Classroom Based Mindfulness and its Impact on Peer Relationships

By

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THE IMPACT OF MINDFULNESS ON PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Abstract

For many students, the chief focus of school academic development and less so, social-emotional development. The purpose of this study is to consider how using mindfulness in a classroom setting with students impacts the relationships amongst students in the class. The overall research question is: how might classroom-based mindfulness practices influence student relationships with one another? This study utilized a qualitative research methodology; semi-structured interviews were conducted, the data was coded and categorized into themes. First, I found that there were many foundations for the implementation of a successful mindfulness practice. Second, I provided a discussion on the resources and facets of implementation in the classroom that support a successful mindfulness practice. Third, I found that the implementation of this mindfulness strategies had a meaningful impact on the social and emotional development of students.

The findings of this study provide several avenues for the effective implementation of mindfulness in the classroom in a way that is meaningful to the students. Most significantly, it demonstrates the potential capacity of mindfulness to enhance the social and emotional development of students. This capacity of classroom based mindfulness implies that there must be a significant undertaking on the part of teachers to support a classroom mindfulness practice with their students, but the potential benefits make this a worthwhile venture. At the same time, the effort of teachers needs to be supported and encouraged by school administrations.

Key Words: mindfulness, interpersonal relationships, self awareness, self regulation
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

Mindfulness is a state of mind that is said to be an awareness cultivated through purposeful, present-moment attention with open awareness, and without judgement (Kabat Zinn, 2013). The practice of mindfulness originates within Buddhist traditions. Buddhism has a focus on discipline in mental practice in order to release oneself from suffering (Bankart, Dockett, & Grant, 2006). I define mindfulness as a mental practice in which a person is aware of their present moment experience, attends to all thoughts and stimuli with curiosity, but without judgement. Being mindful means giving attention to thoughts and feelings as they pass. This insinuates that mindfulness involves giving attention to all of experience as it is unfolding in the present moment, including potentially challenging or painful thoughts and feelings. Through this process, a person can reduce the amount of suffering they will encounter by being present with, and dealing with their pain. Developing mindful awareness requires an understanding of Buddhist notion that pain in a constant in life and that humans cannot escape it, but they can reduce the impact or suffering it has in life (Germer, 2005).

Utilizing practices that encourage mindfulness have been taken up by modern psychology practice and distanced from its origins as a religious practice. Mindfulness is being utilized in clinical settings to encourage individuals to have a greater self-awareness and responding skillfully to intense emotions, giving the practitioner a greater control of their mental state (Bishop et. al., 2004). This insurgence of mindfulness in psychological clinical practice was prompted by the development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). MBSR is an eight-week program with the inclusion of many meditative exercises to teach mindfulness skills; it was developed for the treatment of individuals with chronic pain and conditions related to
stress and anxiety (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006; Bishop et. al., 2004). This prompted the
development of other mindfulness based programs such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive
Therapy (MBCT), Dialetical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), and Acceptance Commitment Therapy
(ACT). Each of these programs have been developed to cater to the mitigation of specific
physical and mental illnesses. In general, these programs involve the practice of mindfulness
through different meditative techniques that encourage a person to pay attention to specific
stimuli, pay attention to their thoughts and feelings without becoming involved, or do a simple
activity with guided mindful awareness (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006).

The programs and initiatives in clinical practice have had a significant impact on
practitioners. This is because mindfulness is skillful way for people to connect with their
moment to moment experience. Mindfulness skills can help a person to give their full and
undivided attention to the present moment, attend to internal and external stimuli without intense
reactions, to have thoughts and observations without judgement (Dekeyser et. al., 2008). In this
way, mindfulness "provides an opportunity for exposure to, and subsequent tolerance of,
challenging physical and emotional states" (Wisner, 2014, p. 628). This is supported by a
significant volume of research, which demonstrated that the inclusion of regular mindfulness
practices has had a variety of beneficial results on practitioners or patients. These individuals
report a reduction in experiences of negative feelings, better emotional regulation, and a greater
calmness and relaxation associated with the practice (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Grossman,
Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2003; Samuelson, Carmody, Kabat-Zinn, & Bratt, 2007
Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2008).

The success of mindfulness programs in clinical health settings has prompted the
introduction of mindfulness education in other contexts. In particular, mindfulness-based
curricula have been introduced to school age children with mindfulness meditations being conducted in class, mindfulness curricula being offered at lunch, and mindfulness programs, such as MBSR, being offered as an extra-curricular activity. Research conducted on these programs have demonstrated that the benefits of mindfulness are consistent in school-age children. In particular, documented benefits with intrapersonal growth have been, but are not limited to: reduced worry, aggression and mental distress, better emotional regulation and self esteem, and a greater sense of calmness, relaxation, happiness and wellbeing (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Meiklejohn et. al., 2012; Sibinga et. al., 2011). Benefits also extend to the students lives in the classroom where there were documented enhancements to student engagement and attention in the classroom (Wisner, 2014).

Scholarly literature indicated that teachers also benefit from being introduced to mindfulness strategies and practice. Outcomes from these programs report that teachers feel a greater sense of self efficacy, social-emotional competence. As such, they are better able to manage classrooms, maintain supportive relationships with students, and they report improvements to their personal well-being (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011; Poulin, 2009).

1.1 Research Problem

Despite the existence of research confirming the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions in the classroom setting, much of what the articulated benefits are focused on the positive intrapersonal and psychosocial changes in individual students (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Mendelson et. al, 2010; Wisner, 2014). At the same time, research investigating the impacts of mindfulness-based interventions on interpersonal relationships often focuses on the inclusion of these practices in teacher development and describes how this promotes better relations between
teacher and student (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Meiklejohn et. al, 2010; Roeser et. al, 2012). There has been relatively little acknowledgement of, or a discrete focus on, the ways that mindfulness interventions have impacted how students relate to one another.

1.2 Purpose of Study

In light of the research problem, the purpose of this study is to consider how using mindfulness practices in a classroom setting impacts quality of interpersonal interactions and relationships amongst students in the class.

1.3 Research Questions

Through my research, the key question I will be trying to answer is:

How might classroom-based mindfulness practices or interventions influence how students relate to one another?

The subsidiary questions are:

i. What do teachers need to be able to integrate mindfulness in their classrooms?

ii. How are mindfulness practices being integrated into lessons or daily teaching practices?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

In my younger years, I experienced a significant amount of alienation from feeling like I did not fit in with other students. There were instances where I did experience bullying. At those times in my life, school felt like an unwelcoming environment and it made it difficult to remain focused on school work. As I grew older, peer relationships and dynamics had a significant impact on my motivation in school. If I was experiencing conflict and tension with another student, it had the ability to completely distract me from learning. This is because my intrapersonal well-being was connected very strongly to interpersonal relationships and if things
were turbulent with my interpersonal relationships, I found that it impacted my self-esteem, increased my anxiety, diverted my attention, and ultimately, made me feel alienated.

In my final year of undergraduate education, I was delighted to have the opportunity to take an elective course on mindfulness and psychotherapy. In this class, we read about the Buddhist underpinnings of mindfulness and had the opportunity to practice mindfulness meditation in the classroom. I experienced the ways that mindfulness helped me address existing intrapersonal issues; I felt a relief of stress and anxiety from the practice of mindfulness meditation. At the same time, this newfound intrapersonal awareness also helped me with my interpersonal relationships. It was easier for me to remain calm and not get swept up in intense emotions such as anger. Mindfulness helped me be more compassionate, empathetic and understanding in my relationships with friends and my parents. As a result, I am keenly interested in the potential for mindfulness to relieve tension and help to foster better interpersonal relationships in the classroom.

1.5 Preview of the whole Masters of Teaching Research Paper

To respond to the research questions, I have conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview three teachers about the application of mindfulness practices or interventions and what their observations are regarding the changes in interpersonal relationships between students. In chapter two, I review the literature in the areas of how mindfulness interventions are already being used in high school and what the outcomes from these trials have been. Next, in chapter three, I elaborate on the research design. In chapter four, I report on my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature, and in chapter five, I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and
practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature on mindfulness interventions and their outcomes. I introduce the notion of mindfulness and its origins in Eastern spiritual traditions and its movement to Western Clinical practice. I then discuss the use of mindfulness in clinical interventions and the successes of these interventions. Then, I review the literature regarding how mindfulness interventions have been taken up in educational settings and what the outcomes have been on individual well-being. Finally, I discuss the research regarding the capacity of mindfulness to play a role in enhancing interpersonal relationships between students.

2.1 Introduction to Mindfulness

2.1.1 Understanding mindfulness. Mindfulness is a naturally occurring state of mind that exists when a person shifts their attention to present experience, paying close attention to moving thoughts, sensations, and feelings from moment to moment. Mindfulness requires a purposeful regulation of the focus of attention and a resistance to becoming absorbed and carried away with thoughts and feelings (Bishop et. al., 2004). The goal of mindfulness is not to become a different person or change the way the mind thinks. Instead, a person tries to attend to their thoughts differently and “[settle] into [their] current experience in a relaxed, alert, and openhearted way” (Germer, 2005, p. 16). Also, acquiring mindfulness will not necessarily allow a person to avoid difficult emotions or feelings and sometimes will not result in feelings of relaxation. Mindfulness is a method to be aware of, and come to terms with, difficult emotions and feelings (Germer, 2005). As a result, cultivating mindfulness has the potential to provide a person with more control over their mental processes and can have various benefits for a person’s mental health and wellness, well-being, and personhood (Bishop et. al., 2004). While
mindfulness is technically a naturally occurring state of mind, there are a variety of impediments in the contemporary world that may make it difficult to have sustained awareness in the present moment. Therefore, reaching a state of mindfulness is not necessarily an easy process and requires significant practice to maintain for sustained periods of time (Germer, 2005).

2.1.2 Cultivating mindfulness. Developing present moment awareness can be more difficult than it seems because people’s lives are filled with school, work, responsibilities, deadlines, and relationships that offer a significant number of distractions from paying attention to present moment thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Bringing awareness to the present moment can be incredibly challenging and stressful because it requires a person to slow down from the bustle of their lives and bring awareness to their thoughts and feelings as they pass (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006). As such, developing sustained mindfulness requires consistent practice of specific skills because this will train the mind to remain present, bring energy to daily routines, and have better relationships with thoughts and feelings.

Mindfulness training methods can exist in many forms, but can be generalized into two categories: formal mindfulness and informal mindfulness. When a person commits to formal mindfulness training, they undergo consistent practice of “sustained, disciplined introspection” (Germer, 2005, p. 14) through meditation. Mindfulness meditation involves sitting, lying, standing, or moving in silence for a considerable amount of time. A person is encouraged to place deliberate, open awareness on thoughts and sensations as they pass. “Mindfulness meditation helps us to develop the capacity for relaxed, choiceless awareness in which conscious attention moves instantly and naturally among the changing elements of experience” (Germer, 2005, p. 16) and practitioners have the ability to undergo a deep level of introspection. Mindfulness meditation can provide an intense experience that many people are not ready for,
not willing to do, or do not have the capacity to undergo. Informal mindfulness training allows a person to practice mindfulness less intensely and can be a good way to introduce a person to mindfulness or to supplement mindfulness meditation practice (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006; Bishop et. al., 2004). Informal mindfulness is the application of mindfulness techniques in everyday life. It occurs anytime that there is a shift in awareness to present moment experiences, and it is done with acceptance and non-judgement. This can be as simple as paying attention to the breath, bringing awareness to ambient sounds in the environment or bringing awareness to bodily sensations (Germer, 2005).

2.1.3 Origins of mindfulness and inclusion into contemporary clinical practice. The cultivation of mindfulness through meditation is an important aspect of a few specific religions. In particular, much of contemporary mindfulness draws inspiration from Buddhist doctrine (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006). In Buddhist teachings, it is important for practitioners to strive towards ethical thoughts, actions, speech, and behaviour and this is said to be achieved through the disciplined cultivation of mindfulness through meditation. To bring deliberate, non-judgemental awareness to each present moment, provides a person with a more intentional processing of passing thoughts, how they might behave, and how they might act. Through practices that cultivate a greater sense of personal mindfulness, individuals are provided with the opportunity to approach their lives with greater care and thought. These individuals have capacity to enhance their well-being and minimize their suffering (Bankart, Dockett & Grant, 2006). It for these reasons that mindfulness is a relevant strategy to implement in psychiatric settings.

Buddhist belief garnered popularity in Western psychiatry because “the cultivation of mindfulness may be beneficial to people who are suffering from a wide range of problems and disorders but are uninterested in adopting Buddhist terminology or traditions” (Baer &
Krietemeyer, 2006, p. 4). In mental health and medical settings, techniques and skills that cultivate mindfulness are being taught or incorporated into intervention programs independent of the religious or spiritual underpinnings to make it applicable to a wide range of populations in Western society. Significant research has been conducted in recent years to validate the success of utilizing mindfulness in interventions or programs in mental or medical health settings. The affirmation of the clinical effectiveness of programs that include mindfulness have resulted in them becoming more widespread in psychiatric settings.

2.2 Mindfulness Applications in Clinical Settings

2.2.1 Mindfulness interventions. There are four main types of mindfulness-based interventions that exist in clinical practice and they are mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), and acceptance commitment therapy (ACT). These interventions use a variety of strategies to teach practitioners mindful awareness and have been each intervention has been designed to address different mental or medical health issues (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006). “Mindfulness-based interventions have multiple components, including mindfulness practice exercises, didactic instruction, and social support” (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009, p. 374). The general difference between interventions is that MBSR and MBCT include a combination of formal and informal mindfulness exercises while, DBT and ACT consist of mainly informal mindfulness training. Nevertheless, the nature of each intervention is the same; practitioners are encouraged to practice mindfulness by bringing attention to specific stimuli with awareness and open curiosity. When the mind wanders, practitioners are instructed to bring the attention back to the instructed task, they are encouraged to note how they feel, observe the phenomena slowly and carefully, pay very close attention to the sensations and emotions in the present moment as they
arise, and engage in labelling these sensations or emotions. These interventions can last from six weeks to a full year and can consist of weekly sessions that are one to three hours (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006).

2.2.2 Outcomes of mindfulness based interventions. There has been a growing volume of empirical research on the impact of mindfulness. Many research trials demonstrate that mindfulness training assists people cope with distress in their lives (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2003; Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). This is because mindful individuals may be more likely to engage in adaptive coping behaviours to deal with their stress and are less likely to avoid stressors or have maladaptive responses (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). It has also been demonstrated that mindfulness training is correlated with individuals having a greater sense of personal well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). Mindfulness also results “in lower levels of mental health symptoms and higher levels of positive psychological experience” (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009, p. 383). As such, mindfulness interventions are thought to be helpful to people dealing with broad range of mental and medical conditions because of the capacity of mindfulness to enhance coping strategies with challenging mental or physical states.

This is supported by research conducted in neurophysiology, where it has been demonstrated that a left-sided anterior brain activation captured by brain imaging is associated with positive moods, greater positive affect, and “more adaptive responding to negative and/or stressful events” (Davidson et. al., 2003, p. 569). Brain imaging of individuals, before and after an eight-week mindfulness-based intervention showed increases in left-sided anterior brain activation demonstrating a positive shift in brain processing (Davidson et. al., 2003).
In recent years, research has been conducted in clinical settings to validate the clinical efficacy of interventions that include mindfulness training. These show the broad range of benefits that practicing mindfulness strategies provide for various people that are coping with mental or medical issues. In general, it can be surmised that practicing mindfulness has the capacity to enhance a person’s overall wellbeing. I believe that this is the reason that the strategies that encourage mindfulness or mindfulness practice is being taken up by other realms, such as in schools, because of the potential of mindfulness training to improve the well-being of people for all facets of life.

2.3 The Impact of Using Mindfulness in Schools

2.3.1 Mindfulness training and interventions in school settings. Mindfulness strategies and practices have been brought to various school settings and their impact has been assessed. In the scholarly literature that has been review, school-based mindfulness has taken the form of training amongst teachers, and classroom-based usage of mindfulness with students.

Mindfulness training for teachers has occurred for teachers as professional development that happens over the course of one or two days. These training sessions include components of informal and formal mindfulness training for teacher personal use. As well, some training provides teachers with the opportunity to learn strategies that they can use in the classroom to teach students to be mindful through the encouragement of present moment attention and self awareness of thoughts and feelings (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia & Greenberg, 2011; Meiklejohn et. al, 2012).

The usage of mindfulness in classrooms, that has been studied, tends to utilize curriculums of teaching mindfulness that is very similar to, or modelled after common mindfulness interventions in clinical settings. The most common therapeutic intervention is
Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Burke, 2009; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Mindfulness curriculums have been introduced to students of all ages, from the age of seven to the age of nineteen. They tend to occur on a consistent basis over a longer period of time. Generally, programs occur over six to twelve weeks but could be as long as twenty-five weeks allowing for the consistent training and practice of mindfulness (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Burke, 2009; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Mendelson et al., 2010; Sibinga et al., 2011; Wisner, 2014).

2.3.2 Impact on well-being of students and teachers. The use of mindfulness interventions and mindfulness training has shown great efficacy in improving intrapersonal well-being in clinical settings. Personal practice of mindfulness has demonstrated greater well-being, allowed for greater emotional regulation, and proved to be helpful to individuals experiencing mental or medical health issues. Much of the research conducted on mindfulness interventions with teachers and students in school-based settings demonstrates congruent findings when these interventions are brought to a school setting.

Mindfulness training for teachers’ personal use demonstrated a capacity to improve teacher’s emotional regulation. It is suggested that this provides teacher with the skills for coping with stress factors and intense emotions that lead to “burn out” from the profession. Furthermore, teachers also report increased motivation and enjoyment in teaching leading to a better self-concept of their efficacy as teachers (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia & Greenberg, 2011; Meiklejohn et al., 2010).

School-based mindfulness curriculums for students have had a variety of benefits for students. The research conducted establishes that, following interventions, students have exhibited higher levels of concentration and attention in the classroom and it has been suggested
that this is the result of mindfulness training that is prompting students to have more present
moment awareness (Mendelson et. al., 2010; Meiklejohn et. al., 2012; Reichl & Lawlor, 2010;
Sibinga et. al., 2011; Wisner, 2014). Some studies have indicated that the enhanced attention and
concentration has translated into students having better school achievement (Meiklejohn et. al.,
2012; Sibinga et. al. 2011).

Furthermore, through mindfulness training, many students are provided with tools to
enhance their intrapersonal well-being. Following mindfulness interventions, it has been
portrayed that students exhibit improvement in positive emotions and show an enhanced
optimism (Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). The students have improved self-esteem, a better sense of
well-being and self concept, and students have self-reported that they feel more self-aware
(Broderick & Metz, 2009; Lawlor, 2014; Meiklejohn, 2012; Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Wisner,
2014). Students exhibit greater emotional regulation and it has been shown that these
interventions have resulted in a reduction of depression symptoms (Broderick & Metz, 2009;
Lawlor, 2014; Meiklejohn, 2012; Wisner, 2014).

2.3.3 Capacity of mindfulness interventions to support interpersonal relationships.

While the principal focus of much of the cited research has been focused on the benefits that
mindfulness has had at the individual level, there has been interest in understanding how
mindfulness enhances interpersonal relationships in an education setting. Mindfulness
interventions targeting teachers, for the purposes of professional development will have a greater
focus on, and provide a more significant discussion on how mindfulness training enhances
teacher’s interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students. It is indicated that mindfulness
training provides teachers with a better ability to establish, and maintain supportive relationships
with students and have more functional relationships with colleagues (Jennings, Snowberg,
Coccia & Greenberg, 2011; Meiklejohn et. al, 2012). Furthermore, following mindfulness training, teachers exhibit greater teacher efficacy and better classroom management (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia & Greenberg, 2011).

Following mindfulness interventions, it has been shown that students have greater empathy for others and are more skillful in perspective taking (Lawlor, 2014). It has also been shown the mindfulness interventions have resulted in reductions in hostility, anger, aggression, and bullying behaviours if students commit to and comply with the mindfulness training consistently (Meiklejohn et. al., 2012; Sibinga et. al., 2011; Singh et. al., 2007). It is suggested that this is the result of students becoming more aware of their stress and more effectively coping with their own intense emotions through the practice of mindfulness and this can reduce the frequency or level of reactive responses (Sibinga et. al., 2011). Furthermore, the development of better emotional regulation through mindfulness is asserted to help students control impulsive behaviours (Mendelson et. al., 2011). This points to the potential for the enhancements provided by mindfulness training at the individual level to translate into improvements in interpersonal relationships.

2.4 Conclusion

In chapter two, I have engaged with scholarly literature to illustrate the significant benefits of mindfulness for students. The research has not indicated negative outcomes from mindfulness interventions. Due to the emergence of mindfulness programs and strategies coming from clinical settings, there is a tendency to focus more heavily on the individual benefits of mindfulness. Much of the research in clinical settings and in school settings has a distinct focus on intrapersonal benefits for the practitioner of mindfulness. However, the larger potential of mindfulness demands exploration and it is valuable to consider how these benefits provided at
the intrapersonal level can potentially lead to enhancements at the interpersonal level. Thus, I intend to place a strong focus on the impact of mindfulness programs, interventions, and training with students on their interpersonal relationships, how they relate to one another, and ultimately how it contributes to a positive classroom dynamic.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the research methodology for this study and specify my rationale for specific decisions made about methodology. First, I describe the research approach and procedures and discuss the instruments of data collection. Second, I include information regarding participant sampling criteria, recruitment methods, and provide biographies for each of the participants. Third, I explain the procedures used to analyze the collected data and discuss my compliance with the ethical review procedures. Finally, I discuss the methodological strengths and limitations for this study.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

I chose to conduct my research utilizing a qualitative approach because my research question investigates the impact of mindfulness on interpersonal relationships and there is a discussion of complex relationships at play. Furthermore, a qualitative process allowed me to gather in-depth data on the lived experiences of my participants, extract meaning from this data, and build connections with existing literature. The qualitative process also gave me the opportunity to learn from the knowledge of experienced teachers and these conversations allow for a deep reflection into my own teaching practice.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews as the main instrument of data collection because this instrument allowed me to prepare interview questions in advance, but also provided me with the space to ask follow-up questions and probe for further information or clarification. This possibility also allowed for a greater depth of exploration into the knowledge and experiences of
my participants, and allows the opportunities to delve into more sensitive topics (Louise Barriball & While, 1994). A voice recorder was used to record the interview and word processing software was used to transcribe the interview.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Sampling criteria. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Teachers that have significant personal experience practicing mindfulness.
- Teachers that have experience applying mindfulness training exercises or a mindfulness intervention with a group of students over a significant time frame, for at least one year.
- Teachers that have a minimum of four years experience teaching.

First, it was important for participants to meet the aforementioned criteria because engaging in a discussion about mindfulness requires a person to have a significant amount of personal experience with practicing and understanding mindful states. It was my contention that personal experience with mindfulness would allow the person to have a proficient capability to have an in depth conversation about the facets of mindfulness. Second, for the purposes of this study, being able to comment on the impacts of introducing mindfulness over a longer period of time was important for the research questions posed. Finally, I sought a participant with a minimum of four years teaching experience because it would give the person more of a time frame to draw information from.

3.3.2 Recruitment procedures. I utilized two recruitment methods to find the individuals that participated in this study. First, I submitted a request for participants that was published in a mindfulness newsletter that was circulated amongst subscribed teachers in
Canada. Second, I utilized convenience sampling to reach out to potential candidates within my collegial network (Marshal, 1996). This was an appropriate form of sampling considering my immediate community consists largely of educators: pre-service teacher, in-service teachers, teaching fellows and professors. This provided me with a large collection of potential candidates.

Each interested interviewee was provided my contact information, sampling criteria, an outline of the study, the consent letter, and the interview protocol. This provided the participant with all of the necessary information for them to surmise whether they met the criteria for participation, if they were comfortable with the process of this research study, and ultimately, if they were willing to participate in the study. It was clearly communicated and reinforced that participation in this study was completely voluntary, their identity would be anonymized and provided with a pseudonym, and they could withdraw their participation at any time.

3.3.3 Participant biographies. My first participant, Harpreet, responded to a call for participants in the mindfulness journal. She has many years of experience in the mental health setting, as a mental health professional. She has been working as a teacher and guidance counselor in primary schools for four years. Harpreet integrates mindfulness strategies and teachings as a part of her guidance curriculum. Harpreet began practicing mindfulness several years ago when she was trying to process many deaths in her family. She recognized the power of mindfulness to change her internal negative emotional states and this was something she desired to share with the students in her classroom. This is why she decided to teach mindfulness to her students.

My second participant, Soraya, was a colleague of a fellow teacher candidate. I utilized this connection to ask Soraya to participate in this research study. Soraya has been a teacher for 20 years. She began her teaching career teaching middle school, but eventually moved to
teaching high school when she was given the opportunity. She teaches senior-level Spanish and English and currently uses a daily mindfulness practice with all of her classes. Soraya discussed having a deep personal practice of mindfulness. She has undergone Ayurvedic medicine training and completed significant yoga teacher training; she teaches both yoga and meditation. She began using mindfulness in one of her Spanish classes to manage their energy levels. Upon witnessing the success of this, she brought mindfulness to all of her classes.

3.4 Data Analysis

Following the interviews with participants, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, I was able to extract meaning from this data through a process of coding. This is a process where a word, the code, is assigned to parts of the transcription to capture or summarize what is being said. I used two types of coding: in-vivo coding and descriptive coding. In-vivo coding is when the code is a word that the participant used and descriptive coding is word that summarizes a section of the transcript (Saldaña, 2013). These codes were grouped and categorized carefully into nine sub themes. Finally, these sub-themes were further categorized to establish three distinct, overall themes.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

To ensure that there was no risk associated with participation in this study, there was a strict adherence to the ethical review procedures. These ethnical review procedures mandated that participants sign a consent letter in outlining their agreement to be interviewed, audio-recorded, and for the interview to be transcribed and used in my research. A copy of this consent letter was provided to each participant and I kept a copy of the consent letter from each participant to confirm for my records in this study. Participants were notified consistently
throughout the interview process that they retain the right to refrain from answering any question and to withdraw their participation in the study at any time. Interview transcripts and audio recordings will be stored in a discrete folder on my laptop that is password protected for a duration of 3 years. After this time period, the information will be destroyed. Participants were made aware of my supervisor’s access to the data. Finally, there were no conflicts of interest in the data collection process.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

There were two main methodological limitations of this study. First, my interview subjects were limited to teachers and my data relied on teachers recounting their experiences of how mindfulness impacted student relationships. Therefore, the data is limited to the experiences and observations of the teachers. I was not able to conduct observations or speak with students to understand their experience of mindfulness interventions and its impact on interpersonal relationships. Second, due to the tight time frame of this study, my sample size was limited and I was only able to interview two teachers. This limits the degree to which generalizations can be made about the data I collected and the meanings I have extracted.

However, this process of utilizing a qualitative research approach to conduct a lengthy semi-structured interview with the participants has allowed me to explore depth of their lived experience with using mindfulness in the classroom and how it impacts their students. It also provided me with a unique opportunity to engage with in-depth anecdotes from experienced teachers and learn from these in an effort to grow as an educator.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, first, I described and validated the methodological choice to used a
qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Second, I discussed my sampling criteria and described how I recruited participants that met the sampling criteria. Third, I provided a background of each participant in this study. Fourth, I discussed the specific methods used to analyze the data. Fourth, I reviewed the ethical review procedures this study complied to. Finally, I developed a discussion on the limitations and strengths of my research methodology. In chapter four, I will report my findings attained from the data that answer the research questions guiding this study.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

Mindfulness is a state of mind that consists of non-judgmental, present moment awareness (Bishop et. al., 2004). In recent years, mindfulness has moved from the realm of psychotherapy, and has begun to be used with young people in classrooms. The following chapter discusses the findings of my research that sought to understand how using mindfulness practice in the classroom with students impact the way these students relate to each other and enhances their interpersonal relationships. My research findings develop a discussion on the foundations for the classroom implementation of mindfulness, how mindfulness is used in the classroom, and its impact on the student intrapersonal and emotional development. I collected my data using two, thirty to fifty minute, semi-structured interviews conducted in person. Participants in this study were provided with a list of questions prior to the interview, but were also asked probing or follow up questions if this was needed. Each interview was audio recorded, then transcribed to text. The data was coded, which is a process of assigning words to parts of the transcription, that capture the essence of what is being said. Specifically, I used in-vivo coding, where the word is directly taken from what the participant said, and descriptive coding, which involves using a word that summarizes a section of what the participant said (Saldaña, 2013). These codes were grouped and categorized to formulate sub themes in the data. Finally, these sub-themes were categorized to establish three distinct, overall themes, from the data. For the purposes of confidentiality I will refer to my participants with the pseudonyms, Harpreet and Soraya. They were both teachers with at least two years’ experience in the classroom, integrating mindfulness strategies. Harpreet is an elementary school guidance counselor and educator that utilized mindfulness strategies as a part of her guidance curriculum. Harpreet responded to a call
for participants in a mindfulness newsletter. Soraya is a high school teacher that uses mindfulness strategies with her English and Spanish classes. I share a mutual colleague with Soraya and used this connection to approach Soraya regarding this research opportunity.

My research findings will be organized into the three major themes derived from the data analysis process, which provide answers to research questions that guided this qualitative study. The first theme serves to answer the question: what do teachers need so that they can integrate mindfulness in their classrooms? A discussion will be developed regarding the foundations of mindfulness process broken down by the relevance of a personal mindfulness practice, developing student understanding, and qualities of mindfulness that teachers are encouraging their students to cultivate. The second theme is related to: how are mindfulness practices being integrated into lessons or daily teaching practices? The response to this will begin by discussing resources and mindfulness strategies utilized by teachers, the required elements for a successful implementation of a classroom mindfulness practice, and student response and feedback. Finally, the last theme endeavours to answer how might mindfulness practices impact relationships between students? The conversation developed in this section will focus on the teacher perception of the capacity of mindfulness to help students enhance their capacity for introspection, the ways that this can lead to greater self-management and impulse control, and ultimately, how this can facilitate greater social awareness and relationship skills.

4.1 Foundations of Classroom Implementation

This section is focused on how teachers construct a basis for their implementation of mindfulness strategies in the classroom. Teachers drew from a strong personal practice, sought to enhance student understanding of the reasons behind mindfulness practice, and they encouraged the appropriate mindset for engaging with mindfulness practice. It is suggested that this
foundation-building leads to a perceived sense of meaning and authenticity amongst the students; consequently, this prompted student engagement in mindfulness strategies in the classroom.

4.1.1 Personal practice. Both Harpreet and Soraya discussed an extensive personal practice in mindfulness. Harpreet started a regular practice of mindfulness meditation because it helped her deal with the stress and anxiety related to unfortunate events in her life. Soraya reviewed a vast array of personal practice in yoga, which enhances mindfulness in body movement, and she practices Ayurvedic meditation. Both participants suggest that their personal practices led them to introduce mindfulness strategies in their classrooms. Harpreet stated: “I found that it was so powerful for me, as I started to practice regularly, that I wanted to share that with the students that I teach.” Soraya echoed this notion and reflected on how her personal practice of mindfulness has had a calming effect on her, and how she wanted to bring this to her classrooms to calm the hyperactive energy. Soraya extended on this notion and delved deeper into the importance of a personal mindfulness practice for the purpose of bringing meaning and authenticity to a classroom practice. She said: “if it’s meaningful for you and resonates for you, it’s going to resonate for your kids” and proposed that, if a teacher is implementing mindfulness strategies, they should be drawing from meaningful practices from their personal practice in order for it to feel authentic to the students. Her contention was that students can sense your competence or lack thereof through the way you decide to implement these strategies; she affirms that this opinion is supported by feedback she has received students. Consequently, the implication is that, for students to engage with mindfulness strategies, it has to feel authentic. This requires the teacher to have a strong foundation and understanding in mindfulness, cultivated through their personal practice. This notion resonates in the work of Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen (2012), who assert “before teachers can feel comfortable and effectively
teach mindfulness in the classroom they need to embody and practice mindfulness in their own lives” (p. 11). This echoes the assertion made by both Soraya that teachers must develop a personal practice of mindfulness if they endeavor to incorporate mindfulness strategies within their classroom practice. However, the research stresses that this is important because it can improve a teacher’s relationship with their students and can bring more awareness to their teaching, making them more effective in the different facets of teaching (Albrecht et. al., 2012; Meiklejohn et. al. 2012; Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009;). This indicates that there may be various reasons why a teacher’s personal practice in mindfulness is an important precursor to their implementation of mindfulness strategies with students. Ultimately, there is agreement that the existence of a personal practice is foundational for the implementation of mindfulness strategies in the classroom. Beyond this, it is important to consider how else students would get the impression of authenticity and meaning from mindfulness practices. Not only does the teacher need to provide a sense of competence in the area, but they also must endeavor to provide students with an understanding of how mindfulness is meant to impact them physiologically, because this provides motivation for students to engage with the practice.

4.1.2 Enhancing student understanding. Embedded in their presentation of mindfulness strategies to their respective classes, Harpreet and Soraya spoke about explaining how a person is intended to be physiologically impacted by the strategies they were introducing. Soraya commented on how she provides explanations for her students on how her mindfulness breathing exercises are meant to impact body. She states that she approaches it from an “anatomical” perspective and encourages her students to bring awareness to their lungs and their diaphragms. Harpreet talked about always starting with the “science behind mindfulness.” Specifically, she would introduce mindfulness strategies by teaching her students about the
human brain, the different parts, how it works and how mindfulness is said to impact the brain. She advised using this introduction because “when [someone] says the word ‘meditation,’ which is obviously a big part of being mindful and mindfulness, they think of people who are kind hippy dippy or are monks and practice meditation in a structured and formal way.” She said that providing this scientific basis for mindfulness helped to clear up some of those misconceptions. She also commented on how many of her students were so intrigued by the brain and were intrinsically motivated to learn about this foundational knowledge. Both Soraya and Harpreet explain the physiological basis and impacts of mindfulness as an introduction to mindfulness practice. This indicates that they both see value and importance in enhancing their students understanding as a foundational element to the implementation of mindfulness strategies. Furthermore, providing this introduction can communicate the validity of utility of these strategies to the students, who are seemingly intrigued and engaged by this information. In research about classroom-based mindfulness interventions, there has been limited information in regards to the value of providing students with an enhanced understanding of physiological impacts of mindfulness interventions. Mendelson et. al. (2010) discuss the inclusion of “didactic information” (p. 989) about the impacts of mindfulness in their implementation of classroom-based mindfulness strategies. The Mind Up curriculum, a mindfulness curriculum developed for use in elementary school classrooms, states that learning about neuroscience is of paramount importance; it is one of four pillars of their mindfulness teaching philosophy. They state that “when you teach children how their brain works – it is a revelation to them” (Mindup, n.d.). Developing and enhancing students' awareness of the physiological benefits of mindfulness is shown to be important to the Mind Up program, as well as to both Soraya and Harpreet, and it is
indicated to be something that the students find value in. However, beyond understanding how mindfulness impacts them, students also need to understand the actual practice of mindfulness.

4.1.3 Qualities of mindfulness encouraged by teachers. Each educator placed great importance on certain qualities of mindfulness being emphasized and encouraged in their teaching because these qualities are central to the practice of mindfulness. Both educators spoke of mindfulness being centered on the idea of fostering one’s present moment awareness; this was a quality that both Soraya and Harpreet encouraged with their students. Present moment awareness was articulated simply by Soraya as: “acknowledging you are in a present moment.” This is a consistent idea within literature talking about mindfulness. Present moment awareness is “attending to the present in a sustained and receptive fashion” (Mendelson et. al., 2010, p. 986), and is fundamental to the practice of mindfulness (Mendelson et. al., 2010; Meiklejohn et. al., 2010; Schoeberlein and Sheth, 2009; Sibinga et. al., 2011). Soraya demonstrated how she modeled present moment awareness with her students. She described an intentional practice of greeting each student by name as they walked in and engaging students, who arrived early, in longer discussions. Soraya’s intentional effort to acknowledge and sometimes engage each student as they enter the class demonstrates an effort to present in the moment with each student. Related to this quality of present moment awareness, Soraya discussed teaching her students about the quality of non-attachment and distinguishing attachment from awareness. Attachment, in this context, is conceived of the persistent longing or dependency on certain ideas and outcomes and how this dependency can cause suffering (Bankart, Dockett, & Grant, 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Accordingly, the promotion of cultivating non-attachment within mindfulness practice is said to reduce this suffering and promote greater contentment (Bankart, et. al., 2004). Soraya presented the idea of non-attachment to her students by describing
attachment as the stories we tell ourselves that communicate the assumptions we have about what is happening or the outcomes we have anticipated. She further distinguishes the “difference between awareness and story. So bringing awareness to where the breath is or isn’t and refraining from attaching a story about why that might be.” Both educators established that certain qualities are important to the practice of mindfulness, the importance of these qualities to mindfulness is demonstrated in the literature. Soraya discussed how she built the foundation for her students by modeling or providing explanations on the qualities that were important to the practice of mindfulness. Building a solid foundation for mindfulness can make the implementation of mindfulness strategies feel more authentic, meaningful, and engaging. If students understand what they are doing, what the intended impact is supposed to be, and feel a sense of comfort in the competence of the teacher facilitating the strategies, then it is likely that they are more likely to engage and benefit from the practice. Ultimately, it seems that building a solid foundation supports student engagement in mindfulness practices in the classroom.

4.2 Mindfulness in the Classroom

This theme is dedicated to the conversation of what mindfulness looks like in the classroom. It includes the resources employed by each teacher and how this informed the strategies they brought to their classrooms. It moves on to consider their perception of the factors of space and environment that ensured a successful mindfulness practice. Finally, teachers’ conceptualization of students’ immediate responses and feedback to mindfulness strategies in their classrooms is discussed.

4.2.1 Resources and mindful strategies used. Both Harpreet and Soraya talked about the resources that they used to inform their classroom practice. They tended to draw on their knowledge from their personal practice or resources that they had taken the initiative to seek out.
Soraya completed a two-hundred-hour yoga teacher training and has her own yoga studio. She has done a variety of reading on Ayurvedic medicine and consulted various online resources regarding the implementation of mindfulness in educational settings. In her classroom, Soraya stated that she taught mindfulness through a “yoga lens” and incorporated a great deal of movement. In addition, she often used a variety of Ayurvedic meditative breathing techniques to start her lesson. The strategies she chose seemed strongly connected to her personal practice, training she has undergone, and the personal resources she has found. This suggests that how she chose to teach mindfulness in the classroom was informed by her personal practice or research. Similarly, Harpreet discussed that her classroom mindfulness strategies were primed from the reading she has done on her own and her personal research into the various online mindfulness curriculums that are available for specific purpose of implementing mindfulness into the classroom. She adapted her classroom mindfulness strategies from the MindUp Curriculum, Mindful Schools, and the Smiling Minds website, such as: teaching kids to do innocuous activities mindfully, such as eating or walking; she would also start each class with a mindful minute. Consistent with Soraya, Harpreet sought out these resources on her own and adapted specific strategies to suit her classroom in way that she thought was effective. For both Soraya and Harpreet, resources have been cultivated and implementation of mindfulness strategies in the classroom has occurred through personal willingness and initiative. Neither of them make mention of taking part in professional development regarding mindfulness or having mindfulness strategies being recommended to them externally, from administrators or curriculum leaders, for example. This is somewhat supported from research compiled on mindfulness programs implemented for K-12 students, which states: “the programs are taught by experienced mindfulness practitioners/instructors or by classroom teachers who have received prior
mindfulness training” (Meiklejohn et. al., 2012, p. 298). The data indicates that programs are taught by practitioners of mindfulness, which was true of both of the participants. They were both practitioners of mindfulness. There is mention of mindfulness training offered to classroom teachers, which was not mentioned by either of my participants. Furthermore, Meiklejohn et al. (2012) discuss common strategies employed in classrooms, which “include: focused attention on breath and sensory experiences; awareness of thoughts and emotions; movement practices; and caring or kindness practices” (p. 298). The strategies utilized by both Harpreet and Soraya, can be categorized into these general realms. However, this overview of K to 12 mindfulness programs, also discusses the importance of implementing a gradual and consistent practice of mindfulness to allow the students to develop mindfulness skills, over time. This was not something that was mentioned by Harpreet and Soraya, but serves to build on how mindfulness is most effectively implemented in the classroom.

4.2.2 Facets of implementation. Each educator went into detail regarding their classroom practices of mindfulness strategies and discussed the factors that they employed to have efficacious mindfulness practice. Both Soraya and Harpreet utilized mindfulness exercises at the beginning of class. Soraya consistently used a breathing exercise, while Harpreet used a mindful minute, focusing on embedding mindfulness into activities such as breathing, eating, or walking. They both indicated that this helped to lead the class off in a good way and students were most willing to participate in mindfulness right at the start of class. Both teachers gave students the option of whether to participate and gave them agency in the practice. In both cases, if students did not want to participate, they were just expected to be respectful of the students that did choose to participate. Providing students with this agency in participation prompted students to only participate if they wanted to. Harpreet found that this was effective because, as
she said, “pretty much all of them, by the end of the school year, had kind of bought into it.” Due to the students having the choice to participate, and most of them opting to participate by the end of year, it can be assumed that these participating students were doing so of their own vocation. Linked to this idea of choice, there was a notion from both teachers that mindfulness was never to be a punitive measure or something that is used to discipline students. They emphasized that it was about the student’s personal growth and not about punishment. This also supported the idea that mindfulness practice in the classroom was about a student’s genuine motivation to participate. The literature did not delve deeply into how the details of how mindfulness strategies were implemented in the classroom to ensure an efficacious practice. Research studies were more chiefly focused on what was being done in the classroom, and the impacts of these strategies. They were not necessarily focused on what strategies were proving to be most effective (Meiklejohn et. al, 2012; Mendelson et. al., 2010; Wisner, 2014). This suggests an important space for further inquiry to assess the qualities that make for a better and more successful classroom mindfulness practice for students.

4.2.3 Initial student response and feedback. Each teacher provided a sense of the student response to their implementation of mindfulness strategies. They discussed their perceptions of how mindfulness strategies had impacted their students and provided examples of feedback they have received from students. A persistent observation from both educators was the ways that mindfulness strategies changed the energy in the room. Harpreet noticed that, following leading a mindfulness exercise, her students “as a group, [would] transition to a different state.” She noticed that it would have a calming effect on her students and that it would reduce levels of hyperactivity in classrooms and make for a productive learning environment. Soraya indicated using mindfulness strategies to confront the disengagement she was observing
in her classes. One day, she decided to utilize a mindfulness strategy at the beginning of class and she noted that: “[the students] transformed. That day was awesome with them. They were right there with me.” Soraya indicated that the use of the strategy had prompted greater engagement and participation from her students. This affirmed by the various research studies, which establish that, following interventions, students have exhibited higher levels of concentration and attention in the classroom and it has been suggested that this is the result of mindfulness training that is prompting students to have more present moment awareness. (Meiklejohn et. al., 2012; Mendelson et. al., 2010; Sibinga et. al., 2011; Wisner, 2014). In terms of feedback, Harpreet indicated that she would receive “an amazing amount of feedback from students that was unsolicited.” She spoke about how students would stop in the hallway to tell her they had enjoyed the mindfulness practice that she brought to their class or ask enthusiastically if they were going to participate in a mindfulness practice next class. Soraya spoke about how her students would approach her with questions regarding music to pair with mindfulness practice, or technological applications that they could use to practice mindfulness at home. This suggests that Soraya’s students are engaged with mindfulness to the point where they are motivated to practice it on their own time, outside of class. Moreover, Soraya talked about how she had several students would take the initiative to ask if they could lead mindfulness exercises that they learned from their personal practice, further demonstrating their interest in these strategies. The mindfulness strategies used by both educators, and considerations they’ve made to ensure a successful practice have been deemed to a have a variety of benefits, from the perception of each educator. They have noticed the capacity of these strategies to promote a calmer energy amongst students prompting better learning and more significant engagement. Also, both Harpreet and Soraya indicated that they received positive feedback from their
students, who demonstrated a willingness and excitement to participate in mindfulness practices. While this response can be motivating, in itself, to validate the use of mindfulness strategies in the classroom, it remains important to delve deeper into how the use of mindfulness can impact students’ development on a social emotional level.

4.3 Impact on Student Social and Emotional Development

This theme delves deeper into the significance of mindfulness practice among students and its potential to enhance students’ intrapersonal development, self-management, capacity building in emotional intelligence, and their building of respectful and tolerant social relationships.

4.3.1 Intrapersonal development. Each educator commented on the significant development they saw amongst their students, with respect to their students’ growing capacity for self-awareness, self-reflection, and introspection. Introspection seems to be embedded in the mindfulness strategies used by Soraya and Harpreet. Soraya encourages her students to set their intention for the day. “[she will] say to them: "how do you want to move through the rest of your day, today?" Or if it is halfway through the day: "how do you want to shift the way you’ve moved through your day today.” It seems that Soraya is intentionally encouraging the students to reflect on how they want to navigate their day and prompting this introspection process. Harpreet spoke about how, instead of using a punitive rhetoric, she used mindfulness language to encourage students to reflect on their behavior and make the choice to change it. She continued on to say that these approaches and the implementation of mindfulness exercises, in general, “seemed to increase [the student’s] self-awareness around how to have more control over their own emotions and be more peaceful and mindful.” She elaborated on this and discussed that “it helped students step back from the moment, when they were frustrated or angry or felt like being mean.” It seemed that Harpreet witnessed students introspect and evaluate their emotions rather
than act on them. Building on this idea, Soraya said and thought that doing a mindfulness exercises in the classroom gave the students an “opportunity to check in with themselves.” She goes on to say that she has not had instances of disrespectful behavior after introducing the mindfulness exercises at the beginning of class because of being given this opportunity before they interact with anyone else. It is reported that, following mindfulness interventions, students exhibit improvement in positive emotions and show an enhanced optimism (Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). They have improved self-esteem, a better sense of well-being and self-concept, and students have self-reported that they feel more self-aware (Meiklejohn, 2012; Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Wisner, 2014). Some of these elements of improved self-concept may be emerging from the opportunity provided, through a mindfulness strategy, for students to check in with themselves. The students are also being taught the skills to introspect and engage with their inner dialogue, this may provide an explanation for the better sense of well-being that is experienced. The capacity of mindfulness to expand a student’s intrapersonal development can translate into their emotional functioning and their emotional relationships, the implications of this warrant exploration.

4.3.2 Impulse control and self-management. Social-emotional learning is about the cultivation of emotional intelligence (Shankar, 2014). Harpreet and Soraya discussed the ways that they have seen mindfulness strategies improve student’s emotional intelligence. One key aspect of emotional intelligence is self management, which is a person’s capacity to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. People who successfully self manage exhibit qualities such as impulse control and self-discipline (CASEL, 2016). Harpreet stated her observations of how her students had demonstrated better self management, throughout the course of the year. She noticed that, during lunch periods, previously noisy and energetic classrooms, had gradually
become much more calm and relaxed and “were managing themselves quite nicely.” She also provided an example of students demonstrating the development of better impulse control. We used to have a couple students in the school who used to leave the classroom without permission, and who would kind of run away, and not want to deal with something that was happening, in the classroom, whatever the trigger might have been. Those students started to be more open to, instead of continuing to run away to stop, and take breath, and take a moment, and regroup, and refocus.

The interesting part in this example is that, Harpreet was implying that the students were using strategies similar to those that she provides in her classroom mindfulness practice to manage their impulses. Research by Meiklejohn et. al. (2012) reiterates this relationship between self awareness cultivated through mindfulness and developing better impulse control and self regulation skills that was implied by Harpreet. This implicates that mindfulness has the potential to be an effective strategy for students exhibiting issues with impulse control, as well as has relevance in developing other areas of students’ emotional intelligence.

4.3.3 Social awareness and relationship skills. As has been discussed, a connection has been demonstrated between mindfulness strategies in the classroom and emotional intelligence. Another key aspect of emotional intelligence is social awareness, which is the ability for people to take the perception of others, be able to empathize with others, and appreciate and respect another person’s position (CASEL, 2016). Harpreet commented on how the students began to be “more compassionate and empathetic towards other students.” She noted that: “students started to understand that once you put those wheels in motion, when you're being mean, or not kind to somebody else, or making fun of somebody else, that it impacts that person, just as it would impact themselves.” This portrays Harpreet’s observations of more of an empathetic
understanding that she noticed was coming from the students. Soraya also mentioned that her students “knocked her socks off with their personal ‘out-pourings’ and how they would like reach out to each other and say "Oh I'm so sorry,” demonstrating her observations of more empathetic relationships in her classroom, as well. Harpreet stated that she saw this greater empathy was connected to her students developing a deeper appreciation and respect for diversity, when it came to students with different needs. Soraya stated that she noticed that her students “[crossed] lines, like popularity, cliques.” What has been developed here is better relationship skills, which is another facet of emotional intelligence. Having good relationship skills involves being able to have respectful relationships with peers, being able to communicate effectively, and being able to navigate conflict constructively. Soraya noted that the implementation of mindfulness strategies “absolutely [changed] the way [the students] talk with one another.” She went on to say that, when she begins a class with a grounding mindfulness practice, she sees students engage in a respectful dialogue; they discuss more productively and less argumentatively. This further demonstrates the potential of mindfulness strategies to facilitate better social relationships between students in the classroom. While research conducted by Sabinga et. al. (2011) briefly discusses that mindfulness strategies prompt less tense relationships between participants, there is limited literature that examines how mindfulness may help support positive relationships between students, how it could have an impact on instances of bullying, capacity for students to develop their self-advocacy skills in moments of hardship or personal strife. Ultimately what is needed is a deeper investigation into the potential that classroom mindfulness practice holds in transforming classroom dynamics.
4.4 Conclusion

Teachers utilizing mindfulness strategies in the classroom tend to emphasize the importance of maintaining a personal practice of mindfulness for the purposes of building a foundation for the students. Providing students with a clear understanding of what mindfulness means, as well as the intended impacts, serves to provide students with the fundamental information needed to fully engage with the practice. To implement mindfulness in the classroom, teachers tend to use resources at their disposal that they’ve come across through their own personal avenues and develop their classroom practice utilizing strategies they have pulled from their base of knowledge. They are careful to include specific elements to ensure their classroom practice is successful and effective. This efficacy is demonstrated by the positive response provided by the students. The impact of mindfulness is perceived to start as the building of an intrapersonal awareness. This leads to better social-emotional learning and the ability to engage in competencies related to better social emotional relationships. The observed impact is behavior changes, tolerance for others, and better relationships between students.

The investigation into classroom-based mindfulness strategies has left a variety of questions that bear further study. Overall, this research study was limited to the perceptions of only two teachers; however, this entire body of knowledge would be better supported by longitudinal interviews with students participating in mindfulness practices in their classrooms. This is needed to confirm teacher perception of the impact that mindfulness has on students. Further research is required into the following: student perception of what qualities of classroom practice support the greatest success with mindfulness interventions, student account of how their introspection may be evolving through the practice of mindfulness, and their perception on how this impacts their emotional intelligence.
In chapter five, I will review the key research findings outlined in this chapter and assess their significance. Next, I will discuss the implications for both the educational community and myself in my professional practice. These implications will lead to a discussion on the specific recommendations I will make for teachers, professional learning communities, and school administrations to support effective classroom-based mindfulness practices. Finally, I will suggest areas for further research that have surfaced due to the limitations of this study and provide closing comments.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This qualitative research study sought to develop an understanding about how classroom-based mindfulness practices impact interpersonal relationships between students in the classroom. Through the collection of qualitative data, through semi-structured interviews with two teachers that have implemented classroom-based mindfulness strategies with their students, I was able to respond to the following research questions:

1. What do teachers need to able to integrate mindfulness in their classrooms?
2. How are mindfulness practices being integrated into lessons or daily teaching practices?
3. How might mindfulness practices impact relationships between students?

These research questions address the full picture of implementing mindfulness in a classroom setting. Specifically, the foundations that are required, the different facets of how teachers implement mindfulness practice, and the perceived impact on students. This chapter will begin by outlining the key findings of these research questions and discussing their significance within an education setting. Then, I establish the implications of these findings for the educational community and my professional identity and practice. Based on the research findings and their implications, I provide recommendations for in-service teachers, schools administrations, and teacher education programs. Finally, I will suggest areas for further research provoked by this study.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The first key finding of this study suggests that building a basis to support mindfulness practices in the classroom is important for the students to feel that the practices are meaningful
and authentic. As a result, they are more likely to engage with the practice and benefit from it. This study has demonstrated that this foundation has been built through the teacher cultivating their own personal practice, teaching students about how mindfulness is meant to impact them, and modeling the qualities of mindfulness. This research study points to several avenues that can support this foundation-building.

The second research finding developed a discussion about how the teachers used mindfulness in their classroom, which solicited positive feedback and willing participation from students. This finding demonstrates the facets of implementation that were successful for each teacher such as: beginning a lesson with a mindfulness activity, giving students the choice to participate, and ensuring that mindfulness was never used as a punitive measure. This finding provides strategies that may be helpful when implementing mindfulness in the classroom and indicates there is genuine student interest in participating.

The final research finding discussed the perceived impact on student social-emotional development. Educators observed that the mindfulness practices prompted greater intrapersonal development and self-awareness amongst students. This led to students demonstrating greater impulse control and self-regulation, which seemed to impact how students related to one another. They were seemingly able to demonstrate greater empathy and compassion to their peers. This finding shows the capacity of mindfulness to impact the social-emotional intelligence of school-aged students and improve how they relate to one another. This was the most significant finding of this study because it indicates that mindfulness can be a very powerful in enhancing students’ lives on a social-emotional level. Having established the significance of my research, I will proceed to discuss the implications of these findings.
5.2 Implications

It has been established by this study and in scholarly literature that embedding mindfulness activities in a classroom setting has a possible capacity to transform the lives of students by enhancing their self-awareness, prompting better self-regulation skills, and developing student compassion and empathy. This demonstrated that embedding mindfulness in a classroom setting has the power to be beneficial for students and is a worthwhile venture. My findings present implications for stakeholders in the educational community. Specifically, I will discuss the implications relevant to in service teachers, and school administrations. I will also discuss the implications my findings have on my professional identity and practice, as an educator.

5.2.1 The educational community. At the classroom level, the implementation of mindfulness practices in a classroom must come from the teacher. The research findings presented in this study demonstrate the successes and potential benefits of teachers implementing mindfulness in their classrooms; however, it is worth noting that this implementation of mindfulness amongst the participants of this study were not superficial. Underscoring the successes of the teachers that participated in this study was a deep personal practice, seeking out of resources, a concerted effort to develop student understanding, and a commitment to the creation of a safe space in the classroom, for the practice of mindfulness. The implication for teachers is that they must be willing to cultivate a deep understanding of mindfulness, lay a foundation for the students, and create a supportive climate for the implementation of mindfulness. This helps to ensure that the practice of mindfulness feels meaningful to the student and their willing participation is encouraged.
The key findings of this study implicate a wide variety of teaching practices and strategies that support a meaningful mindfulness practice in a classroom setting. From this study, it was demonstrated that physiological information regarding how mindfulness was meant to impact the body prompted engagement from students. Furthermore, teaching and modelling aspects of mindfulness for students, such as non-attachment and present moment awareness, proved to be effective in helping students garner a deeper understanding of what mindfulness is. Lastly, giving the student the choice to participate, and refraining from using mindfulness as a method of punishment prompted willing participation from students in mindfulness activities.

Finally, school administrations need to support the efforts made by their teacher to implement mindfulness strategies in their classrooms. The participants in this study discussed their classroom-based mindfulness practices to be a largely independent venture. They were independently seeking out resources and developing strategies based on these resources. This leaves a great burden of effort on the teacher. If teachers feel supported by administration in their implementation of mindfulness strategies, this can ease the burden faced by teachers. They may have a greater capacity to develop the knowledge necessary to promote an engaging and authentic mindfulness practice in their classroom, and be more willing to engage in this process.

5.2.2 My professional identity and practice. As a practitioner of mindfulness, I was always keenly interested in using mindfulness in my classroom. Through this research study, I have come to develop a deeper understanding of the foundations and the facets of implementation that are necessary for a classroom-based mindfulness practice. Most significantly, I was affirmed by the capacity of mindfulness practices to enhance the intrapersonal, emotional and social development of students.
It has been demonstrated that bringing mindfulness practices to my classroom is not going to be an easy task. First, it is going to involve deepening my understanding of mindfulness through a commitment to a more consistent personal mindfulness practice. A key finding in my study suggested that a teacher’s personal practice of mindfulness allows the teacher to better understand the facets of mindfulness and provide a much more meaningful practice for their students. Next, I am encouraged to ensure that I am providing students with a basis of what mindfulness is and how it is meant to impact them because my study has indicated that this knowledge of the self serves to promote intrinsic motivation, amongst the students, to learn about and practice mindfulness. My intention is to create a space, in the classroom, that promotes the participation of my students in mindfulness activities. The facets of implementation required to create this space was beyond my expectations, the capacity of a carefully curated classroom practice of mindfulness to enhance the lives of my students has become a great motivator for me to invest energy and effort to implement a mindfulness practice in my future classroom. Undergoing this research study allows me to make recommendations for the educational community resulting from my research.

5.3 Recommendations

My research findings demonstrate that using mindfulness practices with students is not something that can be done superficially. That is to say, it is suggested that teachers need to bring a great deal of knowledge and understanding of mindfulness, prior to using mindfulness with their students. Therefore, the best way for teachers to garner a deep understanding of mindfulness is to develop a consistent personal practice. This will allow them to explore mindfulness on a personal level and cultivate a body of knowledge that they can eventually bring to the classroom. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to seek out opportunities to enhance
their mindfulness learning. This can take the form of taking advantage of professional
development about mindfulness in a classroom setting, or seeking mindfulness resources targeted
at teachers such as: MindUP, Smiling Minds, and Mindful Schools.

Next, there is clearly a set of practices and strategies that prove successful for teachers
implementing mindfulness practices with their students. This research study implies that several
strategies are conducive to a teaching mindfulness to students. As such, the development of
professional learning communities at the board level for interested teachers would provide a
place for these teacher to learn from each other, share best practices, and work towards fostering
an impactful classroom mindfulness practice.

Finally, school administrations play a strong role in supporting the work of teachers that
are using or building a classroom-based mindfulness practice. School administrations should take
a vested interested because this effort is working towards the betterment of students on personal,
emotional, and social level. Therefore, administrators can bring professional development in
mindfulness to the school. This may help support teachers already seeking to implement
mindfulness and could also prompt other teachers to begin considering using mindfulness in their
classrooms. Furthermore, providing teachers with more professional learning in mindfulness will
only help to enhance their classroom practice and provide students with a well thought out
practice.

Finally, there were a large number of limitations to this study and further research would
serve to reinforce the connections made and further validate the use of mindfulness in a
classroom setting.
5.4 Areas for Further Research

There were two distinct limitations that restricted the scope of this research study. First, the ethics protocol that was approved for this study did not allow for observation or interaction with students. Therefore, only teachers could be contacted to participate. Second, the limited scope and time frame of this study allowed for the interaction with very few participants. For these reasons, I will recommend two possible academic extensions of this research that would be beneficial to research on mindfulness in the classroom setting.

My research study explored a connection between a clearly defined and carefully cultivated classroom-based mindfulness practice, and the impact it can have on a student’s intrapersonal awareness, their ability to demonstrate self regulation, and their empathy and compassion for others. However, this was a connection built through the perception of teachers. While they were able to provide a series of anecdotes and vignettes that demonstrated the student experience, it would be much more powerful for the academic research to observe and interact with students in a classroom with a teacher experienced with using mindfulness practices with their students. Information could be gathered about how the students feel and what is observed in the classroom before and after a mindfulness strategy is used to assess the immediate impact of this strategy on student emotional state and classroom dynamics. This research would be most effective if it was over the course of the year and researchers were able to used a mixed-methods approach where they are able to interview and observe students. This would allow for the researchers to assess how classroom dynamics have changed over the course of the year and how students’ attitudes towards their peers have shifted with the use of a consistent mindfulness practice throughout the year. This would allow for data to be collected, from the student perspective, about how things have changed for them on a personal, emotional, and social level.
Further, it would allow for an analysis of short term and long term impacts of classroom based mindfulness. Finally, researchers could have access to first person observations that have been recorded by trained personnel, rather than relying on anecdotes from teachers being retold from memory.

While it is relevant and necessary to garner a deeper body of knowledge of the student perspective, the knowledge and expertise of teachers implementing mindfulness practices in their classrooms cannot be understated. As was stated, the limited timeframe and scope of this research allowed for a limited number of participants. However, a large amount of knowledge was garnered about how to build a successful classroom-based mindfulness practice. Several common themes arose from the conversations had with both participants in this study. Therefore, a logical next step would be to interview more teachers to validate or contribute to the findings posited in this study.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This chapter has served to provide a thorough conclusion to my research study. In this chapter, I introduced my qualitative study and discussed the research questions I sought to respond to. Next, I summarized my key findings and demonstrated their significance. My findings were categorized into three themes: building the foundations of mindfulness for a classroom practice, what mindfulness looks like in the classroom, and the personal, emotional and social impact of classroom-based mindfulness. I moved to discussing the implications that my research findings had on the educational community and my professional identity and practice, as a teacher. The research findings of this study demonstrated a need for teachers implementing mindfulness practices in their classroom to build a strong body of knowledge to support this practice, supplies a wide variety of teaching practices and strategies that support a
meaningful mindfulness practice in the classroom, and suggest that administration support the work of teachers, in this regard. I then provided recommendations to the educational community, based on the research findings. Finally, I provided two possible extensions to this research by proposing that a student perspective needs to included and that more teacher input is needed to validate and contribute to the findings in this study.

Throughout their school lives, the larger focus for students tends to be their academic ventures and less of a focus seems to be on their social and emotional development. Research studies, such as this, are important for the validation of strategies, such as mindfulness, that build social and emotional competences because they are incredibly impactful and can serve to transform the lives of students. My research has demonstrated the potential capacity of mindfulness strategies to enhance student relationships with one another and it is my hope that research is continued to discover the immense potential of mindfulness in enhancing the social-emotional lives of students.
References


THE IMPACT OF MINDFULNESS ON PEER RELATIONSHIPS


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

My Name is Munira Lila and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how mindfulness plays a role in enhancing students’ interpersonal relationships. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have personal commitment to practicing mindfulness, utilize mindfulness interventions/training in the classroom, and have had at least 4 years experience teaching. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Cristina Guerrero. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after I have transcribed the audio into text. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Munira Lila
(Phone number redacted)
munira.lila@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Cristina Guerrero
Contact Info: cristina.guerrero@mail.utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Munira Lila and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ____________________________________________

Name: (printed) __________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about the impact of mindfulness on student interpersonal relationships. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on the ways that you have implemented mindfulness training into the classroom and what you have noticed about how students relate to one another. 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, the interview will be transcribed to text, and I will ensure that your identity is anonymized in the data and in my analysis. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background
1. Please describe your background in teaching.
2. Please describe the different grades, levels and subjects you have taught.
3. Which were more common? Which have you taught more frequently?

Teacher Perspectives and Beliefs
4. What does mindfulness mean to you?
5. Describe how you began practicing mindfulness personally?
   a. Why did you start?
   b. When did you begin mindfulness in the classroom?
6. Describe any training you have received in leading mindfulness practice.

Teacher Practices + Supports and Challenges
7. Describe how you’ve incorporated mindfulness, meditation or breathing exercises into your classroom?
   a. What did you do? What strategies did you use?
      i. Examples?
   b. When did you situate it within your lesson?
      i. Why did you chose to use it in that location within the lesson?
   c. How frequently did you conduct this strategy?
   d. Why did you decide to implement this strategy?
   e. Which classes did you use it in?
   f. Might this approach be better in some classes than in others? Please provide some examples.
   g. Has it been used as a classroom management strategy? Describe some examples.

8. Was mindfulness a new strategy for the students? Have the experienced it before?
   a. Describe the impact that his had?

9. Describe how students react to these strategies?
   a. Do they take it seriously?
   b. Are they receptive?

10. How does this implementation affect your students?
a. What do you notice about their attention, engagement?
b. What do you notice about how they relate to each other/their interpersonal engagement?
c. Have you ever used mindfulness to calm a tense situation? Please explain.

11. What do you notice about the classroom environment after utilizing a mindfulness strategy?
   a. Describe short term changes (within a class period)
   b. Describe long term changes (over the course of the year)

12. If possible, please comment on how mindfulness has impacted tense relationships between students.
   a. Has it had an impact on instances of bullying?

Next Steps:
13. What is advice you would give to teachers who want to try mindfulness training in the classroom?