

Doctoral Student Research Briefs

School of Education

Drexel University

A Case Study: Exploring Mindfulness Practices in Pennsylvania Elementary School Settings

by

Jessica Quinter

EdD Student

Drexel University

Supervising Professor:

Dr. Joyce Pittman

Editors:

Dr. Penny L. Hammrich

Professor and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies

Dr. Rajashi Ghosh

Associate Professor and Program Director of the PhD Program

Dr. Kathy Geller

Associate Clinical Professor and Program Director of the EdD Program

Tamara Galoyan

PhD Candidate

Katelyn Alderfer

PhD Student

Copy Editor:

Anthony Hopkins

Marketing and Communications Manager

A Case Study: Exploring Mindfulness Practices in Pennsylvania Elementary School Settings

Jessica Quinter
EdD Student
Drexel University

Abstract

This brief presents an analysis of current research and details the protocol for a qualitative case study, which is currently being conducted. The study explores teacher perceptions about the implementation of mindfulness practices in elementary school settings. Mindfulness practices involve the act of paying attention to the present moment without judgement and serve as a gateway skill to developing social emotional well-being.

Research Findings

The research findings presented here are based on the literature review conducted in preparation for the data collection, which is currently underway. The completed study will analyze qualitative data obtained through transcribed participant interviews and journals. Both will be coded to identify themes and categories that emerge from data analysis (Saldaña, 2016). The three literature streams informing the research focus on social emotional learning, the classroom climate, and the outcomes of mindfulness practices.

The implementation of mindfulness practices can serve as a gateway to developing emotional intelligence and social emotional well-being in students. The research is based on the social emotional competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015b). Neuroscience research has shown that regular mindfulness practice can lead to decreased grey matter in the amygdala, increasing self-regulation of responses to stressors, and an increase in executive functioning (Hölzel et al., 2011).

Additionally, students who demonstrate social emotional well-being are better able to attend to tasks and are more likely to maintain an optimistic outlook (Napoli et al., 2005; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Student interactions with others also benefit through an increase in positive social interactions and a decrease in negative behavior (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Academically, students who engage in mindfulness practices are less likely to experience test anxiety, receive better grades, and are more likely to attend school (Davidson et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2005).

Aim

The purpose of this research is to explore teachers' perceptions about how the implementation of mindfulness practices is helping to develop social emotional competence in students in their elementary classrooms. Specifically, the research questions explore teachers' views regarding the effects of mindfulness practices on (1) students' social emotional well-being,

(2) students' interactions with others and (3) the overall classroom environment, and students' ability to make responsible decisions in the school setting.

Problem

While mindfulness practices have been identified as one way to increase social emotional well-being, enhance classroom climate, and improve academic achievement, its use in elementary school classrooms is extremely limited (Weare, 2013). Research supports the value of social and emotional learning and safe and supportive classroom environments (Flook et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), yet the current research base regarding mindfulness as a means of developing these conditions for learning has not been well-established and is limited.

Students who engage in prosocial peer interactions and feel a connectedness to school are more likely to experience growth in their social emotional competence and academic performance. Often, students from lower socio-economic settings (which research has concluded are high stress environments) come to school with inadequate skills affecting their ability to self-regulate, attend, and interact with others (Bigelow, 2006; Black & Fernando, 2014; Costello & Lawler, 2014). Growing recognition of the value of mindfulness practices, where these skills can be taught, have supported their application in social emotional instruction in elementary schools.

Methods

This qualitative, instrumental, case study will explore how mindfulness practices within elementary classrooms in Pennsylvania are being incorporated into teaching pedagogy to influence students' social emotional well-being, classroom interactions, and responsible decision-making in the school setting. Semi-structured interviews and participant journals will be used to gather data from teachers implementing mindfulness with their students in the classroom setting. The case is bounded by the parameters of a specific group of teachers who have participated in professional development on mindfulness facilitation, and who have subsequently implemented mindfulness practices into their classrooms (Yin, 2014).

Discussion

Social emotional competence has an effect on student interactions, school performance, and participation. As a result, the development of SEL competencies should be addressed within the school setting. Yet, this is an area that is traditionally under acknowledged in instruction. This trend may be changing as research and legislation have supported the importance of social emotional competence in both students and teachers. Mindfulness practices are one way to acknowledge and develop these skills in students.

Research Implications

Mindfulness practices are an emerging method being used to support the well-being of both teachers and students. Mindfulness practices have been used and are gaining popularity among educators because they have shown a direct connection to the development of social emotional skills and resiliency (Lantieri, 2008; Weare, 2013). Mindfulness practices are also

attractive to school districts and teachers as they are fairly inexpensive and easy to implement. Additionally, early research is supportive of the benefits of the implementation of mindfulness practices, indicating potential changes in social emotional learning pedagogy. This study will enhance the existing body of research by adding first-hand perspectives of teachers who are implementing mindfulness in their classrooms and are sharing their pragmatic experiences with others. While the research base is growing, additional research is needed to address gaps that exist in terms of the implementation of mindfulness practices with elementary students.

References

- Bigelow, B. J. (2006). There's an elephant in the room: The impact of early poverty and neglect on intelligence and common learning disorders in children, adolescents, and their parents. *Developmental Disabilities Bulletin*, 34(1), 177-215.
- Black, D. S., & Fernando, R. (2014). Mindfulness training and classroom behavior among lower-income and ethnic minority elementary school children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 23(7), 1242-1246. doi:10.1007/s10826-013-9784-4
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2015b). *Social and emotional learning core competencies*. Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/core-competencies/>
- Costello, E., & Lawler, M. (2014). An exploratory study of the effects of mindfulness on perceived levels of stress among school-children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 6(2), 21-39.
- Davidson, R. J., Dunne, J., Eccles, J. S., Engle, A., Greenberg, M., Jennings, P.,...Vago, D. (2012). Contemplative practices and mental training: Prospects for American education. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 146-153. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00240.x
- Flook, L., Goldberg, S. B., Pinger, L., Bonus, K. & Davidson, R. J. (2013). Mindfulness for teachers: A pilot study to assess effects on stress, burnout, and teaching efficacy. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 7, 182–195. doi: 10.1111/mbe.12026
- Hölzel, B. K., Carmody, J., Vangel, M., Congleton, C., Yerramsetti, S. M., Gard, T., & Lazar, S. W. (2011). Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 191(1), 36-43. doi:10.1016/j.pscychresns.2010.08.006
- Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491–525. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40071173>
- Lantieri, L. (2014). *Building emotional intelligence: Practices to cultivate inner resilience in children*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

- Napoli, M., Krech, P. R., & Holley, L. C. (2005). Mindfulness training for elementary school students: The attention academy. *Journal of Applied School psychology, 21*, 99-125.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Lawlor, M. S. (2010). The effects of a mindfulness-based education program on pre- and early adolescents' well-being and social and emotional competence. *Mindfulness, 1*(3), 137-151. doi:10.1007/s12671-010-0011-8
- Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Oberle, E., Lawlor, M. S., Abbott, D., Thompson, K., Oberlander, T. F., & Diamond, A. (2015). Enhancing cognitive social-emotional development through a simple-to-administer mindfulness-based school program for elementary school children: A randomized controlled trial. *Developmental Psychology 51*(1), 52-66. doi:10.1037/a0038454
- Weare, K. (2013). Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence and policy context. *Journal of Children's Services, 8*(2), 141-153. doi:10.1108/JCS-12-2012-0014
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Author Information and Biography

Jessica Quinter is the Elementary Principal and Federal Programs Coordinator at Juniata Valley Elementary School in Alexandria, PA. She earned her B.S. in elementary education from Juniata College and an M.Ed. from Saint Francis University, where she also completed Principal and Reading Specialist certifications. She is currently a doctoral candidate pursuing her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Management, completing a concentration in Education Administration at Drexel University. Jessica also serves on the Pennsylvania Principals Association Board, as the elementary principal representative to the Pennsylvania School Study Council, and is a steering committee member for the Commonwealth Education Blueprint.

Her research focuses on the implementation of mindfulness practices in elementary school settings. This research is a result of her passion for developing social emotional competence in students and the overall effect on the classroom and school environment. During Jessica's tenure as principal, Juniata Valley Elementary has implemented a Positive Intervention and Behavioral Support (PBIS) program which has received recognition for fidelity at the Tier I and Tier II levels. The implementation of this program demonstrates the school's commitment to supporting the social emotional development of its students.