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Mindfulness, The Effects on Student Trauma and Stress Management

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Mindfulness, The Effects on Student Trauma and Stress Management

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the effects of mindfulness on student stress and anxiety. This study occurred in a small rural school approximately an hour southwest of Chicago, Illinois. The classroom was a self-contained general education classroom consisting of 15 kindergarteners. All 15 participants were between the ages of five and six. The action research took place over four weeks. Over these four weeks, the researcher taught students mindfulness strategies that included deep breathing exercises and meditation - an awareness of senses and emotions. All 15 students participated in mindfulness daily. Data was collected over the entirety of the study. On-task behaviors were observed and recorded twice daily. Students were surveyed on their emotions twice daily. The researcher conferenced with students one-on-one weekly. The researcher also kept a journal to note observations during the study. The data shows that students on task behavior improved when mindfulness was implemented. The data also shows that feelings of sadness and anxiety decreased and happiness increased when mindfulness was practiced daily.

Keywords: mindfulness, on-task, emotions

Trauma can come in many forms and stem from broken homes, stressed relationships, lack of income, food and/or housing, and physical and emotional abuse. More recently, in 2020, the effects of COVID-19 and government shutdowns have probable cause to contribute to childhood trauma and stress. Young children were unsure of outcomes, were isolated from families, and could not attend school with their peers. Childhood trauma may significantly impact a child's ability to learn. Based on the hierarchy of needs, students cannot learn academics when necessities are not met, physically and emotionally. This could mean that children frequently exposed to the stress of trauma are not capable of focusing their attention on academics and, therefore, cannot fully obtain their grade-specific academic skill set.

Mindfulness is like meditation; it is a mental state that requires an individual to be fully aware of their surroundings, thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Mindfulness is thought to be used as a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety and self-regulation of emotions and urges. Strategies used in mindfulness include breathing exercises, grounding techniques, challenging negative thoughts, and focusing/understanding feelings. When students experience extreme feelings, such as anger, frustration, sadness, and excitement, the natural tendency is to express their feelings in ways that may not be appropriate in a school setting. The idea is that mindfulness can teach children to slow down their reactions and focus on how they are feeling to stay calm under stress.

Childhood trauma may significantly impact a child's ability to learn. This could mean that children frequently exposed to the stress of trauma cannot fully obtain their grade-specific academic skill set. This research aims to determine the evidence that addresses students' trauma needs through trauma-informed practices, like mindfulness. To find this answer, the classroom in focus will be a Kindergarten classroom in a small town in central Illinois. The demographics of

the student population consist mainly of middle and low-class families. For this specific group of students to obtain a complete Kindergarten skill set, the teacher will seek knowledge of trauma-informed practices and guidance and resources from the school social worker to find solutions to help students manage and cope with traumatic stress. This will be done in hopes that coping strategies will help students to be able to manage stress better and therefore increase learning in their classroom setting.

Theoretical Framework

The Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory guided this research. Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory focuses on using mindfulness as a means to cope with stress. The theory stresses the importance of using mindfulness to help with positive reappraisal, changing an individual's negative to positive mindset. Mindfulness meditation creates many forms of cognitive reconstruction. Meditating has been shown to rebuild cognitive structures. It "can be used to disengage from extant schema into a metacognitive state of awareness in which attention expands to encompass previously unattended data from which new cognitive structures can be constructed" (Garland et al., 2015, p. 379). It is also stated that during mindfulness, conditioned cognitive processes, in response to stressors, can be shifted, allowing new outlooks on life, and promoting positive feelings despite unpleasant situations (Garland et al., 2015).

In the classroom, Mindfulness-to-Meaning is observed when students practice all forms of mindfulness. Students will be taught mindfulness strategies and will use them daily. In correspondence with the Mindfulness-to-Meaning theory, students will be taught how to focus their cognitive thinking on positives (reappraisal). When students take time to practice strategies that focus on cognitive thinking and allow themselves (with the teacher's guidance) to reappraise, they are shifting their thinking from negative to positive. The negative is the stress they face, and

the positive things that are going well in life that they can focus on. Over time, students will be able to cope with stress because their automatic cognitive thinking will jump to positive thoughts/experiences rather than negative experiences.

Literature Review

Trauma is a form of toxic stress having a significant negative impact on the development and health of an individual. Toxic stress is a biological response to stress. It dysregulates and alters many body systems, including neuroendocrine and metabolic (Harris et al., 2020). To determine if a child has experienced trauma and how much of an impact it has had on the child's well-being, an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) screening can be performed (Harris et al., 2020). By screening children, early interventions can be put in place to protect and improve the physical and mental health of the child. Harris et al. (2020) noted that interventions for toxic stress include mindfulness, exercise, nutrition, sleep, and mental health care.

The majority of teachers (89 - 96%) agree that children have gone through at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) in their life (Kumar, 2020). When asked if they believed that most students had experienced four or more ACEs in their life, the majority (70 - 88%) of teachers said yes (Kumar, 2020). Many characteristics of students facing ACEs are disruptive behaviors, withdrawal, lack of self-care, and challenging authorities (Kumar, 2020). Teacher interactions with students can impact toxic student stress, making it essential that teachers are well-equipped to deal with this issue. Teachers must understand trauma-informed practices, including interacting with students in one-on-one settings and understanding when issues are beyond their control (Kumar, 2020).

Many children's physical and mental health was affected negatively during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many states faced state-wide shutdowns that required Americans to stay home for

work, school, and leisure. These uncertain times led to an overall increase in alcohol consumption across America. With more American families consuming alcohol, domestic abuse cases also rose, placing children at higher risk of exposure to abuse and violence (Mulholland & O'Toole; C., 2021). Along with violence exposure, many children face isolation, loneliness, and worry (Mulholland & O'Toole, 2021). Children exposed to traumatic events have shown undesirable behaviors in school, such as outbursts or withdrawals; trauma-informed practices are essential to help children cope with toxic stress and better succeed in school. Lastly, the author stressed the importance of positive adult relationships when coping with and healing from trauma.

Students face varying levels of stress related to traumatic events. Such stress may be hard to cope with and handle daily at school. Being able to recover quickly from life's difficulties is something that students may not be able to do on their own. Lipscomb (2019) explained that teachers could help students by establishing resilience in the classroom. Resilience is achieved over time by providing positive relationships. Having a supportive relationship can teach children persistence, a growth mindset, adaptability, and self-efficacy can help a child to adapt to adversity (Lipscomb et al., 2019). Lipscomb continued by noting the importance of staff development to understand trauma-responsive practice. By training teachers to foster responsive relationships, students are well-equipped to face challenges. Teachers can also make an impact by providing opportunities for early care (Lipscomb, 2019). Lipscomb explained that it is vital to start early because child development happens so quickly at an early age. Providing positive relationships and resilience opportunities can set a young child up for lifelong success. These opportunities can happen in early childhood education, Head Start, preschool, or child care. Lastly, administrators must support teachers and students when learning to be resilient.

Lipscomb (2019) stressed the importance of staff development in learning about trauma-informed practices.

When teachers have opportunities to learn about trauma-informed practices, student trauma can be better understood and addressed (Bindemann, 2021). Trauma-informed practices may include instructional and non-instructional strategies for the student's overall well-being. Non-instructional strategies can include mindfulness, teaching, and expressing compassion to students (Bindemann, 2021).

A trauma support system will be implemented in the described classroom to help students to further cope with traumatic stress and help them to focus on learning. Implementing a trauma support system is essential in helping students manage stress and anxiety (Chung, 2019). In the 2019 article, "Adapting and Implementing Support for students exposed to trauma in South Korea: A Pilot Study," Chung described research conducted in South Korea to study trauma support systems in the classroom. Chung's research showed that when teachers implemented a trauma support system in the classroom, students were more equipped to manage their depression. This support system may include culturally responsive lessons that include social and emotional learning and lessons on well-being, self-care, and mindfulness. When stress is managed, students can focus on their academics rather than the anxiety that comes with trauma.

To properly cope with traumatic stress, students need to positively interact with adults in their everyday lives. These interactions can help children better to manage their emotions (Bayat, 2019). Said interactions also help to provide children with positive role models to help children build specific character strengths in their educational careers, such as resilience, determination, and perseverance (Bayat, 2019). Teachers are a part of a student's everyday life and can be a great positive role models. By greeting students daily with smiles, seeking to learn about their

interests, and deeply caring about their feelings, teachers can be role models that make a lifetime impact.

Students can manage their emotions when teachers create environments that are responsive to their needs (Koslouski, & Stark, K., 2021). These environments can be created as instructional or non-instructional. When teachers create an instructional responsive classroom environment, they establish clear expectations for students to help them feel safe and secure. Routines create consistency and predictability that can help students to feel comfortable. Along with routines, teachers can create predictable transitions between lessons and activities. Doing so can help students to feel more confident. Teachers can also implement positive behavioral support for all students, especially those who struggle with appropriate behavior (Koslouski & Stark; K., 2021). Non-instructional approaches to responsive environments consist primarily of relationship building. When teachers can build positive relationships with students and teach them how to build positive relationships, they create a space that allows students to feel safe (Koslouski & Stark, K., 2021).

Sanders (2021) agreed that creating safe spaces can help students to grow academically, stating that there is a correlation between emotions and learning. Sanders (2021) also agreed that non-instructional strategies could help to create that safe space. A non-instructional approach that Sanders (2021) focused on is the importance of choice. If a student is unwilling to participate in a class discussion or activity, providing other opportunities can allow the student to learn and feel comfortable in the classroom. Another non-instructional approach that Sanders (2021) noted is the importance of self-care. Self-care can be done in multiple ways, including cognitive, relational, and physical (Sanders, 2021). Teaching students to take care of their overall well-being can allow students to manage their emotions.

When it comes to student insight, students agreed that teachers could help students manage trauma in multiple ways. Students appreciate it when teachers can manage classroom behaviors well (West, 2014). More specifically, consistency and high expectations help students to succeed. Students also expressed appreciation for trauma-informed resources such as a place in the classroom where they can go to calm down or a teacher to talk to (West, 2014). Lastly, respect plays a significant role in helping students heal - having a trusted and respected teacher to talk to about their personal life (West, 2014).

It appears there is a common understanding that in order to solve how to help students of trauma succeed academically, a person should consider becoming a trauma-informed educator. Trauma-informed practices include instructional and non-instructional approaches, which are essential in helping children feel safe and comfortable. Additionally, fostering positive teacher-student relationships has merit. Further research will be conducted to evaluate the impact of positive relationships when healing from trauma. One-on-one conferencing and data collection will help to determine its validity.

Methodology

The basic design of this study is the implementation of mindfulness to see if it helps student behavior and overall academic achievement. Mindfulness strategies that will be implemented include various breathing exercises throughout the school day, calming activities, and focusing on and understanding specific emotions and feelings to find ways to handle them. When students showed undesirable behaviors, instruction was paused to do mindful breathing. During the students' designated rest time, mindful readings were read by the teacher to focus thinking on things calming in nature. When students had Social Emotional Learning (SEL) time,

the class was instructed on being mindful of feelings to better understand and react in certain situations with peers.

The sample for this study consists of 15 kindergarten students in a small public school in rural Illinois. The class has ten girls and five boys, all ages 5 to 6. The socioeconomics of this town consists mainly of low-income and middle-class families. Many of these students have never attended preschool, daycare, or any other social setting (primarily due to income) before coming to kindergarten. Multiple students have expressed that they experience varying levels of trauma at home. Because of this, many students struggle with emotional regulation and attention at school.

At the beginning of this study, a baseline was built by observing student behavior—peer interactions, following teacher directions, and attentiveness during lessons. Peer interactions were observed and recorded in the teacher's journal three times a day for one week. Attentiveness was observed and recorded for each student three times a day for the first week of school. On-task behaviors (hands in lap, voices off, sitting in an assigned spot, self-starter, 2-minute transition, body facing the speaker) were observed and recorded. The teacher also surveyed each student about how they felt the first couple days of school. The survey included one-on-one questioning. The teacher recorded each student's answer in a journal.

Data was collected by observation, conferencing, surveying, and journaling. As mindfulness strategies are implemented, observations of student behaviors will be recorded. These include on-task behaviors such as sitting in their assigned spots, having hands in their lap, body facing the speaker, quiet voices, self-starting, and quick transitions. These will be tallied as they are observed twice a day for 10 minutes each to see if there is a correlation between using mindfulness and having on-task behaviors.

One-on-one conferencing is a second means of collecting data. The teacher will speak privately with each student once a week for four weeks. Questions that will be asked include, but are not limited to, How are you feeling today? What emotion are you feeling the most? What was the hardest part of the day for you? What was the best part of the day for you? What mindfulness technique did you use? These questions will be asked to determine if there is a correlation between mindfulness and student emotional regulation.

To further gather data, a one-question survey of student emotions will be conducted twice a week for four weeks. Surveys will include words and pictures to make answering the question easier for kindergarten students who may not be able to read yet. Emotions will be listed on the whiteboard, and students may place a magnet next to the emotion they are feeling. Magnets will be numbered, and students will be given their assigned number privately to keep surveying anonymous within the class. Emotions in this survey include loved, excited, nervous, scared, happy, and angry.

The last method of data collection will be teacher journaling. Throughout the 4-week study, the teacher will journal all observations. Journal entries will include observations of students practicing mindfulness techniques throughout the day, both teacher-led and independently. Other journal entries may include but are not limited to, reflections on student conferences and reflection on student surveys.

Analysis of Data

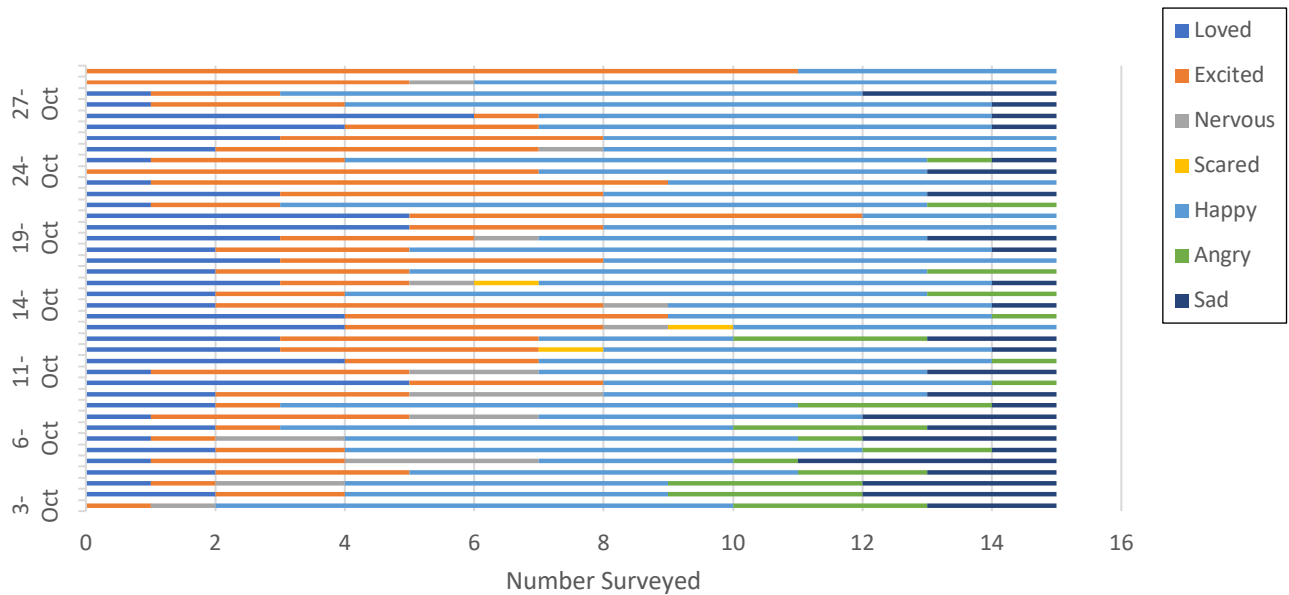
This study examined the impact of mindfulness on student self-regulation. I wanted to know if teaching and practicing mindfulness would improve students' on-task behaviors and emotional well-being. Students were surveyed on their emotions, their behaviors were observed,

students were conferenced with individually, and I kept a journal for my various observations.

The result of the study is shown below.

Figure 1

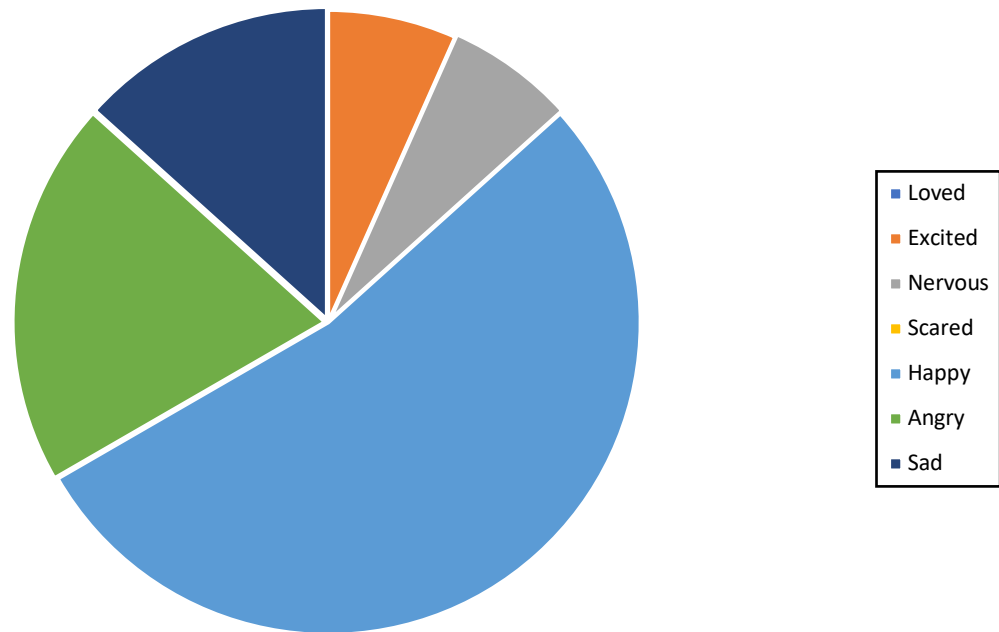
Student's Feelings



Note. The emotion survey was conducted twice daily.

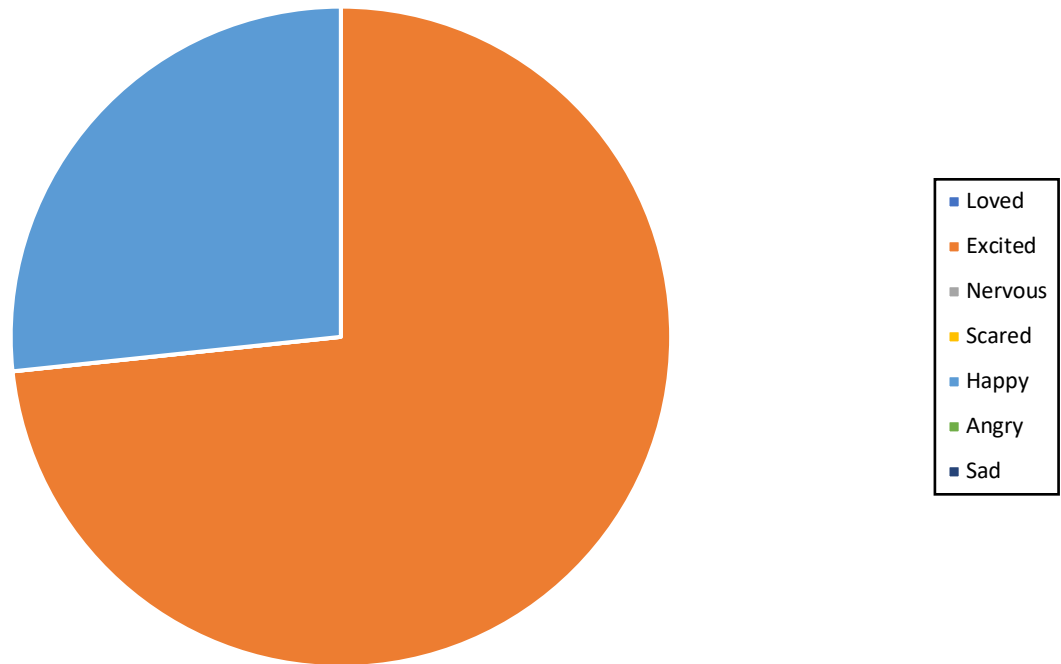
Data was gathered to determine if mindfulness had an impact on student emotions.

Students were surveyed twice daily, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, to see which emotion they felt the most at that time. It was noticed that students felt most happy and excited coming into class in the morning after being dropped off at school. Students were sadder and more angered coming into class in the afternoon after spending much social time with their peers (recess and lunch).

Figure 2*First Day of the Study*

Note. Student feelings on the first day of study.

Student feelings were recorded on the first day of the study as a baseline before I started to teach mindfulness. In the morning, students were asked if they felt loved, excited, nervous, scared, happy, angry, or sad as they entered the class. This data is represented in the pie chart above. The majority of students, 53%, stated that they were generally happy. A significant number of students, 20%, stated they were angry. Based on the teacher's journal entries and one-on-one conferencing, students had stated they were angry because of events before school, either on the playground or the cafeteria, with other students. 13% of students reported that they felt loved, 7% stated that they felt excited, and 7% said they were nervous. Zero students reported feeling scared.

Figure 3*Last Day of the Study*

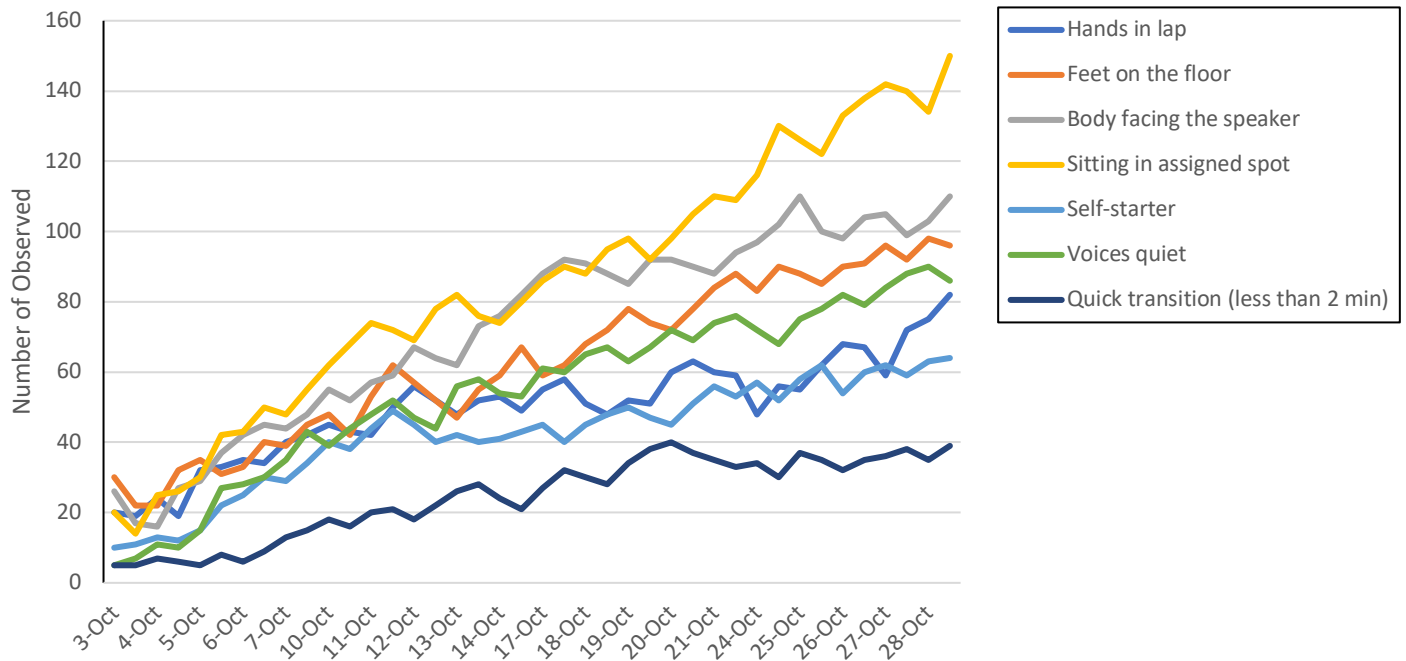
Note. Student feelings on the last day of the study

Student feelings were recorded on the last day of the study. Since this was the last round of data collection on this topic, these results were collected in the afternoon as students returned to class from recess and lunch. In this final survey, students reported either feeling excited (73%) or happy (27%). No students had reported feeling sad, angry, nervous, or loved. Based on one-on-one conferencing, students had reported no negative peer interactions that had caused negative feelings, as described in the first survey (Fig. 2). Teacher journal entries show that on this day, students were in generally positive moods. These results show that implementing daily

mindfulness decreases negative feelings and increases positive feelings. The data also shows that practicing mindfulness improves peer interactions.

Figure 4

Improvement of on-task Behaviors

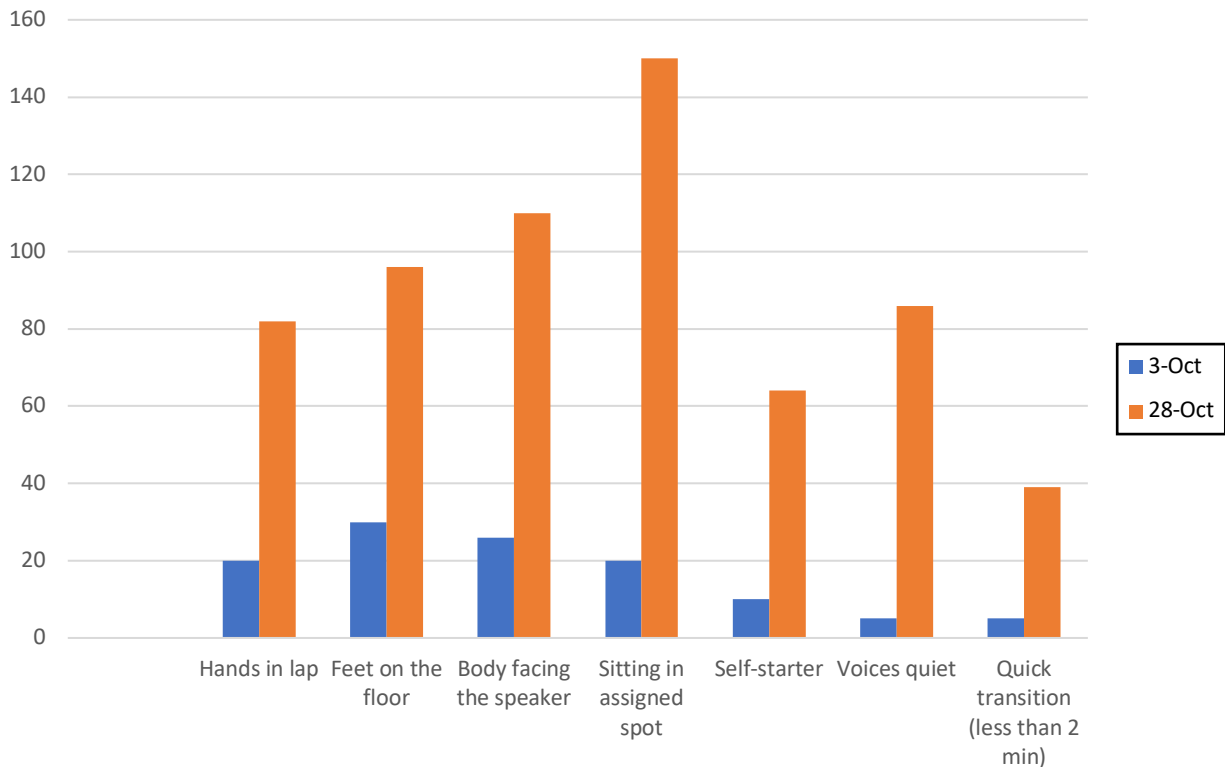


Note. On-task behaviors were tallied twice daily for ten minutes.

On-task behaviors were observed and recorded twice a day for ten minutes throughout the four-week study. The on-task behaviors observed include hands in lap, feet on the floor, body facing the speaker, sitting in an assigned spot, self-starter, quiet voices, and quick transitions. The data shows that as the study progressed, every on-task behavior increased, suggesting causation between mindfulness and on-task behaviors at school. The on-task behavior that increased the most was sitting in the assigned spot. The on-task behavior that increased the least was quick transition times.

Figure 5

Comparison of on-task Behaviors



Note. On-task behaviors with and without mindfulness

The bar graph above compares student on-task behaviors on the first day of the study (3 October 2022) and the last day of the study (28 October 2022). On-task behaviors represented on 3 October 2022 were collected in the morning to be used as a baseline. On-task behaviors represented on 28 October 2022 were the definitive collection, collected in the afternoon. On the first day of the study, no on-task behavior was observed more than 30 times. By the end of the study, on-task behaviors had significantly increased, with one on-task behavior being observed 150 times. This data shows that when mindfulness is used daily in the classroom, students can self-regulate and stay on-task.

Conference data showed that students' feelings differed from child to child. Most days, students answered that they were feeling happy, with few answering sad. This related to the emotional survey that was conducted twice daily. The emotion that students felt the most was happiness. On average, the most challenging and best part of the day for students were times that required social interaction with peers, such as recess, lunch, or playtime. This is because many students have difficulty processing and expressing their emotions when socializing. Students seemed quick to feel emotions of sadness and anger when faced with a problem they did not know how to respond to. Other answers for the best time of the day included center time, storytime, rest time, math, and art. Most students stated that the mindfulness technique they used the most was breathing exercises.

Journal data showed many teacher thoughts and observations. It was noted that students struggled the most with on-task behaviors during the afternoon. Students mainly were on task during the morning hours (on-task behaviors recorded above). It was observed that students mostly participated in deep breathing exercises and often used deep breathing exercises independently during instruction, centers, and playtime.

Action Plan

Many students across the United States face trauma in many forms. Traumatic experiences can cause toxic stress. Harris et al. (2020) noted that interventions for toxic stress include mindfulness, exercise, nutrition, sleep, and mental health care. This action research aimed to determine if early interventions can improve said toxic stress in students. The trauma-informed practice that was focused on in this study was mindfulness and if using mindfulness strategies had an impact on student learning. Over four weeks, students were taught mindfulness strategies and used them daily in a whole group setting. These mindfulness strategies included

deep breathing exercises, focusing on the senses, focusing on feelings, and guided meditation. The purpose of all these activities was to teach students to cope with anxiety, slow down their reactions, and refocus on the tasks rather than stress.

The findings from this study show that mindfulness practices increase student attentiveness at school. On-task, behaviors increased as students practiced being mindful. They were able to focus, stay on task, quickly transition, and be a self-starter. The findings also show that implementing mindfulness in the classroom positively affects student emotions. Students at the beginning of the study showed anger, nervousness, and sadness in both morning and afternoon surveys. Students at the beginning of the study showed excitement, happiness, and love in both morning and afternoon surveys. I observed an increase in positive peer interactions as the study progressed. This means that mindfulness helps students regulate emotions while interacting with classmates throughout the day. When stress is managed, students can focus on academics (Chung, 2019).

This research will impact teaching practices and student learning positively. Teachers who implement mindfulness in their classrooms will see students succeed in many ways. Students who are attentive and focused will be able to learn more than students who have difficulty paying attention and staying on task. Peer interactions improve significantly while using mindfulness, meaning mindfulness could be implemented to help with social-emotional learning (SEL).

Based on the findings of this study, I will continue to have students practice mindfulness in the classroom. Potential future action research could involve using mindfulness in place of, or in conjunction with, social-emotional learning or impulse control. It was observed, and noted in the teacher journal, that using mindfulness greatly improved kindergarteners' social interactions

with one another. Instead of being quick to anger and act out, students were observed stopping and standing still, closing their eyes, and taking deep breaths before proceeding. Other potential research could focus on other interventions for toxic stress, as described in Harris et al. (2020): exercise, nutrition, sleep, and mental health care. Further research could also look at further implementing trauma-informed practices and determining which practice is most beneficial for a kindergarten classroom overall.

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