using other empirical designs there is evidence that mindfulness assists in the treatment of a broad spectrum of psychopathologies such as eating disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder and substance abuse. (Chiesa, Calati, & Serretti, 2011; Hofmann, et. Al, 2010; Witkiewitz, and Bowen, 2010). A societal effect of mindfulness intervention working alongside modern medicine can be translated to less health spending. By bringing mindfulness to Ontario educational curriculum, it is documented that it will improve the physical health of those practicing.

2.2.3 Mental Health Effects

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) states that, “Students’ health and well-being contribute to their ability to learn in all disciplines” (p.5). Mindfulness is important to teach children because when it is practiced regularly in an educational setting, it can improve neurological functions, physical ailments and also well-being and mental health (Weare, 2013, p. 141). In Weare’s (2013) metacognitive research study, Developing mindfulness with children and young people, she found that mindfulness is “capable of improving…mood, self-esteem, self-regulation, positive behaviour and academic learning” (p.141). A study done by Liehr and Diaz (2010) among disadvantaged children at a summer camp introduced a mindfulness-based intervention program one that helped in a “reduction in depression symptoms…and a reduction in anxiety” (p.69).

Zylowska (2008) did a mindfulness pilot study on youth with attention hyper deficit disorder (ADHD) and found that there were improvements on self-reported ADHD symptoms,
and on externally observed and self-reported anxiety and depressive symptoms. It is important to not only focus on treating the stress when it starts affecting an individual’s physical or mental health, but also to shift the focus “on the creation of nurturing environments, including safe and supportive schools” (Biglan et al., 2012, p.258). This demonstrates proactively stopping stress, rather than reactively, through the incorporation of mindfulness into classroom learning. Kabat-Zinn stated that education systems emphasize some aspects of development, such as thinking critically, but the systems lack in emphasizing one’s somatic experience or cultivating compassion (Gazella, 2005). The “most fundamental of all,” to Kabat-Zinn, is the lack of emphasizing awareness itself (Gazella, 2005, p. 59). By teaching mindfulness to children in elementary classes, they will learn the skills to continually improve their mental health when faced with challenges in their lifetime.

Overall, the research on mindfulness practices with children show that it has the ability to improve neurological processes, relieve physical health issues while also supporting Ontario mental health goals to decrease and prevent mental health issues.

2.3 Mindfulness Impact on Classroom Management and Culture

While the previous section was based on the neurological, physical and mental health effects of mindfulness practices, this section will focus on how mindfulness can affect the dynamics of a classroom environment and a school climate as a whole. Mendelson et al. (2013) incorporated mindfulness and yoga at urban schools and noted “intervention delivery during the school day may have the potential to enhance school climate by creating a culture of compassion and awareness among students and teachers” (p. 285). Mansor and Gianaros (2012) associate the learning environment with better academic achievement. They found that “a strong sense of belonging has been associated with a desire to learn and an increase in understanding, whereas a lack of belonging has been associated with negative academic outcomes such as truancy and withdrawal from school” (p.37). The literature on mindfulness practices show that the culture of compassion promotes, improves and reshapes the classroom learning environment and school climate as a whole. Accordingly, it is suggested from study evidence that practicing mindfulness techniques at school will improve behaviour and academic achievement (Mansor & Gianaros, 2012).
A clinical study by Bogels et al. (2008) examined the effects mindfulness had on children with behavioural issues, such as attention and behaviour-control deficits. They found that “significant increases in self- and parent-reported measures of personal goals, sustained attention, happiness and mindful awareness” took place after the mindfulness intervention (p. 52). All of these changes contribute to a warmer and safer climate for learning which can in turn lead to greater productively. In his study with elementary students, Wall (2005) outlined the perceived benefits of teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MSBR) and Tai Chi’s benefits. His finding resulted in improved well-being, calmness, relaxation, improved sleep, less reactivity, increased self-awareness, and a sense of connection with nature. Schwartz & Pollishuke (2013) study results support this notion. The study shows that good classroom management allows teachers to work with students in a positive and encouraging way. They also note that teachers should use preventative measures to avoid unnecessary interruptions. Moreover, the Hawn Foundations 2012 report shows that the MindUP curriculum positively influenced classroom culture 100% of the time (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010).

Black and Fernando (2014) recently studied the link between mindfulness training and classroom behaviour. The study shows that the students had improved attention levels, calmness, self-control and increased participation in activities, as well as respect and care for their peers (Black & Fernando, 2014). In addition to the above, Monsor and Gianaros’ study shows that “student learning excels most optimally in a non-disruptive classroom environment where teachers feel in control and not under emotional distress (p. 1242). Weare’s (2013) publication on Developing Mindfulness with Children and Young People, shows that when people regularly practice mindfulness, they learn to sustain their focus and attention for longer periods of time. Also, they learn to accept their experiences in a more “curious, interested and open-minded rather than a judgmental way” (p. 142). Through fostering this type of outlook, the incorporation of mindfulness practices, a teacher’s ability to manage the classroom would improve because of all of the resulting changes on the attitudes and behaviours among students.

Kosnick and Beck (2011) stress that “classroom management is a crucial aspect of classroom life [...] and is inseparable from [all the other priorities for teaching and teacher education]” (p.6). Mindfulness helps to create a culture of compassion in elementary schools and also helps student’s increase their attention span which in turn “enhance[s] their capacity to cope with their psychosocial as well as academic challenges” (Meiklejohn et al., 2013). There are
evident changes that take place after practicing mindfulness that improve classroom management, school culture, and a students’ ability to learn in a positive manner.

### 2.4 Social and Emotional Learning through Mindfulness

The overarching goal of social emotional learning (SEL) is to increase self-awareness, emotion regulation, calmness, resilience, compassion and empathy (Goleman, 1996). All of these attributes have been documented to increase through the practice of mindfulness (Weare, 2013). In addition, Mendelson et al. (2013) suggests that mindfulness practices are well suited to “complement and extend training offered in social-emotional learning curricula and in standard academic programmes” (p.286). After the implementation of the MindUP curriculum, findings show that: 82% of children reported having a positive outlook; 81% of children learned to make themselves happy; and 58% of children tried to help others more often (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010, p.137-151). Thus mindfulness, social emotional learning, and academics contribute to the same goals.

Watson and Ecken (2003) provide an alternate view on SEL in classrooms as they believe today’s educators are under a lot of pressure to deliver higher academic results. Their findings note that the “focus on academic achievement has led many teachers…to reduce their attention to students’ social and ethical growth” (p.55). This contrasts with Elias et al. (2002) when he states that social and emotional well-being plays a fundamental role in the attainment of academic outcomes. Mindfulness has been found to improve a child’s ability to make meaningful relationships and manage difficult feelings (Weare, 2013). Miners (2008) looked at developing mindfulness programs and found that “adolescents who are mindful, either through temperament or training, tend to experience greater well-being and mindfulness correlates positively with positive emotion, popularity and friendship-extensiveness and negatively with negative emotion and anxiety” (p.32). Overall, the effects of mindfulness support the “missing piece” of education, SEL, because it represents aspects of learning and academics that teach a set of skills vital to success in communities, workplaces, schools, families, etc .(Elias et al., 2003, p.7).

### 2.5 Academic Incorporation and Implementation

The reasoning on why mindfulness should be incorporated into elementary classrooms has been supported through the strong foundation in research studies and literature on the topic.
The findings of mindfulness implementations were largely positive when taught properly and practiced regularly. The findings show there are significant improvements on mental health, physical health and overall well-being. The majority of research in the field of mindfulness looks at why mindfulness should be incorporated into classroom learning. Given the overwhelming evidence that mindfulness does benefit students, the challenge now is to develop the best methods for practicing this in the classroom. The studies on mindfulness practices show that suggestions can be drawn that will have implications for future mindfulness interventions in classrooms. To merit the ongoing integration and acceptance of mindfulness in elementary classrooms, the training for the incorporation of these programs need to be fully developed and broadened (Meiklejohn et al., 2013).

The Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) released a resource titled The Foundations for a Healthy School in December 2014. It states:

“The Foundations for a Healthy School resource is designed to help contribute to a learning environment that promotes and supports child and student well-being – one of four core goals in Ontario’s renewed vision for education. This goal emphasizes the need to focus not just on academic success but also on the whole child and student – their cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.” (p.2)

This proves that the focus that must be placed on improving student well-being, from the government level, by looking at students as a whole child.

Many mindfulness studies, one of which is called Learn to Breathe (L2B), suggest that teachers should have their own mindfulness practice (Broderick and Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This will ensure they are able to teach authentically in order to achieve the best results. The learning environment as a whole needs to be looked at when practicing mindfulness in an educational setting; an impacting element is the teacher. Teachers need to be looked at as whole entities which is why the L2B program wants to ensure they are personally practicing mindfulness, not only teaching it. Mindfulness practices for children should be relatively short, around three quarters of one hour, and the goals should be focused on awareness and engagement rather than enquiry, which is the unpacking of an experience (Black & Fernando, 2014). Weare (2013) suggests that the “methods, materials and activities [for mindfulness among children] are generally more pacy and lighthearted, with a focus on fun and seeing it as a game, and with less emphasis on long periods of silence” (p.142).
How mindfulness is being incorporated into elementary classrooms will be discussed further in the following sections of this research paper.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

My key question is how is mindfulness being implemented in elementary classrooms? My sub-questions are:

- What are elementary teachers’ experiences with mindfulness in their classrooms?
- How does mindfulness impact the life experiences of teachers and students?
- Do teachers see connections between mindfulness and current Ontario curriculum guidelines?
- What strategies, resources or approaches are teachers using in their classrooms to support mindfulness?

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology employed for this study. I begin by reviewing the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I explain data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations relating to my study. I identify a range of methodological limitations, but also speak about the strengths of the methodology. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions, given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedure

Qualitative research focuses on “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13.) When looking at how and why mindfulness is being incorporated into Ontario elementary classrooms, it is essential to hear firsthand from teachers adopting this practice. This research study was based on data collection from literature in the field of mindfulness and three semi-structured interviews with elementary school teachers. The results show that there are different existing mindfulness practices taking place with students. To delve further into the development of mindfulness practice in elementary classrooms, it is important to collect data from those who experience mindfulness and its effects firsthand. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), qualitative data provides rich insight into human behaviour; it is beneficial to this study
in showing how the learned practice of mindfulness affects human behavior, most especially the child within an educational setting.

The interview protocol was developed to aid participants in highlighting how they practice mindfulness and in summarizing their strategies. It was also developed to uncover why participants decided to incorporate mindfulness into their classroom practices. I felt that interviews were the most effective way to gather information about teachers’ practices and attitudes.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The interview style was semi-structured, informal interviews. As stated by Guest and Namey (2003), a quintessential feature of interviews is the use of open-ended questions which are often followed by probes in response to participant’s answers. There was a basic structure of questions and impromptu follow-up questions to clarify answers or seek more detail. This allowed for an in-depth and detailed review of each teacher’s experiences with mindfulness.

Semi-structured interviews are useful when “learning about the motivations behind people’s choices and behaviour, their attitudes and beliefs and the impacts on their lives of specific policies or events” (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Therefore, this style of data collection best suits my research question and sub questions. The interview questions asked can be seen in Appendix B. Two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and one was via Skype. They were all digitally recorded using a tape recorder, cell phone and laptop. They were transcribed and analyzed according to prominent themes that arose between the interviews and the literature review. Notes were taken during the interviews to supplement the recorded data. Interviews were conducted after school hours or during the weekend. The locations were all chosen by the participants. The interviews ranged from 58 minutes to one hour and two minutes.

3.3.0 Participants

Here I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment. The purpose of interviewing participants was to learn about their mindfulness practices with students, and their attitudes and strategies.
3.3.1 Sampling Criteria
Participants found were based on the following criteria:

- Must be a current Ontario elementary teacher who practices a form of mindfulness with students.
- Must be willing to reflect on their experiences of practicing mindfulness with students.
- Must be willing to be involved with this research project.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures
To recruit participants, I used my immersion in the mindfulness and yoga communities and networks, plus word of mouth discussions, to find three teachers who practice different mindfulness methods with their students.

3.3.3. Participant Biographies
Shayna has been teaching for 26 years. Her father runs a meditation centre and she was introduced to mindfulness at a young age. It wasn’t until she got sick and turned to mindfulness as a form of healing that she experienced the changes it can produce; she grew interested and passionate about mindfulness. She began to conduct research on mindfulness, traveling to China, Thailand, and attending conferences and workshops around the globe. She ran professional development Wellness Workshops for the Thames Valley District School Board staff. The teachers she trained all reported positive feedback from the workshops and noticed changes in their classrooms and mental states on a daily basis. This prompted Shayna to see if, and how, mindfulness could benefit children of all ages.

Jane has been teaching for eight years. She was introduced to mindfulness while doing her student teaching practicum. The teacher she was placed with was heavily involved with mindfulness. Her practice with mindfulness has grown from being a part of her classroom to her embracing it in her personal life. Her daily practice includes yoga and meditation, which has helped her cope with difficult, life-altering events. Jane mentioned that mindfulness is “such a saviour” and that it really helped her “feel grounded and helped me feel okay with myself again.”

Carly has been teaching for three years and was introduced to mindfulness at OISE in the Master of Teaching Program. Her goal in practicing mindfulness with her students is to teach them about compassion and self-love. She looks forward to her daily meditation which she practices traditionally—seated in silence.
3.4 Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, I read them numerous times to help identify key themes, connections to the literature in this field, and relevance to my research questions. For each transcript, I identified codes, then categories of data and finally themes within these categories. Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest that “themes come both from the data (an inductive approach) and from the investigator’s prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study (an a priori approach)” (88). I found eight themes altogether, yet I consolidated them to five themes. These themes are further explored in the Discussions and Findings section. I also looked at null data, which is what the participants did not speak of, and why this lack is important to discuss.

3.5 Ethical Consideration

Participants were given letters of consent, which they read and signed once they understood the terms. A copy of this signed letter (Appendix A) was given to each participant and a second copy was kept for my records. Interviews were done at a time and place chosen by each participant. Efforts were made to ensure the comfort and ease of the participants. The necessary information on confidentiality, content and consent was explained to the participants before the interviews were conducted. At the start of each interview, the participants were told they could refrain from answering any questions and that they could also review or revise their answers. They were informed that I would provide them with access to the transcripts at any time after the interview. All data (audio recordings) are stored on my password protected computer and will be destroyed five years after publication date.

The topic of this research project was discussed with the participants to clarify the nature and purpose of the study and their role as interview participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participating teachers’ anonymity. Interviewees were reminded that their participation was voluntary and at any time they could opt out of their role in the research project. All research results were reviewed by a supervisor from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education prior to publication, with the consent of the participants. No changes were made to the procedures outlined in the consent form signed prior to the interview.
3.6 Methodical Limitations and Strengths

Given the ethical parameters of the Master of Teaching Research Project (MTRP), one limitation is that only teachers were interviewed, rather than students and parents. It was also not possible for me to conduct any classroom observations or surveys. The sample size used for this study was fairly small therefore, I cannot generalize on the experience of teachers in a broader sense. There were also a limited number of interview questions asked due to time constraints.

The literature review was selective due to the limitations of the MTRP. It included peer reviewed journal articles, books, interviews and medical research. In this broad area of research on mindfulness, I could not include all relatable research. I carefully chose works that explained different reasons on why and how mindfulness should be practiced among elementary school children.

An advantage that came from only interviewing teachers is that I gained an in-depth knowledge of their experiences compared with the data that would have been gathered through a survey or questionnaire. The interview questions also left certain areas open ended which allowed the participants to speak to issues and ideas they felt were relevant when discussing incorporation of mindfulness in the elementary classroom. The interviews validated each participant’s voice and experiences as a teacher and allowed for them to make meaning of their experiences. The limited number of interview questions allowed for in-depth questions and follow-up questions to be asked.

This MTRP involved both theory-based and field-based approaches. The theory-based approach involved examination and analysis of existing literature while the field-based approach entailed interviews with classroom teachers. As a researcher, I bring my own prior knowledge and understanding of the topic to the interpretation of my findings. Due to my strong interest and experience in the area of mindfulness, there is a possibility I may have influenced my participants’ responses.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presented the methodology for my qualitative research project. This study aims to find out why and how teachers in Ontario are incorporating mindfulness into their classroom learning experience. This chapter presented the research approach and procedures, the instruments of data collection, participant sampling criteria, sampling procedures
and biographies, data analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations and strengths of the study. In chapter 4, I report on the research findings.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

In review, chapter 1 of this study introduced the purpose, and rationale of the research study. It outlined that the focus of this research paper is studying both how and why mindfulness is being incorporated into Ontario elementary classrooms as a way to improve student well-being. Chapter 2 provided an in-depth literature review on the background and research on mindfulness, including neurological changes, physical health effects, mental health effects and mindfulness impact on classroom management and culture. Studies looking at social and emotional learning through mindfulness as well as academic incorporation and implementation were explored. Chapter 3 outlined the methods, data collection and analysis processes employed, while also included methodical limitations and strengths.

This chapter outlines findings from three interviews which focused on how teachers were improving student well-being through mindfulness practices. The information in this chapter is organized into five themes and subthemes based on the analysis from the interviews with three elementary school teacher. The themes that guide this chapter cover the codes that emerged during the data analysis process. The themes contribute to answering my main study questions on “how” teachers are incorporating mindfulness in their classrooms to improve student well-being and how it may impact their life experiences and their classroom. The themes are: (1) qualities of a mindful teacher; (2) mindfulness methods with students; (3) teachers’ perceptions on the effects of mindfulness on students; (4) mindfulness and Ontario curriculum connection; and (5) challenges and barriers in implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom.

4.1 Qualities of a Mindful Teacher

The qualities of a mindful teacher was not a question asked outright during the interviews, yet was a recurring theme that arose. All of the interviewees related their responses back to the importance of certain qualities in a mindful teacher. In order to teach students about mindfulness, how to practice it and what it means, the teacher needs to set an example of what a mindful person looks like. As defined in the literature, mindfulness is “paying attention in the present moment, on purpose, and without judgment” (Kabat-Zinn,
1990). This subtheme explores several qualities of a mindful teacher: commitment to personal practice, non-judgemental approach, compassion, honesty/authenticity, and non-reactivity.

### 4.1.1 Commitment to Personal Practice

The first component of being a mindful teacher, which all participants emphasized multiple times throughout their interviews, was the importance of the teacher having a personal practice. Shayna stated, “I wouldn’t be able to do any of this if it wasn’t grounded in daily practice”. She also thinks that if teachers don’t have their own awareness and reflection developed through their own mindfulness practices, they cannot offer it to their students. In the classroom, a teacher’s attention must be on many things at once, therefore, it is beneficial to increase awareness through mindfulness practice and exhibit the traits related to a mindful person. Teachers play a large role in creating a classroom that fosters student academic growth as well as social-emotional well-being. However, teacher turnover is been on the rise and attributed to burnout due to the high stresses of teaching. If teachers are practicing mindfulness, the research shows that their overall well-being will rise (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013).

Shayna does yoga every morning for at least 15 minutes and then goes into a traditional sitting meditation. She also likes to practice in communal settings. She offers a space at her school once a week, called “Quiet Space,” where she runs a yoga class, guided meditation or sometimes a place to just sit in silence.

Carly believes that one’s personal practice helps them adopt “mindfulness philosophies” into their daily lives. She looks at mindfulness as “not just twenty minutes out of your day” but it’s taking what you learn during those twenty minutes and always applying it. She stressed the importance of a teachers’ individual practice because students do what you do, not what you tell them to do, so if you are not mindful and exhibiting those qualities, students will not be able to exhibit those qualities either.

Jane can tell when her mindfulness practice is not a part of her daily experience as she senses her patience shorten. She states that while sometimes it is a challenge to get up earlier in the morning to meditate, she now has increased awareness of when she needs to take a few minutes to pause during her day. She knows that even if she doesn’t have time to
do an hour asana practice then maybe she’ll do some breath work instead, ensuring that there is some steady mindfulness practice in her daily routine.

4.1.2 Non-Judgemental

Being non-judgemental is a quality that all teachers considered vital to being a mindful teacher. This is in relation to both other people and to one’s self. All participants spoke of the non-judgemental qualities when becoming aware of the thoughts and feelings going on inside one’s head. They focus on noticing these thoughts and feelings without any judgements or labels attached to them, which allows them to stay in the moment and have clear awareness.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1991) defines being non-judgemental as:

Suspending judgment. It doesn’t mean having no judgments or forcing oneself to be nonjudgmental; rather it means that one doesn’t judge how judgmental one is. Once one starts to really pay attention it becomes obvious how many ideas and opinions, likes and dislikes, actually drive each of us from moment to moment so that we are lost in thought (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

When Shayna models to her students how to reflect on their mindfulness practice, she ensures that she is not judgemental of whatever thoughts or feelings arise. “I’m not judging it in any way because you don’t always have to be happy”. She is also realistic in her teachings by making her students aware that any emotions that arise are okay.

Carly spoke of this characteristic during tantrums and difficult situations a child may have. She noticed that her presence was supportive during a student’s emotional breakdown - just standing non-judgementally beside the student in need, and letting him or her know she is there, and that the student is valued.

Jane spoke about getting over the fear of judgement you may think other people have for you. She has noticed that since she began practicing, she is less judgemental of herself and others; her thoughts becoming more conservative rather than opinionated. She also related this quality to stepping out of your comfort zone. As an example, she explained that she is more likely to ask colleagues questions, when she used to think they’d judge her for those inquiries. Without the fear of judgement, she has blossomed as a teacher.
4.1.3 Compassionate

The third quality that the participants thought a mindful teacher must have is compassion. Jazaieri et al. (2015) defines compassion as:

A multi-componential construct encompassing: (1) an awareness of suffering (cognitive/attentional component), (2) sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering (affective component), (3) a wish to see the relief of that suffering (intentional component), and (4) a responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering (motivational component) (p.2).

The participants described this more simply as an increase in compassion leads to an increase in caring behaviours. Carly mentioned that when students cultivate compassion, they will be “nicer to each other”. She believes that people need to possess self-compassion and self-love in order to lead happy lives. Carly finds that “in this society, we all feel like we have to prove ourselves before we can love ourselves. The truth is that we never get there.” She mentioned that individuals need to show compassion to themselves at all times.

Shayna has difficulty when dealing with parents who “are struggling with parenting,” but always reminds herself to practice and grow her compassion. She believes that teachers need to consistently remind themselves that the parents of your students are “doing the best they can with what they have”. Jane thinks it is important to recognize when one is showing compassion to one’s self and to other people. Recognizing these moments of compassion, leads to a growth of compassion.

Not only was this trait recognized as extremely important by the study participants but it has also been associated with mindfulness through brain-imaging. Mindfulness practices “increased activity in cortical areas responsible for empathy and compassion” (Lutz, Brefcynsk-Lewis, Johnston, & Davidson, 2008). Studies have also linked mindfulness to increased activity in the brain regions associated with positive emotions and significantly increases levels of compassion (Weare, 2013).

4.1.4 Honesty/Authenticity

The fourth characteristic that the participants thought was important for a mindful teacher was to be honest and authentic. To them, honesty is being truthful and transparent, while authenticity is being your genuine self. In the field of Social Psychology, authenticity is defined as “the state of congruence in which an individual does not deny himself the
feelings being experienced and is willing to express them and be open to others” (Hefner and Felver-Gant, 2005). Mindfulness “enables us to connect deeply with ourselves, so in turn we can authentically connect with others” (Aguilar, 2014). Therefore, mindfulness is a form of honesty to oneself.

Carly believes that when a teacher makes a mistake in front of their class, they should simply and openly acknowledge the mistake and tell their class rather than acting like it was a test to see if the students were paying attention or brushing past the mistake. As well, she feels that modeling how one deals with mistakes using self-compassion is beneficial for students, especially because many of her students “beat themselves up” when they make mistakes. This climate of honesty and authenticity shows the students it is a safe classroom.

Jane speaks about these traits when modeling her own thoughts to students. She supports being as authentic as she can when she stated “I probably make myself a lot more vulnerable than a lot of teachers would be comfortable [with], and I share a lot of personal information, but I also find that’s my strength in connecting with people is to be as open and honest as I can be”.

Shayna believes that by cultivating your awareness through your own mindfulness practices it allows you to teach others from a place of authenticity. To her, the only way you should teach mindfulness practice is through that authentic experience. She also believes that being honest with yourself and your students on what you are thinking can be very “worthwhile.”

4.1.5 Non-reactive

Shayna speaks about the importance of being non-reactive and exhibiting patience with students who have done something wrong or even harmful. Instead of getting mad in the moment at them, she is able to approach them and say “sweetheart what is going on with you, because obviously something happened that you want to get rid of this emotion that you’re feeling.” She can put aside her emotions that arise during these times and attend to the situation at hand. This relates to current research which has found that mindfulness is linked to a decrease in emotional reactivity, which can be caused from things such as social stress (Briton, Shahar, Szepsenwol, & Jacobs, 2012).
Carly has developed and exhibited a strong patience in her daily teachings with the students in the HSP classroom. She has been put in stressful situations where a student will physically and emotionally try to harm themselves while having a tantrum. She spoke about the importance of staying calm, not reacting to the stressors in front of her, and “never giving up on any student”. Her belief was that just being calm and standing there with the student helped him come back to a more quiet and peaceful place. She stated “And I just stood there. Just the presence of me...Which is one of the most fundamental philosophies of mindfulness, just being there with them”.

4.2 Mindfulness Methods with Students

4.2.1 How the Participants Introduced Mindfulness

All three participants introduced mindfulness to their students through different activities but shared the same views on how it should be introduced to students. They believed that it is best not to explain what mindfulness is to their students before doing the first mindfulness exercise. Instead, they would tell their young students that they are “playing mindfulness.” With older students they would dive right into the mindfulness activity and tell them what the activity is formally called only after its completion. None of them started teaching mindfulness with stillness, instead they would build up mindfulness philosophies through different practices and activities.

Shayna began with “Life Lessons with Mrs. K” where the class would go into a community circle and focus on being present for what people needed. Students would share anything going on in their lives and they would talk about what would contribute to a happy life. Together they invented ten ways to deal with stress. Eventually, she moved into teaching her students relaxation techniques, “what we would call guided meditation but they weren’t like that, they were just called quiet hours”. Shayna now begins introducing mindfulness by telling students, “we’re going to do this really cool thing, we’re going to play mindfulness”. She believes that the way we introduce something to kids is how they’ll respond to it. She has students create their own definitions of mindfulness approximately a month into the practice, then again five months in.

Jane began introducing mindfulness to her students through a “heart lock-in” which is a form of a loving-kindness meditation. She would play relaxing, calm music and give her
students a few post-it notes where they were directed to write down five names they want to send love and appreciation to. She then gives them “an opportunity to share who they sent love and appreciation to and how that made them feel when they were sharing.”

Carly introduced mindfulness practices through discussion of mindfulness philosophies. She would speak with her students about “being happy with the present” and “finding joy in just being themselves, not having to prove themselves”. After those discussions she introduced short loving-kindness meditations.

All of the teachers spoke about giving the students the right to participate during the introduction of mindfulness, therefore, mindfulness practice was an open invitation. The participants all believe that if the students don’t feel comfortable or do not want to do the practice, they will not be fully open to it and will not get the benefits. They would ask the students who are not interested in participating to be respectful of the silence in the room. Jane would tell her students if they try three times and do not want to continue with the practice, she would find an alternative assignment for them to do. To date, no students have taken up this offer.

4.2.2 Establishing a Routine

All participants aim to have a mindfulness routine with their students. For example, Shayna stated,

It’s great to say that we are mindful and we want to be mindful but [Jon Kabat-Zinn] says...the beauty of the practice is grounding it in routine. So I have kind of taken that to the classroom and said we need to have some type of routines that we practice every day so I have set from 9:40 a.m.-10 a.m. every day religiously we practice.

Her class starts with five minutes of mindful movement. Then they move into quiet time; the amount of time for this portion of the practice is age and level dependent. Quiet time can be a guided visualization or relaxation techniques. Then they do a quiet reflection, the dialogue centering on what they noticed. She models the reflection to ensure students know that there is no wrong answer.

Jane’s rotary students, who she has for just one or two subjects a day, know that when she enters the room they must all sit on the carpet for the mindfulness routine which is practiced during class transitions. In Jane’s homeroom class, students do mindful journal
entries as part of their daily routine. They also have a Friday afternoon yoga practice. Her students often notice and comment on being disappointed if they miss their daily/weekly mindfulness practice.

Carly aims to have an established routine with her classes. Her previous kindergarten class would do their mindfulness practice for a few minutes every morning during carpet time. Her current routine is to do the mindfulness practice of listening to the bell at the same time daily.

4.2.3 Practices

All of the teachers shared the mindfulness practices they have used in their classrooms and a brief explanation on what they are. This section includes practices that were consistent among all three teachers interviewed. These included loving-kindness meditation, mindful movement, breathing techniques, reflection on practice, peace corner and teacher resources.

Loving-kindness meditation is a form of mindfulness practice that brings about a positive change in attitudes and a loving acceptance of one’s self. The literature defines it as a meditation that “focuses on developing feelings of goodwill, kindness and warmth towards others (Salzberg, 1997). Jane believes that there are four things that every human being needs and wants in order to live a healthy life; this has led her to practice a heart meditation mantra, a form of loving-kindness meditation. The whole class repeats (out loud or in their heads) “may I be happy, may I be healthy, may I live my life with ease, and may I live my life safely”. She takes this mindfulness activity further by having students write down five names to send those good wishes to. First is to themselves, second is to a caregiver, “someone that is really easy to send love and appreciation to”, third is to someone neutral in their lives, such a stranger who serves them at a shop, fourth is to someone they are having difficulty with, and the last is to a component of the world. Students shift their focus to whichever person they are sending their wishes of well-being.

Shayna stated that there are high levels of violence and aggression in her student population and that loving-kindness meditations really helps her students act with more care and less aggression. As well, the student population is not very multi-cultural so this form of mindfulness has been helpful in student awareness of “how we show respect not only through words, but through body language and through nonverbal communication we
use” as a way to support and include everyone in their community through loving-kindness.

All participants found the mind-body connection important. They notice that stillness is difficult for many children, so mindful movement allows them to increase their bodily awareness, and then move into awareness of the mind.

Shayna does yoga poses with her students and attaches different affirmations with each posture. She created cards that have all the yoga moves and positive affirmations. She has put them together into a song, “I am powerful as a mountain, I am tall as a tree, I take care of my body, I’m balanced as can be”. A second activity Shayna played, called “Here, there and everywhere” is a kinesthetic mindfulness game. Shayna usually does it outside with her students. She yells here, and the student squish together closely, and when they’re huddled she’ll say, “Just notice what it’s like, what you feel like. And I’ll go, ‘I feel so squished, so uncomfortable’”. Then she yells “there” and the student run far away. And lastly, she yells “everywhere” and she chases the students trying to tag them. Then they share what thoughts or body sensations they noticed while playing.

Jane is a certified yoga teacher and spends every Friday afternoon doing a 45 minute to 1 hour yoga practice with her students. Jane also introduces partner yoga to her students once a strong routine is established. She likes doing partner yoga because it incorporates cooperation and collaboration. Jane also lets her students have room to be creative with yoga poses and to try and craft their own postures.

Carly believes that some students need movement to go deeper into their mindfulness practice and some students need stillness. She invites her students to do whichever one they prefer. Often during a practice students will be walking while listening to the meditation.

All teachers noted that the breath is the most important tool we have. They observed that breathing helps calm their students down and that increasing students’ awareness of their breathing patterns gives them the skills to tune into their breath and bring on their own relaxation. Scientific literature on breathing links mindful breathing to lower stress levels and improved health factors (Levine, 2015). Harvard Medical School released a study that indicated “there is a very direct relationship between breath rate, mood state, and autonomic nervous system state” (Levine, 2015).
Not only did all of the interview participants state that they do guided breathing exercises with their students, but Shayna and Jane have also had their students “develop all different kinds of breaths.” Their intention is to use the breath to help their students focus and calm down before the lesson begins. Shayna laughingly stated that the “kids have made up a gazillion breaths like volcano breath or fart breath... they all love these breaths.”

Jane speaks about the importance of letting kids “be silly and imaginative and creative with breath work”. Jane believes that “kids have more knowledge and power than we do in what they feel comfortable expressing or trying, so giving some of the power back to them”.

Carly uses deep breathing with her kindergarten class to begin their mindfulness practice. She also teaches her students what “square breaths” are. She practices the square breath technique with her students and tells them it will help when they’re “upset”. She shared a story of a student’s mom being upset and her five year old suggesting she “take square breaths” to help calm her down, proving the effect mindfulness has on the students.

All of the teachers believed it was important to discuss and reflect on the mindfulness practices as a way for students to gain meta-cognitive skills and have an awareness of the changes taking place. Shayna has students get into small group or partners and ask them to discuss “what did you notice” after any practice where students are sitting. Then they come together as a whole group and have a free share on what they noticed during the day’s practice. Shayna makes sure to emphasize that “the coolest thing about mindfulness is there is no wrong answer”. She believes it is important to model self-reflection. “I think that really is probably the most powerful piece of what we do, and all of the other stuff is preparation for that piece”.

Carly has volunteers share how they feel after they do a mindfulness practice. This is often in a whole group setting. She was shocked at the amount of positivity she receives after any practice with her students. Her kindergarten students shared comments such as “I feel like a butterfly”, “I feel like I was at my uncle’s wedding” and “I feel graceful”.

All of the interview participants spoke about having a safe place in the classroom where students could go to if they needed a break, their own space or some quiet time; this was often referred to as a peace corner. Jane’s classroom peace corner has a lit up tree, plants, books, breathing tools, and sensory objects that make sounds and have unique
textures. Jane’s peace corner is not only a safe space for her students, but for students from other classes. Shayna’s classroom also has a similar peace corner, and her students have expressed their gratitude for having this safe spot to go to when needed. Carly’s HSP class is very small but she keeps one desk, with dividers on either side, which faces away from the room; it has feelings charts taped to the dividers. Her students can go there to calm down and self-regulate.

All of the interviewees shared the resources they would suggest for new teachers looking to incorporate mindfulness practices into their classrooms. The below section explores the top resources used by the participants.

All participants agreed that the best resource is personal experience gained during one’s mindfulness practice. Jane and Shayna suggested teachers use Daniel Rechtschaffen’s book *The Way of Mindful Education*. They both stressed the usefulness of this book in the classroom, revealing that it includes not only stories based on Rechtschaffen’s many experiences, but also hands-on lessons and guided practices to use with students.

Carly and Shayna use selective parts of the MindUp Program, as referred to in Chapter Two. It is currently available through Scholastic. Shayna warned that teachers should be aware that this program does not mention the importance of a teacher’s personal practice. Carly and Jane both said that conversing with colleagues and others who practice mindfulness “can be a gem” in terms of the knowledge and ideas you can gain. Some authors that were suggested include Thich Naht Han, Pema Chodron and Gail Silver for kids’ picture books.

### 4.3 Teachers’ perceptions on the effects of mindfulness practice with students

The third theme that emerged in the three interviews is the teachers’ perceptions of the effects mindfulness practice has on students. This is based purely on their observations and professional insight. The behavioural changes that emerged during the interviews are also reported through qualitative studies on mindfulness as explained in Weare’s (2013) metacognitive research study on *Developing mindfulness with children and young people.*
4.3.1 Awareness and Self-Regulation

All teachers mentioned that they noticed an increase in self-regulation in themselves and in their students. In order for students to be able to self-regulate, they first need to have self-awareness.

Carly noted that she had a student who would have meltdowns and start screaming. She would just stand beside him and motion to smell the rose, blow out the candle and feel good, which was her routine mindfulness practice with that class. She stated, “He would stop all the screaming and follow me.” Jane, who works with the intermediate grades, thinks it is very easy to consider teenagers as self-involved, yet the mindfulness practices give them a greater awareness of themselves and others. Shayna brought up the increase in body awareness among her students. At the beginning of the school year she often noticed a lack in awareness of personal space but after learning mindful movement the students were more aware of their own bodies and how to interact with others. This decreased fights that would take place on the carpet since students were more aware of their emotions.

All teachers mentioned the importance of having a safe place to go, such as the peace corner. Once students are more aware of their emotions, they can learn how to self-regulate. All teachers noticed that when students would go to the peace corner, thereby showing an increase in awareness of their feelings and an ability to self-regulate, this detracted from the teacher directing them to go for a time out. Going to the peace corner leaves the decision making up to the student.

4.3.2 Increased Compassion

All teachers mentioned an increase in the students’ compassion levels after the introduction of mindfulness. Mendelson et al. (2013) note that practicing mindfulness creates a culture of compassion. This culture of compassion was exhibited in a story Carly shared; she noticed a group of her kindergarten students standing in a circle on the carpet during inquiry based play time. She realized there was a student in the middle crying and the “other students surrounded that student with a box of tissues and were doing smell the rose, blow out the candle, feel good” to remind the sad child what he could do to help
himself feel better. She said the increase in compassion and empathy levels was “transformative” in her classroom.

Jane noticed that the more she focused the mindful journal writing on kindness and compassion, the more her students began to show compassion to one another. Not only did their awareness on what compassion means increase, but they were readily able to point out times when they showed kindness and compassion to others and to themselves. As well, they could recognize small gestures other people did that showed compassion towards them.

Shayna discussed an increase of self-compassion through nurturing activities; she defines these as anything one can do where they lose track of time, for example, gardening, which can be a mindfulness practice. She believes nurturing activities contribute to self-care and increase feelings of pleasure. She tells her students and attendees of her wellness workshops, “When you find yourself struggling, increase the time you spend doing those activities. That is your mindfulness practice.”

4.3.3 Increased Attention Levels

The very definition of mindfulness, as stated above, “implies both the regulation of attention and the cultivation of openness and curiosity towards the object of one’s attention” (Poulin, 2009, p.26).

The participants noticed that students had longer attention spans immediately after mindfulness practices, and over longer periods of time. Jane not only uses the mindfulness practices during the daily routine times but also before longer assessment pieces “that require student to sit and not to talk. I’ll lead them through a breathing exercise before”. She asserts this improves the students’ ability to maintain focus.

Shayna also has noticed an increase in attention among her students. She believes that through mindfulness, she’s “not telling kids to pay attention anymore, she’s teaching them how”. She has noted a huge amount of growth in their academic success and in their “inner lives”. Carly mentioned how the decrease in anxiety (see section titled Stress and Anxiety Management) led to an increase in attention levels in many of her students.

4.3.4 Increased Confidence

Many students in Carly’s HSP class had very low self-confidence which resulted in them not wanting to try or take risks while doing work. She believes this is from repetitive
put-downs they have received from peers, teachers or themselves. This hindered their learning abilities. She noticed that practicing mindfulness increased their confidence levels leading them to “produce their best work”.

Jane discussed how the brain is easily affected during adolescence. Mindfulness can help change negative thoughts and the neural pathways created by negative thoughts (Holzel et al., 2011). She spoke about the “power of changing our perspective on how we see each other and how we see ourselves”. She aims to improve her students’ “self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth” and noticed subtle changes in these areas after a few weeks of practicing mindfulness.

Jane spoke about the changes in confidence levels and self-worth in her students after doing a daily mindfulness practice. Her students were self-advocating, approaching her about difficulties they were experiencing at home, and volunteered to share their personal mindfulness journals with other teachers looking to start the practice in their classrooms. Jane stated that students became more open and accepting of themselves as a result of the mindfulness practices.

4.3.5 Stress and Anxiety Management

The participants observed that students had noticeably lower stress and anxiety levels after practicing mindfulness. These changes were noticed after one week of practice. Students also reported feeling more calm and happy. The research in mindfulness found “physiological and psychological benefits through a reduction in stress physiology and through measurable changes in the function and structure of diverse areas of the brain” (Mieklejohn et al., 2012, p.293) thereby confirming the positive effects. Carly has had students with anxiety disorders and noticed positive changes in them after introducing mindfulness practice. One student’s mother noted her son excelled in Carly’s classroom. He wasn’t having “his usual panic attacks” and the calm atmosphere is what lead him to function and resulted in a rise in his academic performance.

Jane had a student with very negative self-talk occurring. She was highly stressed and had committed acts of self-harm. Jane worked with her on how mindfulness became a “positive strategy for her focus on rather than” focusing on the stress, self-harm and anxiety.
4.4 Mindfulness and Ontario Curriculum Connections

All of the participants found many connections between the Ontario Curriculum and mindfulness. Shayna stated that “we are really teaching mindfulness all day, we’re just not aware of it.” She has been asked by principals to observe fellow teachers and point out ways in which they are already mindfulness teachers. Participants made connections with the Ontario Curriculum and mindfulness practices. Mindfulness movements taught many of the physical education expectations, for example, balancing. Mindfulness can be tied to the mental health portion of the Health curriculum. Jane noted that the Language curriculum’s writing expectations are “vague” (for example, have students write about an experience) and that teachers have the luxury of choosing how their students reach those expectations. These expectations can be taught by using the mindful journal method.

Mindfulness can be part of the Science curriculum by having the students discuss and understand the different parts of the brain. When they understand how their brains work, how emotions and actions affect them on a physiologic level, it increases their awareness. Jane teaches her students about the research on mindfulness “developing neural pathways”. Shayna incorporated a skit on how the parts of brain work into her Drama class, along with the changes mindfulness makes in these regions. Her students came up with characters named “Amy Amygdala” and “Poindex the Pre-frontal Cortex”. Music and Dance expectations, such as rhythm, can be met through mindful movement. York Region School Board’s mandated Daily Physical Education (DPA) can be completed with mindful movement activities. Mindfulness also contributes to an increase in metacognitive awareness, which has been said to improve both literacy and mathematics skills. Shayna linked mindfulness to the social justice curriculum as it “makes kids aware of their emotional attachment to issues and looks at world compassion”.

Carly pointed out the strong correlation between the learning skills and work habits in the Ministry of Education’s document “Growing Success” and mindfulness education. This document outlines a “comprehensive policy for assessment, evaluation and reporting of student achievement in Ontario schools” (Ontario, 2010, p.2). Four of the six learning skills and work habits that teachers are mandated to assess have strong parallels to behaviours that mindfulness is said to improve (as seen in the literature cited in chapter
two and throughout the participant interviews conducted for this study). These learning skills and work habits are self-regulation, collaboration, responsibility, and independent work. This document lists sample behaviours to assist teachers in their assessments. For example, a sample behaviour for responsibility is “takes responsibility for and manages own behaviour” (Ontario, 2010, p.11).

Jane found that her school board’s specialists were increasingly using Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as a place to recommend mindfulness practices. She has seen many of these official government documents state that students “should practice yoga or mindfulness strategies” as a tool to help with self-regulation, anxiety and other factors. Her peace corner has been included in these official documents as a safe place students can go.

### 4.5 Challenges and Barriers in Implementing Mindfulness

This theme includes the main barriers or challenges that the three teachers interviewed were faced with when looking to adopt a mindfulness practice.

#### 4.5.1 Lack of Support

All teachers experienced a time when they felt that implementing mindfulness as a way to improve student well-being was not supported, whether it was from parents, colleagues, administration or others. The parents of some of Shayna’s students wrote letters to the board saying, “You are trying to convert my child into a Buddhist. I don’t want you to use the bell anymore and I refuse to have my child participate in the program.” She had been doing the same mindfulness practice for many years with her students but instead of calling it mindfulness, it was referred to as Attention and Action. When she changed the title to Mindfulness and Action many more parents began having issues with the practice.

Jane experienced similar opposition when she was running a yoga club at her school; a child in grade one was not allowed to take part because his parents said it was against their religion. Jane noticed that a lot of her fellow teachers are resistant and unsure on how to implement mindfulness because they think it will be a huge undertaking.

As a way to gain support from parents and community members, Shayna’s school holds an education week where the gym is open to the public and mindfulness booths are set up throughout. She believes that people who do not support mindfulness are afraid of it
and misunderstand what the practice is. She holds this week to “make them more aware, while maintaining your sense of humour!” The students create different booths and community members are invited to take part in a wide variety of mindfulness sensory awareness games and other mindfulness activities.

4.5.2 Student “Buy In” and Participation

Carly and Shayna have noticed that often the students who question why they are practicing mindfulness are the ones who “need it the most”. When Jane has a student who “can’t find their stillness” she tries simple tactics such as getting closer to them or placing a hand on their back during the practice.

All participants noted that older students often put up more resistance than younger students who are more “open-minded”. When Jane introduced mindfulness, she didn’t refer to it as mindfulness, but instead “just described what we’re going to do”. She also found that the “buy in” levels for the older students increased when they were placed with mindful buddies (an older class paired with a younger class and assigned a buddy by their teachers). Jane stated:

They know they’re in the type of role model situation...they kind of let their guard down. Then they are really enjoying the activity, and they want to do it, then they will be more willing to do it just on their own with their grade 8 peers.

After Jane’s initial introduction of yoga with her grade 8 students, they were silly, disruptive and not engaged. She realized the importance of strategically positioning the students during the practice (boys in the front and girls in the back) and did a presentation for her students on the benefits of yoga for hockey players and football players. This was a tactic to get more of her students engaged and interested in the practice. She used pop culture celebrities, such as Lebron James, and showed interviews about their yoga practice to hook the students’ interest.

4.5.3 Time Constraints

The teachers spoke about the time constraints in their personal practices as well those in the classroom. Jane sometimes took time away from her mindfulness routine to do other things in the classroom. She spoke about a time when she planned a football tournament during the time her students practiced their weekly yoga and received a large
amount of backlash from the students! Jane stated “I have other stuff to get through. I’d love to do an hour [yoga] practice every day but I just don’t, you know, the time I have with them is so limited”. Carly brought up the idea of establishing a personal practice, stating “it’s better for teachers to start in the summer because you’re not stressed and actually have the time”.

4.6 Chapter Conclusions

This chapter reviewed the findings from an in depth analysis of three interviews with teachers who have their own mindfulness practice and have been teaching it to their students. This chapter started by discussing the qualities the participants believe to be important for a mindful teacher. They believe that mindfulness in the classroom needs to begin with the teacher’s personal practice and modeling, therefore, it is important to know what qualities to exhibit.

The qualities that arose were: non-judgemental, compassionate, honest/authentic, and non-reactive/patient. Suggested mindfulness methods to use with students were given. Details on how participants introduced mindfulness to their students and how they established a mindfulness routine in their classrooms were included.

All participants shared their perceptions of the effects mindfulness practices had on their students. These included behavioural changes, such as an increase in awareness, self-regulation, compassion, attention, confidence, and anxiety/stress management. While numerous benefits of mindfulness were discussed, the participants also mentioned the challenges of implementing mindfulness practices as well as barriers. These included lack of student “buy in” and participation, time constraints, and lack of support. Despite the barriers and challenges noted, all participants were optimistic about overcoming these barriers and shared their ideas on how best to do that.

The following section will bring together the study by discussing the implications and recommendations for further research on improving student well-being through mindfulness.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction

This study was designed to learn more about improving student well-being through the incorporation of mindfulness in elementary school classrooms. This chapter summarizes the research findings, highlights the implications for various stakeholders, provides several recommendations for the education community and suggests directions for future research.

The previous chapter outlined the findings from three in-depth interviews with current elementary school teachers who practice mindfulness in their classrooms and have established their own personal practices. It reviewed the main themes and subthemes that arose during the qualitative interviews and drew parallels to the current literature in this field.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

The findings that emerged from the interviews with three educators revealed five important themes:

(1) Qualities of a mindful teacher;
(2) Mindfulness methods with students;
(3) Teachers’ perceptions of the effects of mindfulness on student behaviour;
(4) Mindfulness and Ontario curriculum connection; and
(5) Challenges and barriers in implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom.

The first theme, qualities of a mindful teacher, revealed that in order to successfully bring mindfulness to students, teachers must first have their own mindfulness practice and exhibit the qualities of a mindful person. This provides a model to the students of what an authentic, mindful person looks and acts like. The main qualities that participants listed as important were: non-judgemental, both of one’s self and others; compassionate, which often resulted in an increase in caring behaviours; honest/authentic, which encompassed being truthful, transparent and being your genuine self; and lastly, non-reactive which includes an element of patience.

The second theme to emerge was mindfulness methods teachers used with students. The participants introduced mindfulness in different ways yet they all agreed that it is important to begin with short mindfulness practices. They found that the students responded best when mindfulness philosophies were imparted through activities. All participants agreed that
mindfulness practices should never be introduced with stillness. They did not find it necessary to explain what mindfulness is, or use the term mindfulness for the first few practices. Rather, it was noted that if students thought it was a game or exercise they were taking part in, they kept open-minded attitudes. All participants spoke about the importance of grounding the mindfulness practice in routine, whether it is at the same time every day or every week, or the same mindfulness method used consistently. Interviewees shared types of mindfulness practices they use with their students, including but not limited to; loving kindness meditation, mindful movement, and breathing techniques. The three participants thought it was important for students to reflect on their mindfulness practices and they also shared the names of resources they used. Some useful resources include Daniel Rechtschaffen’s book *The Way of Mindful Education*, the MindUp program, Gail Silver’s children books, and authors Thich Naht Han and Pema Chodron.

The third theme explored was teachers’ perceptions on the effects of mindfulness practices with students. The observations discussed were behavioural in nature. Participants reported improvements in their students and in themselves in the areas of awareness (both bodily awareness and awareness of thoughts and emotions) and self-regulation. The findings also showed improvements in compassion, attention, confidence, stress and anxiety management, and more.

The fourth theme looked at connections between mindfulness and the current Ontario curriculum. Participants discussed how mindfulness could be used to teach the health and physical education curriculum, and support expectations for mathematics, language, science, drama, and art. Many of the skills mindfulness helps develop also support the Ontario curriculum goals in developing meta-cognitive awareness, critical thinking and social justice education.

The last theme was on the challenges/barriers of implementing mindfulness practices. One finding was lack of support from parents, students, colleagues or administration. Student “buy in” and participation was a barrier, as some students were resistant to the mindfulness practice. Another challenge teachers faced when bringing mindfulness into their classrooms or in creating a personal practice was time constraints.
5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Broad

This study has important implications for educational reform. In broad strokes, this study should serve as a reminder to policymakers and curriculum planners about the importance of teachers supporting student well-being within their classrooms. The present study is consistent with the conclusions of academic literature which found that incorporating mindfulness in elementary classrooms is effective in improving student behaviour, attention, compassion and stress/anxiety. Study participants reported they were able to support student well-being through consistent mindfulness practices. The reason why teachers incorporate this practice in their classrooms is because it is proven to improve student well-being. This study also provides insight on how teachers are currently incorporating mindfulness in their classrooms which answers the main research question of this study. Teachers discussed the challenges/barriers teachers encountered during the implementation of this practice; policy makers should take heed.

The present study also has three specific implications for teachers. First, as there are no current board-wide strategies on how to integrate mindfulness into the classroom, it is up to classroom teachers to educate themselves in this area and bring mindfulness practices into their classes. There are countless books, podcasts, courses, community groups, and yoga studios where teachers can begin or can enhance their mindfulness practices. There are also seminars and workshops offered throughout the province with organizations such as Mindful Me, Mindful Teachers, The Centre for Mindfulness Studies, Mindfulness Training Toronto, The Mindfulness Institute, Yoga Therapy Toronto, and many more. Participants all emphasized that it is essential for teachers to have their own mindfulness routine in order to effectively teach students how to be mindful.

Second, the importance of incorporating mindfulness not only as a tool to support the curriculum but also to improve well-being and positively impact the life experiences of both students and teachers. This is important because student achievement in the school setting will rise, as will the increase in resilience lead to ultimately happier lives. This implies that after a routine mindfulness practice is established, it will lead to a rise in academic and life success. There is encouraging proof of the positive and profound effects mindfulness practices can have and the change in teacher perceptions of their students’ behaviour and outlook on life. The literature in this field, and the data collected, not only speak of the physical, physiological and
neurological effects mindfulness can have but also suggests that one’s overall happiness will rise as their resilience grows.

### 5.2.3 Narrow

And lastly, the implication for me as both a teacher and a researcher is that I must continue to spread my knowledge and expertise on mindfulness. I will aim to help my colleagues develop their own mindfulness practices. This study implies that giving students the mindset and skill set developed through mindfulness will cultivate their well-being.

### 5.3 Recommendations

The implications of the present study point specifically to several recommendations for ministries of education, school administrators, and teachers. The recommendations were divided into two main categories in relation to policy initiatives and professional development for current and pre-service teachers:

1. **Policy Recommendations**
   - While the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) has initiatives that stress the importance of student well-being, there are not yet documents that outline how teachers can implement practical methods of supporting well-being. School boards should create policies on how to include mindfulness in their board improvement plans (BIP). This document is updated annually and reflects the York Region District School Board’s current “set of value which guides [their] actions” (YRDSB, 2015). The YRDSB currently includes “student achievement and well-being” as one of the three goals in their Multi-Year Plan, therefore, more in-depth guidance should be given to schools and teachers on how they can achieve this improvement (YRDSB, 2016).
   - Schools should follow board goals and objectives by incorporating mindfulness into their school improvement plan (SIP). The MOE outlines the purpose of the SIP as a “process through which schools set goals for improvement, and make decisions about how and when these goals will be achieved” (Education Improvement Commission, 2000, p.6). By including policies and documents that educate on mindfulness practices, it will help bring schools closer to achieving
their goals to improve student well-being by holding teachers accountable for taking action by practicing with their students to bring around these changes.

2. Professional Learning and Development

- Education and training in mindfulness methods should be a mandatory part of ongoing teacher professional development for current and pre-service teachers. Nurturing inner resilience and non-judgemental attitudes through mindfulness training should be done through professional development at the pre-service level. This creates a strong foundation for future teachers to support and cultivate student well-being and prepare them to manage classroom behaviour through mindfulness.

- Professional development programs should improve awareness of the topic and reduce stigma associated with mindfulness. Once teachers are mindfulness practitioners, they can begin to practice age-appropriate mindfulness activities with students. School staff should also have supportive relationships to external mindfulness trainers to answer any questions on the effective incorporation of this practice and provide necessary guidance.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

It is evident from the research and the findings of this study that mindfulness has the potential to positively impact the educational community and bring substantial changes. It has also highlighted the need for further study. There is already high quality empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness on social and emotional learning. The evidence on working with students in the classroom is only beginning to emerge. There is limited empirical evidence on the efficacy of interventions with younger populations. Clinical research trials should be designed with larger sample sizes and should include both random and control groups.

This study has allowed me to see where there are gaps in the research and where educational scholars should direct their future studies. Some questions that were raised through this research are:

- What types of mindfulness interventions are most effective?
- Should different mindfulness methods be used with different ages?
How established must a teacher’s personal practice be before they should introduce mindfulness to their students?

It is recommended that a greater emphasis be placed on how mindfulness should be implemented into classrooms, rather than focusing on why. Future studies should hone in on the most effective mindfulness methods with students. The research should look at the length of time, frequency and time of day teachers should implement practices into their classroom. Future studies should analyse the barriers preventing teachers from beginning their own mindfulness practices and the challenges/barriers teachers might experience while implementing mindfulness in the classroom. As well, future studies should focus on the implications of mindfulness practices for students with exceptional needs. For example, if mindfulness can improve the well-being of students on the Autism spectrum, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder and other needs? Future studies can look to measure these changes.

Educational scholars should analyze where school boards are currently putting funding money for mental health initiatives and measure the current effectiveness of these programs.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how and why current Ontario elementary school teachers were using mindfulness as a way to improve student well-being. This study analyzed current research in the field of mindfulness and education. It uncovered ways mindfulness is currently being practiced in classrooms and looked at best practices being used by three current Ontario elementary school teachers. Research findings suggest that teachers must have their own mindfulness practices in order to successfully bring it into their classrooms, and should exhibit the traits of what of a mindful teacher. They must be non-judgemental, compassionate, honest/authentic and non-reactive. Some successful mindfulness activities being used in classrooms include: loving kindness meditation, yoga, mindful eating, and sensory awareness games. The participants in this study recognized and emphasized the need to use mindfulness to cultivate student well-being and improve awareness and attention levels within the school community.

This research is significant in the field of education as it proves why mindfulness is being used to improve student social and emotional learning which ultimately leads to an improvement in their academic success. Mental health is a rising issue and leaders in this field have measured
the positive effects mindfulness has on student behaviour in the classroom. These findings are relevant as it reinforces existing literature in this field. This study also unveiled some of the barriers that hold teachers back from beginning a personal mindfulness practice and establishing one with their students. It is noted that there are gaps in the literature; this study provides insights and recommendations for future studies as a way to further develop the best practices for mindfulness within the education system. As the mindfulness field is continuing to grow, it is important that teachers stay informed on what mindfulness is and how it can be used to improve student well-being. The Ontario Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools can put policies in place, as well as teachers can take initiative to learn about the practices to reap the benefits. As stated by Jon Kabat-Zinn, “The best way to capture moments is to pay attention. This is how we cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing” (1994).
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Appendix A: Interview Consent Letter

[Date]

Dear [insert participant name],

This is a letter of invitation to participate in my research project called “Improving Well-Being in Education: Incorporating Mindfulness in Ontario Elementary Classrooms”. My name is Carrie Poteck and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. This is a two year teacher education program that certifies me with an Ontario teaching certification and a graduate degree. I am required to complete a Master of Teaching Research Project (MTRP) that involves a theoretical and practical component. I am studying why and how mindfulness should be incorporated into elementary school classrooms. I believe your experience and insight would be an invaluable addition to my research in this area.

You will be asked about personal experiences and your opinions on various topics related to mindfulness. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a question or sharing your views, please let me know and we will skip that question.

Your involvement would include a 45 to 60 minute interview that would be digitally recorded and transcribed. The content from this interview will be used for my MTRP which will be published online, and for informal presentations to my classmates and professors. A pseudonym will be used to keep your name, position, and school confidential. Your specific responses will also be kept confidential. The data you provide will be kept secure, erased and only be accessible by my direct supervisor and I.
A time and place for the interview will be arranged according to your availability and convenience. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose to withdraw from the study at any time. In this instance, the information collected from you would be immediately destroyed.

The information gained from this study will help increase our knowledge on why and how mindfulness should be incorporated into Ontario elementary classrooms. A summary of my research, as well as the full report, will be sent to you via email. Feel free to contact my faculty supervisor, , or myself if you have any questions or require more information.

If you agree to participate, please sign the consent form below and return it to Carrie Poteck in person or via email. Please keep the second copy of this letter for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Carrie Poteck
Principal investigator
647-984-0333
carrie.poteck@mail.utoronto.ca

Consent Form
I have read and understood the letter provided by Carrie Poteck and wish to participate in the MTRP as an interviewee. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from my role as a participant at any time without a consequence.

Participant’s Name: ____________________________
Participant’s Signature: _________________________
Date: ________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me. Just to remind you, this research is aims to learn _________________ for the purpose of _________________. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on _________________ . I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Info

1. a. Name? Do you have any preferred pseudonyms when I remove identifying information from my final paper?
   b. Grade/subject that you’re currently teaching?

2. How many years have you worked as a teacher? How many years have you taught at this school?

3. I already know that you have some experience with mindfulness. How did you become involved with mindfulness?

4. So I can get a better picture of your students, how would you characterize their overall behavior?

5. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated (ex: diversity, socioeconomic status, etc.)?

Section 2: Teacher Practices (WHAT/HOW)

6. How did you initially introduce mindfulness into your classroom/students?

7. Do you have any expectations or hopes that led to your decision to practice mindfulness with your students? If so, what expectations?

8. What types of mindfulness activities do you practice with your students?

9. Have you established a mindfulness routine with your students? If so, what is it?
10. To what extent has your class’s mindfulness practice had effects on their learning? What are they?
11. Do you have your own mindfulness practice outside of the classroom? If yes, what is it?
12. Have you seen any connections between one’s well-being and one’s learning abilities? What are some examples or specific connections you may have noticed based on your experiences?

Section 3: Beliefs/Values (WHY)
13. Do you see connections between mindfulness and current Ontario curriculum guidelines? If so, what are some?
14. What are some of the assumptions or inspirations that led you to use mindfulness practices in your classroom?
15. Do you think students can gain anything from practicing mindfulness in elementary classrooms? If so, can you please provide some examples?
16. Can you describe to me how your students responded to your introduction of mindfulness in the classroom? How they currently respond?
17. Do you use any resources to help you teach mindfulness? What resources would you recommend for teachers new to the practice?

Section 4: Influencing Factors and Barriers (WHO)
18. Have you faced any obstacles or challenges when teaching mindfulness in your class?
19. What kind of feedback have you had from people outside the classroom regarding your practice of mindfulness with your students? For example parents, administrators, other teachers?

Section 5: Next Steps (WHAT NEXT)
20. What advice, strategies, resources or approaches would you give to a teacher looking to teach mindfulness to their students?

Conclusion:
21. Is there any other important information you would like to add to what you have already told me?

22. Are there topics or issues regarding mindfulness with students that you believe were missed in this interview?