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Mindfulness Intervention: Usefulness In Elementary Classrooms In Regards To Transitions And Collaboration

An Action Research Report
By: Jessie Filkins

MINDFULNESS INTERVENTION:USEFULNESS IN ELEMENTARY
CLASSROOMS IN REGARDS TO TRANSITIONS AND
COLLABORATION

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In fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree
St. Catherine University
St Paul, Minnesota

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Date: _____

Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to see if mindfulness lessons based on breathing and meditation techniques would be effective with elementary age students in building community and collaborative work skills. This was done in a classroom of 25 students ranging from nine to twelve years old. I used a pre and post survey as well as observational data to determine the relevance of the meditations on community clean up time. The results showed that there was an increase in participation as well as a decrease in the time it took for the children to clean up. There was also a heightened awareness of community responsibility based on the post survey results. The observational data also showed that the children were communicating more effectively and even leading discussions on how to problem solve. Other interesting reflections came to light such as the teacher's assumptions on what the students believed about the importance of their work in the community and their ideas about self. The action plan shows the importance of continued work in mindfulness meditation in the classroom to help support the children to focus, be aware of their environment, communicate more effectively and have a greater appreciation of themselves.

Keywords: mindfulness, meditation, collaboration, community, children

My research question arose from careful observation of the classroom prior to the mindfulness intervention. I noticed that one of the times that the children had trouble collaborating was during their clean up/transition time. I observed carefully, wondering if perhaps they did not know where the supplies were, or if they were unsure what their jobs were. We had multiple conversations about the things that needed to happen during this time. I was surprised to see that no matter how much clarification we gave, this was still a slow moving, stressful time for everyone. The children would stand around in small groups chatting, or on the rug, and if asked to help, would respond by saying things like “that’s not mine” or “he isn’t doing anything (pointing to a friend).” I was surprised by this lack of collaboration and care for the environment as these are two key components of a Montessori education and most of these children had been in classrooms that emphasized collaboration and community responsibility for most of their lives.

I was aware that due to the characteristics of their developmental plane that they were less prone to the meticulous clean up of their younger counterparts. They had less of a need for external order. However, because of their age and development, they should have been more prone to working together and collaborating. I began to see this lack of collaboration in many other areas of the classroom, and thought that perhaps this was a bigger issue than just clean up. I used mindfulness and meditation to help them be more community oriented and used the clean up time as a data point to see if there was any connection to mindfulness and a more connected and collaborative community. I tried to get to the root of the problem and see if by remedying the problem of collaboration there would be a lessening of the symptoms, inability to clean up. I identified the problem as being a lack of collaboration and the symptom was a difficult clean up time.

Research on mindfulness and its positive effects on human beings has become more popular in the past five years. In the busy, modern world people are coming to the realization that although academic and career opportunities abound, there is an overwhelming sense of discontent. The added opportunities lead to an added workload, causing a lot of stress. Some adults are looking for new ways to reconnect with themselves and find balance. This balance can lead to a stronger ability to focus and a sense of connection with others. Adults are not the only ones affected by the busy, modern lifestyle, children are also feeling this strain. Children are more and more frequently being asked to take tests and assessments that put the focus on their academic careers in a way that is very different from past generations. These added stressors are increasing the interest in the effects of mediation and relaxation studies for children. These mediation and relaxation techniques can be described as secular techniques that help to build mindfulness.

Mindfulness is an awareness that comes about by focusing on one thing purposefully. It can be considered a way of observing and understanding your thoughts and feelings. (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.144-156). Mindfulness training can be thought of as a way to train the mind to pay attention to itself. This is done through exercises that help children practice reflection and build focus, such as breathing exercises, meditation and gentle yoga. The benefits of this practice are physical and mental and have also been found to help foster community. Mindfulness can also help children to calm themselves. In calming themselves they are able to listen to each other more attentively. They are also able to understand their feelings so that they can communicate more clearly. This ability to communicate is essential to true collaboration.

In a group of nine to twelve year olds it was observed that there was trouble collaborating, especially at times of transition. These times of transition required that they work together as a community. One time that was easily identifiable was clean up time. Observations showed that children were only cleaning up after themselves and did not have a sense of identifying and carrying out jobs that benefited the greater good. They were also not asking each other for help. If they did ask another child for help they were rebuffed in a way that made it impossible to communicate and work together. They often used harsh tones and language with one another, or completely ignored each other when asked to do something.

Once it became clear that the children actually knew what they were supposed to do during clean up, the question then became, why were they not working together? Why were they not helping each other? I began to wonder if a greater understanding of themselves and ability to calm themselves would help them to connect with each other. In my personal experience with meditation and yoga, I have felt that by working on my own inner life I have been more able to listen to and work with others around me. It has had a direct effect of calming inner turmoil. Also meditation has helped me understand my own emotions so that I could feel when I was becoming agitated about something and then work to calm myself. When a person can get to this level of self-reflection then she may be able to take a breath before reacting to other people around her and therefore she is better able to communicate in a calm way with her friends, family, and coworkers. I wondered if giving the children these skills could also help them to be calmer and more observant in their environment and thus become more cooperative and understanding with each other.

Literature Review

Mindfulness interventions and yoga may have many positive effects on school age children. Both have been gaining popularity with adult populations and now many studies are being done on their effectiveness with children. The article (Greenberg, 2012) explained that in both targeted populations and general populations, data has shown that mindfulness training has had positive physical as well as emotional effects. There have also been improvements on attention, behavioral problems, anxiety issues, and academic performance. They have also found that yoga has had positive effects on student's motor functioning, executive functioning skills, spatial perception, muscle strength, and respiratory capacity. Although all these positive benefits have been reported, because of the way the studies have been given and how little data there is, there is not enough data, as of now, to state conclusively whether yoga and mindfulness are beneficial to students (Greenberg, 2012). . In Greenberg (2012), it is discussed that although there may be benefits for the general population of children there is not enough research to support this hypothesis.

In the article (*Kuyken, Effectiveness of Mindfulness, n.d.*), the authors emphasized the importance of teaching children to handle everyday stressors. One way of doing this is through mindfulness training and interventions. Mindfulness is defined as “a form of attention training using meditation techniques, in which participants learn to pay attention in a specific way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 144-156). Studies found that mindfulness based interventions reduced anxiety symptoms as well as attention and behavioral problems. In one school-based mindfulness training (Weijer-Bergsma,2014,) children reported pre-

test to post-test higher verbal sharing of emotions and bodily awareness of emotions. In that same study teachers reported “large increases in student respect, student friendship and belonging, and student shaping of the environment” (Weijer-Bergsma, 2014)

Most mindfulness programs that were written about in the articles had the same basic appearance: a secular program based in meditation, body awareness, and yoga. There are other types of Mindfulness programs such as those found in Montessori classrooms or art education. One article (Patterson, 2015) focused on mindfulness via art education and spoke of art and drawing rituals which can be done in the classroom. Observational drawing allows other parts of the brain that are not usually used during academic work to be exercised. This type of drawing requires the participant to focus on an object for an extended period of time, thus exercising the one-pointed focus used in meditation. The article mentioned that schools across the country are utilizing mindfulness curriculums to help students regulate their emotions, and to learn how to pay attention to their thoughts and environments (Patterson, 2015).

The article, (Schonert_Reichl, 2015) focused on building positive social and emotional skills through mindfulness training with children in order to build their resilience when faced with stressful situations. Executive functioning skills (EFs) are cognitive control abilities that organize sequence and regulate behavior. These abilities can be built through the use of mindfulness activities. They also wrote that self-regulation is a way of predicting children’s altruistic behavior. These EFs can be influenced by environment and enrichment. Therefore engaging in a form of mindfulness training could help the children to build these abilities.

One study (Schonert-Reichl, 2015) that administered mindfulness training to

elementary school children, found that giving children mindfulness attention training in combination with opportunities to practice optimism, gratitude, perspective-taking, and kindness to others can, not only improve cognitive skills, but also lead to significant increases in social and emotional competence and well-being in the real-world setting of regular elementary classrooms (Schonert-Reichl, Oberle, Lawlor, Abbott, & Thompson, 2015). Since both yoga and mindfulness training, such as meditation, strive to strengthen attention and inhibition, and decrease stress reactivity they can both help children to build and use these skills in all areas of their life. These skills would also help them in social situations and community building as they would become stronger members of their society. In one study where teachers were asked to do mindfulness and yoga interventions in their classrooms, teachers reported that although the time spent on the yoga and mindfulness was considered minimal for their setting (about 12 minutes a day), the classroom management benefits that they saw were great. Some reported benefits were that the trainings helped the children to transition into their classroom times and to work together (Cico, Raza, & Timmons, 20). Taking these ideas into consideration I came up with the question: Could mindfulness training in an elementary community help build community and collaboration?

Description of Research Process/Methodology

After forming my research question it was time to start thinking about what the mindfulness interventions would look like, how they would be carried out, what kind of data I would be collecting, and what data collection forms would be necessary. I decided that I would have mindfulness training sessions on Tuesday and Thursday mornings to fit with our school day schedule and that I would observe everyday during the morning and

afternoon clean-up times. Tuesday and Thursday mornings were times when we were already scheduled to meet as a group for a community meeting. The morning clean up time occurred at 11:30 and the afternoon clean up at 2:45.

Before starting the mindfulness training I chose to give the children a survey to ask them about what their responsibility was during the clean up process and during community times. After collecting this data I began the initial mindfulness trainings. The mindfulness training that we used was based on breathing techniques and gentle stretches used in Yoga and meditation practice. The theory behind it was to allow the children to feel the effects of their breath on their mind and body so that they could then become more calm, and connected with themselves.

After writing up my initial pre-survey and data collection tools, I began my mindfulness trainings. We started the first mindfulness meditation with basic breathing. We continued with different breathing and meditation exercises (see appendix A). As expected, some children were much more comfortable with the work than others. Some children were able to immediately close their eyes and breathe deeply, while others were too anxious to close their eyes, or felt squirmy and uncomfortable trying to make their friends laugh or pay attention to them. We had discussions about this, and why it was important to connect with themselves. I started the discussions by asking them if anybody would like to share about their experience. Many of them did and some had questions about what they had felt. I would also sometimes make general statements based on observations, for example, how difficult it can be to focus inward, or sometimes it can make you feel nervous or uncomfortable if you are not used to it. We also talked about building focus, and calming the body and mind to be able to focus better.

I collected baseline observations of their clean up periods before we started the mindfulness intervention so that I would have data (see appendix B for observation form) to compare to at the end of the study. In my observations I was specifically looking to see how long the clean up period took and how many children helped at a given time.

I then observed during every clean up time that was possible and took observation notes. I recorded what time the bell was rung, how many children were helping at any given time, any pertinent comments such as “that’s not mine” or “please help clean up” and the children’s reactions. I also collected how much time it took to clean up and any other circumstances that would effect how the transition was going. Unfortunately I was not able to observe everyday because of circumstances that arose that were outside of my power, but this also gave valuable data.

The mindfulness interventions continued at least two times a week, for six weeks and throughout that time I observed, reflected and observed some more. I made some tweaks to the initial mindfulness training plans based on what I observed and requests from the children. These changes were made to the actual meditation lessons and had to do with adding more lessons and changing some of the meditations to help the students be more comfortable. One example of this is that I observed that some of the children were not comfortable lying down or closing their eyes, so I began to offer options. Some of these options included a choice of seated or lying posture, or taking a soft gaze at the rug in front of them instead of closing their eyes. We also discussed that it was ok to feel uncomfortable with meditation, and that it was a process. It was important for them to be able to observe what made them comfortable or uncomfortable. At the end of the period I took a post survey (see appendix C). The post survey had the same questions as the pre-

survey and asked questions about the children about their responsibility to the community.

Data Analysis

The Mindfulness interventions were carried out over a period of six weeks, with the initial week being observation before any mindfulness lessons were given. Initial observation showed just how ineffective the clean up times were. On my first day of written observation, during the pre-intervention week, the children completely ignored the announcement to clean up and some even started new work. Works were ripped and destroyed and children were disrespectful to one another saying things like “you are not the clean-up police” when reminded by another student to help in their responsibility.

The bell was rung at 11:35 and after 25 minutes there were still children who had not cleaned up despite multiple verbal reminders, and two children wrote the message on the board. At that point it was clear how much I was supporting the clean up process through reminders and my role as the teacher and “authority figure.” This was the first time I sat back and just observed and it showed that my original assumptions were correct: clean up time was a time that was in need of change.

It also brought to light my lack of seated, formal, observation. This was another area that needed intervention. I was surprised by the children’s lack of collaboration, community, and respect for each other. This lack of respect was evident in how they spoke to one another, how they listened to one another, and how they treated each other’s things. On that first day I observed two children clean the whole classroom. Seven children stood around as one child made a seating chart for lunch and the rest milled

around talking. The expectation for making the seating charts is one or two 6th graders makes a lunchtime seating chart for the class. This job rotates through the 6th graders and they are given the responsibility to make sure that the children are seated at diverse tables based on age, sex, and friendships. Two children were working on the chart while 5 stood around giving their input.

For the rest of the week, the clean up took 15-25 minutes and at any given time my observation showed that two or three children were cleaning at the same time. Large groups of children (up to nine) would be standing around talking. Other behaviors were also noted such as two girls played piggy back, or one child remarked “I’ll probably end up cleaning the whole room.”

During this first week I also gave a pre-survey to the children with five questions about responsibility, clean up time, and transitions. The survey questions and some responses were as follows (See appendix C for a list of the questions and appendix D for a all the responses given by the children)_:

Pre Survey Responses

1. What is your responsibility during clean up time?

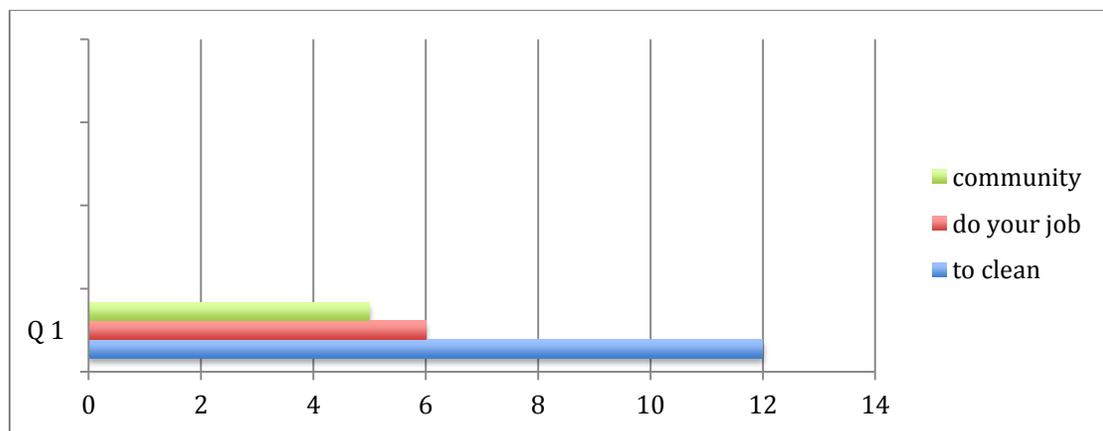


Table 1. Responses to Question 1

Community refers to a response that had mentioned or had something to do with community.

2. How and why is your work important to the community?

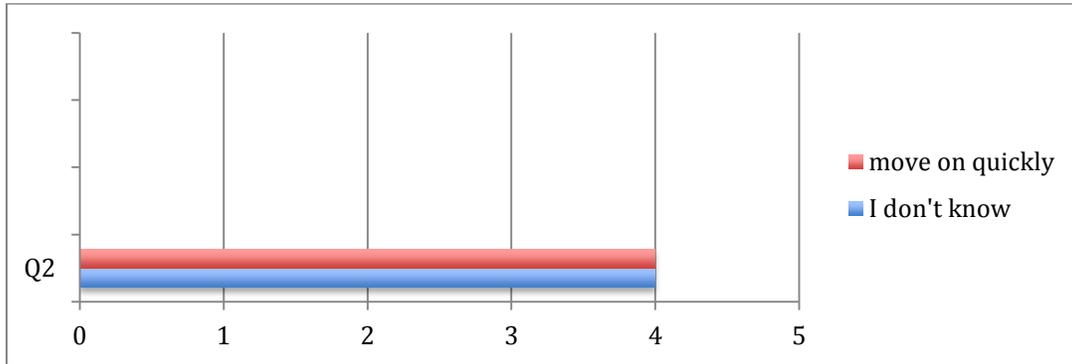


Table 2. Responses to Question 2

3. Why is it important to take the time to clean the environment?

All of the answers to this question had to do with not living or working in a messy or dirty environment.

4. What is your responsibility during transition times such as walking through the halls, or in between group lessons?

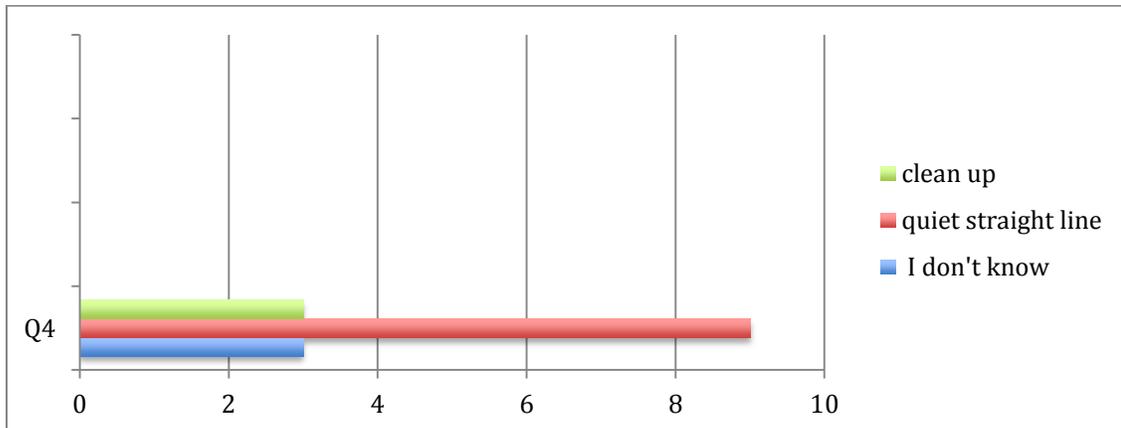


Table 3. Responses to Question 4

5. Why are these important?

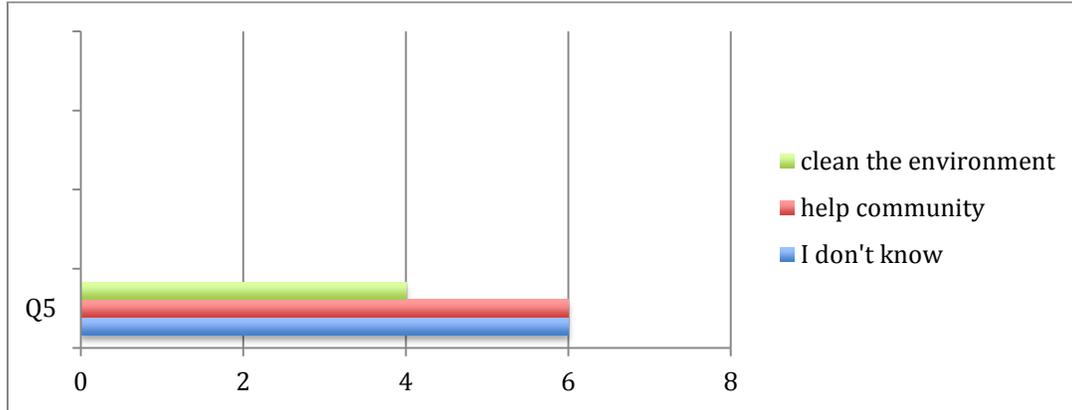


Table 4. Responses to Question 5

A couple of things that came to light after the initial survey was that many children did not understand or know the larger meaning behind their community work or why it was important. Many children did not know what their responsibility was during transition time, some children didn't even know what transition time meant. There seemed to be a general understanding that it was important to keep a neat classroom, however there was little deeper understanding of why. There were a few responses that used the word community, but in general terms for example "because it helps the community." These kinds of generalizations, although they showed some awareness of community responsibility, also showed a glaring lack of understanding when it came to a deeper meaning of community and collaboration. It did not show a deeper understanding of how their individual contribution would help the community at large. A longer or more personal response would have shown an internalization of the concept, instead these answers sounded more like a parroting of an idea rather than a deep understanding.

Week one of Mindfulness Intervention

The following Monday we began our mindfulness work with some breathing as a large group. I asked the children to get comfortable in any way they wanted. Some children preferred to lay on the ground while others remained seated. For those who remained seated I showed them different ways to sit to help energy flow, and then I asked them to close their eyes and focus on their breath. Some children were very comfortable with this kind of breath work, while others did not even feel comfortable enough to close their eyes. Some children sank right into the idea of relaxation while some children's body language showed them trying to protect themselves or soothe themselves by hunching over. I brought this up at the reflection afterwards explaining that everyone had their own path, and that maybe someone didn't feel comfortable with closing their eyes today, but that was ok, they could try another time. I was surprised to see the children's differing reactions to this. I had done this kind of work with very young children, and most of them took to it right away. I had also taught mindfulness and breathing to adults, but they had chosen to come to the class and make that a part of their routine. It became very clear, early on that working with mindfulness and children right on the cusp of adolescence would be much more intricate and complicated in this class. Dr. Montessori observed that children who were entering adolescence entered a plane of development that mirrored their infancy plane of development. It was a period of great physical change which made them very sensitive, both to their peers and to the whims of their emotions. They are so aware of their peers that they can become easily embarrassed. For these reasons, it was important that the whole community work together to create an accepting and relaxed atmosphere where the children would feel safe to explore their inner lives.

We continued with the breathing exercises on Tuesday and Thursdays. Each mindfulness intervention followed the same pattern: asking them to take a comfortable position, breathing in different forms (see appendix A), relaxation and then a period of discussion and reflection. Sometimes the children were eager to share their experiences and at other times they had questions about the work we were doing. By the end of the week student reflections were about how they wanted to do more mindfulness and could they do it after recess to help with their transition back into the class? From the observations it seemed that the clean up period was still pretty much unchanged from the initial clean up time observations. There were still only a few children doing the majority of the clean up while others stood around and talked to one another.

Week Two

The second week of clean up was interesting because there were some other external motivations for the children that may have had some effect on the clean up schedule. On Monday, two older boys had a new class project that they wanted to present to the class, and the only time for them to present it was right before lunch. They were thus motivated to get the other children moving so they would have time for their presentation. It should be noted that these were two boys that in previous observations did not do much to help with the clean up and would routinely leave the classroom at this time, or move about without doing much of the actually cleaning. They rang the bell early, and explained why they wanted to clean up early and then went around trying to help the other children. Clean up was done in 12 minutes. I also heard one comment “Jonathon (name has been changed) is in Spanish can you pick that up for him?”. This

was notable because it was the first time I had heard another child comment on helping out one of their classmates in this way. Prior to this there had been comments along the lines of “that’s not mine”, or “I have already cleaned up my stuff”, this was the first time that a child was asking another child to help collaborate and work as a community. Before this the work would have been ignored and when asked to clean it the children would have most likely said that it wasn’t their work. It was also notable that with these two boys leading the charge the children were able to work together in a much more effective manner. It spoke to the children’s innate social nature, without a teacher involved but with two motivated student leaders, the children were able to clean up in half the time.

Thursday also had an external motivation in that 2 boys had choreographed a dance that they wanted to share. Again the most appropriate time for that was before lunch and so they were integral in motivating the class. On this day the clean up took only 17 minutes and there were large groups of children working at one time. There were times when I observed children checking with each other to see whose work is whose and in some cases spontaneously putting work away for their friends.

Other than these two days however the pattern remained unchanged. Two or three children cleaned the whole room. Another observation was that many times there were entire groups of children out of the room for different activities such as language classes. Sometimes up to nine children out at a time. They were always asked to clean up their works before they went, however, it could be challenging for the other children to understand their responsibility to help the community if it was perceived that some children were never there to help. It might have felt unfair to some of the children

because they felt that they were always asked to help out when others were not expected to do so.

On this week there were also two days when it is impossible for me to sit and observe because of events that happened in the room. On one occasion my co-teacher was out sick, and another time the lesson that I had planned went longer than scheduled, so I was actually contributing to children not being there in able to help in the collaboration. This was an interesting realization and from then on I tried my best to not do this.

Another thing that I realized quite quickly was that one of the data collection tools that I originally thought would be helpful was not. I had planned to keep track of how many children were sitting on the rug. This was mainly to see if I could track if there were more children engaged in the community clean up over time. This idea soon became obsolete, because whenever someone would sit on the rug to signal that they were done cleaning, another child would come over and ask them to help clean up. This in and of itself was a huge change, whereas before one child would sit on the rug and then all the children would come and sit on the rug, therefore leaving one or two children to do all the work. Now those children who sat down were invited back to the cleaning by their peers. This spoke to the importance of the so –called herd mentality of the children. Dr. Montessori writes about the strong social bonds that children have in this their second plane of development. They are very in tune to what their peers are doing and therefore makes it a prime time to strengthen their collaborative abilities.

Week Three

The next week was another shortened week, with one day off of school and one day when I was out. We continued the mindfulness training in the mornings, and the children had lost some of their initial enthusiasm but had gained a kind of comfort with the work. Observing them, I still saw some who were very uncomfortable and would not close their eyes. We worked with some tension release work that relies heavily on visualization. I hoped that by giving the children something to place their minds on they would become more comfortable. Another interesting thing came forward that we discussed in our reflections. Because of their social natures, some of the other children were so uncomfortable that they would try to distract their peers in order to pull some attention to themselves and ease their discomfort. We talked extensively about allowing each person to have their own experience, and if they were feeling the urge towards distracting their friends then they could use that urge in their own experience to reflect on why they wanted to do that. Just bringing that into the realm of their consciousness was a part of the mindfulness intervention. Understanding that they were feeling uncomfortable and therefore using that to distract others was a higher level of awareness because they were not just instinctively reacting, but had the opportunity to observe what that nervousness and discomfort felt like. It was also important to frame their actions in a way that made them aware of their impact on the community as a whole. Instead of seeing their nudging another student as an isolated incident, I wanted to them to understand that even this small gesture can have a ripple effect that changes the entire environment of the community.

The pattern of clean up time was very similar this week to the week before. Two or three children would clean the entire class, while others ignored them or milled

around. Towards the end of the clean up period, when it is closer to their lunchtime, more children would join in as the urgency of the next activity became naturally clearer and clearer.

Observation also showed that when children asked each other to help clean up they would ignore one another. The two, sometimes three children who consistently cleaned the room had started to voice their frustrations about cleaning up this week, and one day asked if it would be ok if they did not clean up, I was not sure how to respond to this, but agreed, and they sat to take their own observations of the children during clean up time. Two interesting observations came out of this. The first was that these same children had not been frustrated by the lack of help from their peers earlier. They had taken on the responsibility of cleaning the room without being asked or asking for much help. They were aware what needed to be done and did it efficiently. Now that they were more aware that others were not helping they were trying to act as a motivating force in the classroom but were being continually ignored and rebuffed. Although it was not the goal to frustrate children, it did show a shift in community engagement that the children now understood that this time was not just about getting the room clean but to work together as a community. The second interesting observation that came out of this was that the children then sat down to write up their own observations and then handed them to me at the end of the session. They had observed my work and were helping me to carry it out in their own way. This was of note to me because it once again pointed out how little I was sitting and observing that they saw this a new work on my part and something to take part in. It was also notable because the students seemed to see that the way in which they were trying to motivate their peers was ineffective and they were perhaps

hoping that by sitting and observing as well they would be offering a different kind of motivation for the other children.

Week Four

The third and fourth week of mindfulness meditation was interesting because the children begin to voice their frustrations about certain groups and people not cleaning up. In observation it was seen that the groups of children actually cleaning had grown substantially. This week the group of children cleaning at any given time was eight to ten children. They were continually the same children and they began to voice their frustrations about how they were the only ones to clean up the room. It was interesting to note that some of these children had only joined the cleaning team recently, but they were immediately frustrated and angry by the fact that the other children were not cleaning up. These children facilitated a conversation on the rug about the importance of cleaning up. One child, during this conversation even volunteered to stay in during recess time to discuss and explain, to anyone who did not understand, why it was important to clean up. Some of the other notable observations were quotes heard in the classroom. Three children sat on the rug, one of the children looked around and said “rooms not clean!” they all then got up to clean again. On another day a child thanked another child for helping to clean the room. When a group of children was acting silly during one of the clean up times another child came up to remind that they were supposed to be cleaning up, not acting silly.

The following week, there were more notable observations. Nine children were cleaning up at any given time consistently and there were other interesting quotable observations. It was not uncommon to hear the children ask each other to “please clean

up.” On one day a child rang the bell and announced “please pick ten things off the rug and throw them away”. This was something that had been asked of the children before, but this was the first time they were asking it of one another. Another child said “Come on we have to help clean up the community.” The children did seem to be taking on more of the responsibility for the cleanup time themselves.

Week Five

The final week of mindfulness meditation, the children were asked to choose the position that they were most comfortable in. It was interesting that many chose different positions, and some had come up with positions that I would have never thought of. It was a mixture of positions that I had instructed them in and positions that they had come up with completely on their own.

Some children were still not comfortable to close their eyes so it was offered that they may take a soft gaze on the rug in front of them. This week we also began some gentle chanting. It was a chant, of “I am Happy, I am good”, and this also had hand movements and some gentle body movements.

One interesting observation was that some of the children had a hard time saying these words out loud. The first time we tried it one girl reflected that she was the only girl actually saying the chant. In the beginning of the week we started repeating the chant out loud, but by the end of the week I encouraged students to say it in their minds while we did the body movements simultaneously. They all gently nodded their heads in unison as they chanted “I am happy, I am good” in their minds. It was interesting to note that many children felt very uncomfortable saying these words out-loud. It was embarrassing to some to say “I am happy, I am good”. A couple of children also asked if it was boastful

to declare that they were happy and good. This observation underlined the importance of reminding the children that it was “ok” to think of oneself as good and happy. It also brought on questions of if societally we are helping the children to accept their own internal goodness or whether we were instilling in them a feeling of deficit from the time they were children, in a misguided effort to instill humility. If they were not comfortable saying that they were happy and good than it could be concluded that this could lead to feelings of alienation and even a feeling that, what they did, did not matter. If this was the case then it was no wonder that it was hard for them to collaborate. If they did not understand that their work was critical to the success of the whole, then their ability to work as a community would be very difficult.

They did not understand the effect that their actions had on their peers. One example of this was that I would often observe children looking around to take cues on what to do from other children. If they saw their friends sitting and not cleaning up, then even if they knew what they were supposed to be doing, they would sit with them. I even observed times when children would see their friends not helping, hesitate as if they were going to start helping, but then go and sit with them. The other side was also true. When more children began cleaning up and vocally asking others to help then more children helped, this was evidenced by the growth in the core clean up crew. I reassured them that it was fine to say that they were happy and good, and if it felt false for them to say that about themselves in the beginning that it was ok to practice this sentiment until they felt it was true. I also told them that I believed that they were all happy and good, and could not even think of a time when this was a question in my mind.

This week the pattern continued during the clean up time. Groups of children, between seven to nine at a time, helped each other clean up. They consistently reminded each other and when a child sat on the rug, they were quickly approached by other children, and asked to help some more. The general appearance of the room had not changed, although the children do seem to be more engaged in the process. Also the time it took to clean up the room was much shorter, it averaged about 15 minutes. Down from the 27 minutes in the beginning of the mindfulness intervention.

The mindfulness intervention was designed to help the children connect with themselves in a way that they may not have had the chance to do before. It was also meant to help build focus, and awareness of the self. The question was if these would then translate into the children being more aware of their place and responsibility in their community.

Post-Survey Responses

1. What is your responsibility during clean up time?

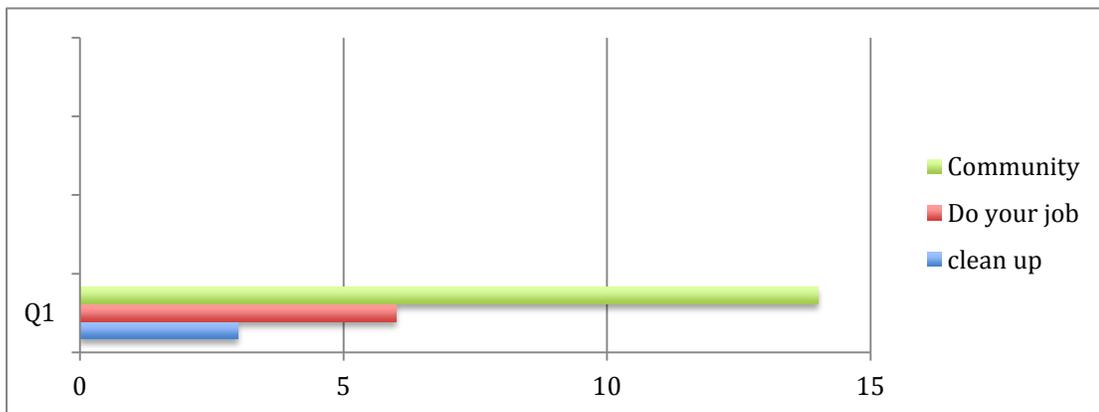


Table 5. Responses to Post-Survey Question 1

It is notable to see how many more responses had to do with helping the community. In the pre-survey five children mentioned community. All of these responses

seemed very shallow and almost as a repetition of an idea rather than a deeper understanding. However, in the post survey 14 children mentioned community and some children even mentioned the idea of cleaning to inspire this work in other children.

2. How and why is your work important to the community

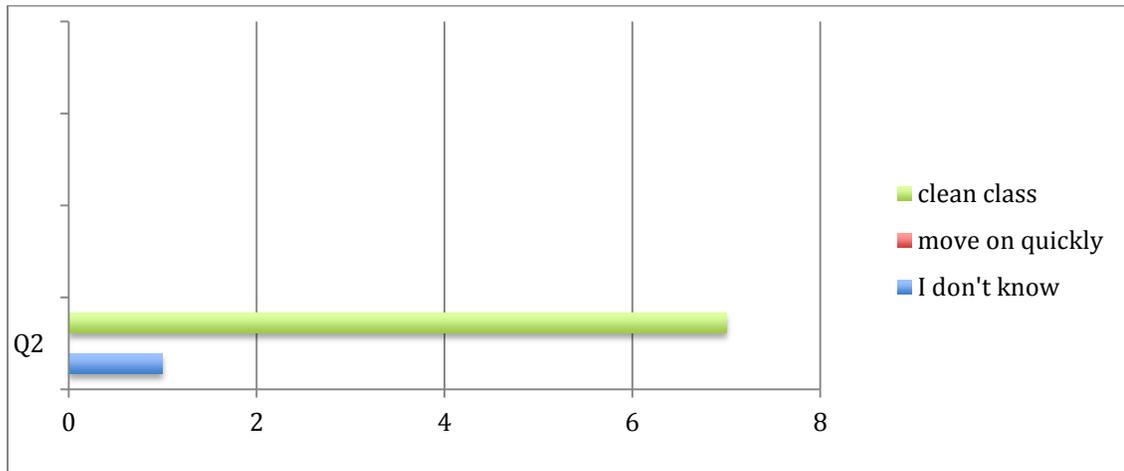


Table 6. Responses to Post-Survey Question 2

It is notable here that in the pre-survey four children did not know why their work was important to the community and here only one child was unsure. None of the students mentioned moving on to the next activity quickly, and the number of children who talked about cleaning the classroom increased significantly (from four to seven). Also 12 students mentioned community in their answers in one form or another, either by inspiring others to clean, helping others, or making the classroom more beautiful. Six students also commented how their work effected their learning and the learning of the community.

3. Why is it important to take the time to clean the environment?

Here again all of the students commented on how they have to clean the environment in order to have a clean place to work.

4. What is your responsibility during transition times such as walking through the halls, or in between group lessons?

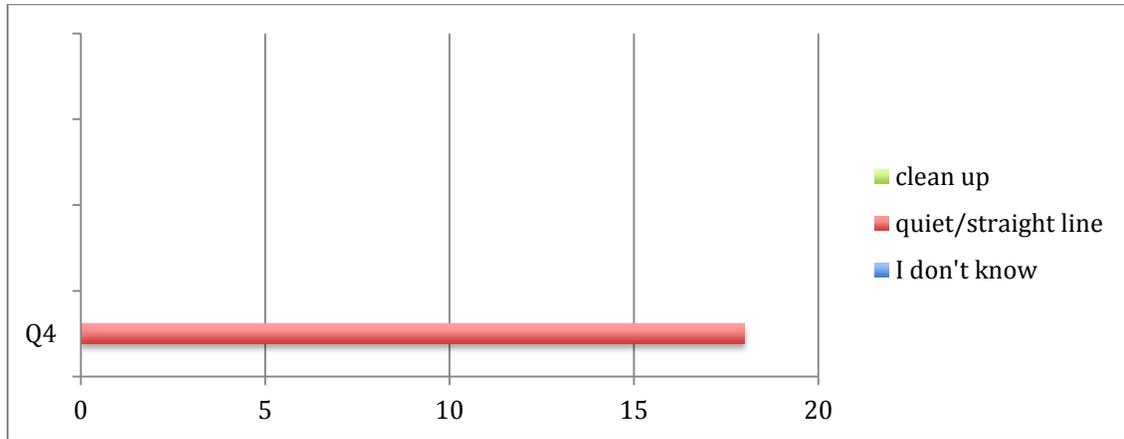


Table 7. Responses to Post-Survey Question 4

There was a significant change here. In the post survey three children did not know what their responsibility was during clean up time, and this time there were zero responses of I don't know. There were also zero responses of "clean up". The response to "walk in a quiet and straight line" went from nine to 18 children. There were also six responses that referred to being quiet in order to respect other people's work or to respect teachers.

5. Why are these important?

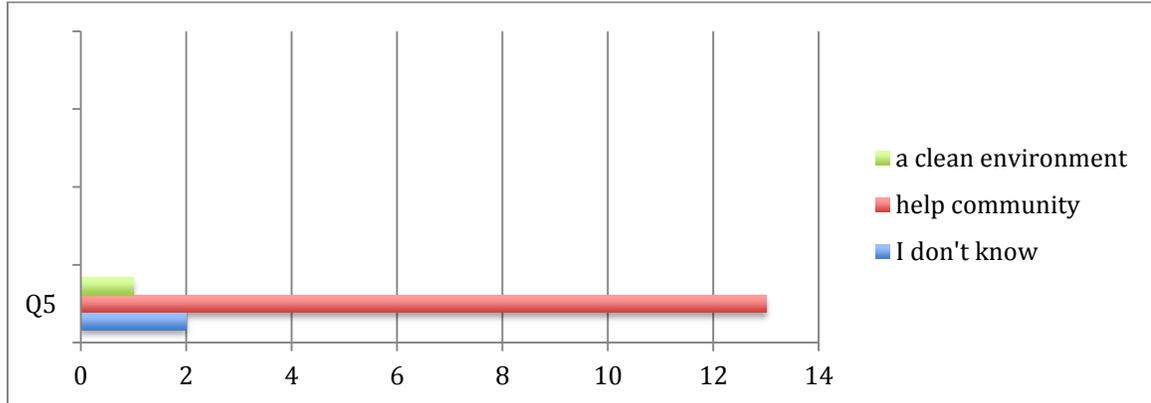


Table 8. Responses to Post-Survey Question 5

In the pre-survey six children responded that they did not know, however in post-survey only two children responded this way. The response “to help the community” jumped from six to 13 students, while the response “to clean the environment” dropped from four to one.

(Note: All student responses can be found in Appendix D)

There are a few factors that should be noted here that may have had some effect on the outcome of the mindfulness intervention. The fact that I was sitting and observing immediately had an effect on the children, because it became clear that now someone was watching. This may have served as an external motivation for some, however, not a strong motivation for others. Also this observation of clean up time naturally brought an energy and focus to this particular transition just because it became clear that this was one of our goals even though it was not discussed. There was little change in the other areas of transition.

Action Plan

According to the data there was a significant rise in student participation when it came to clean up time during the mindfulness intervention. The average number of students cleaning at any given time went up from three to nine. There were also some interesting student lead discussions that made it clear that the awareness of their work was heightened. Sometimes this awareness was manifested by frustration with themselves, others, or the system itself. However, this frustration led to discussion and action and so can be thought of as a kind of catalyst for change.

It is difficult to connect exactly how the mindfulness intervention affected the clean up time. There are other factors that could have affected the children during this time. One very clear factor was the teacher observation. The children were very aware that I was sitting back and observing and this could have been a motivating factor in that they felt they were being watched or perhaps even judged in this way. This is an interesting thing to take into consideration, especially in a Montessori classroom, because we strive toward the children being self-motivated and try to take out judgment and outside motivators. By doing this, the hope is that the children will find their own path and passions and be able to make choices not based on the influence of an outside force, but through their own strength of mind and spirit. If a teacher or authority figure “watching” was indeed a force that motivated them then the question becomes what can we do, moving forward, to help them to overcome this need for approval. Another question that came to mind was, is there a way to get rid of this need altogether, or is it part of who people are? Do people motivate people through this kind of underlying judgment, and if so then how can we help the children do this in a positive way?

During the observations I also saw that the children influenced each other unconsciously. For example if children came into the room during a clean up time, when everyone was cleaning up, then they looked around and started cleaning up. If, on the other hand, they came in during a time when everyone was standing around talking then they would join their friends talking. I began to start changing my language when talking to the children. Instead of asking them to clean up or what their individual job was I asked them if they were helping to inspire hard work in the classroom. We also had discussions about this so that they could start to understand their own work in the context of the greater community.

Another outside factor in the cleanup, was that by the very nature of the intervention and observation it became clear that clean up time was a time where we as a class were focusing a lot of our energy. I never mentioned clean up time during any of the mindfulness lessons. However, through the simple act of my observations and some of the questions that the students were asking me, it was clear to them that clean up time was something that we were working on. I'm not sure if this is negative or positive, however it does muddy the waters when making the connection between mindfulness work in the class and community collaboration.

One surprising aspect of the work that came to light was the discomfort that the children had during self-affirmation meditations. One meditation, in particular where the children are asked to repeat the words "I am happy, I am good" out loud and then silently to themselves, made them incredibly uncomfortable. Their discomfort with this meditation came out in different ways. One way was a continued giggling and silliness. This was their natural reaction, and I didn't want to further their discomfort by

discouraging it. I did encourage in the reflection afterwards to try to really think about the words. Beyond that some of the students (more girls than boys) were so uncomfortable at first that they would not even say the words. One student (a girl) reflected after the first session with this meditation that she thought she was the only girl who had actually said the words, and then no one contradicted her. After this the silly and giggly repetition of these words seemed fine as it felt like a kind of progress and building of comfort with these words. I changed the intervention to include this meditation more often than originally planned in the hopes that over time the words would feel natural and perhaps the sentiment would also grow.

Another interesting reflection on this meditation in particular was one child asked me if saying these words was boastful or narcissistic. This reflection took me by surprise, because I had taken for granted that the children would naturally accept that they were happy and good, as that was my deep belief about them. I realized in that moment that my assumption on how they felt about themselves may not be true. I had taken for granted that they believed themselves good at their core and that even though they were not happy in every moment that they were foundationally happy. Now I realize that maybe this wasn't true, or maybe they were not defining it in the same way that I was. This was not a question that I could answer fully for the student or myself in that moment, but I did tell them that it was ok to feel good about yourself. I also encouraged them to look the words boastful and narcissistic up in the dictionary to understand their connotations.

The reflections on the self-affirmation meditation "I am happy, I am good" were very interesting to me, because it made me realize that perhaps they did not feel this way

about themselves. One of the ideas that I had taken for granted was at this advanced stage of their Montessori education they had been engrained with the foundational belief that they all had special gifts and that each one of them was an integral part of their community. This is one of the basic tenants of cosmic education as written by Montessori.. I was glad that this had come up in reflection because it made it clear that this was an area that required more support and it was a good reminder to keep furthering this inner study and self-affirmation.

It also brought to light another assumption I had made about the children that had fueled the initial query of how to build collaboration and community. I had assumed that the children knew how to work together and collaborate, and was curious as to why they weren't helping each other. I was concerned about their not being able to communicate in a successful and meaningful way. This assumption was based in the idea that the children believed their work to be important and that the goals of the community could only be reached through equal contribution by all parties involved. If the children did not believe that they were happy or good, or at least felt uncomfortable with these ideas then it was also possible that they did not think of their contribution as important. This could possibly lead to feelings of alienation that would make collaboration impossible.

With this new information a couple of things became clear. First and foremost the importance of seated observation and reflection: I had known how important it was to observe and reflect in a theoretical sense, but somehow, in the everyday whirlwind of a classroom it was the first thing to go by the wayside. The observation is important for a couple of reasons. The first reason is that the children should be comfortable and used to the idea of observation. It should not come as a surprise to them that you are sitting and

observing. In this way as well they will not see it as a strange and new form of judgment, but as a natural part of their classroom experience. It also serves to show the teacher where and what the children need to work on, it is the strongest form of assessment.

Another valuable realization that came from this work was the unveiling of my own assumptions. I had made assumptions about the children, their abilities and beliefs. Because of this I had left a vast hole in their understanding because it wasn't addressed or supported. Going forward I would like to emphasize through every lesson, and every communication the importance of their work, and their special place in the community in the classroom. This can be done in more formal ways such as being a part of class discussion after stories or in their research work, or in less formal ways such as casual comments such as "thank you, your work is so important to our class". Being mindful of the language and bringing focus to this idea in everything that I present will help them to build this understanding for themselves.

I would also like to continue the mindfulness work as it is clear that it did have an effect, whether it was a clear connection to clean up time or not. The class was able to work more effectively as a group and it did help to fuel conversation about feelings and a deepened awareness of themselves. It also fueled interesting conversations and brought up areas that need support. The reflections of the students also showed where they were not feeling comfortable or confident with themselves, and so in that way was helpful in informing my teaching practices.

Another interesting aspect that came up during the action research project was the inability of the children to communicate respectfully with one another and to listen to their peers. The children have a lot of difficulty listening to one another and became

frustrated with each other easily. Moving forward I would like to facilitate this by introducing key phrases into the classroom, in a casual way such as “thank you for your cooperation” or “I hear what you are saying”. I would also like to create some lessons on acknowledging other people’s work, perhaps centered around the internet. In these small ways I would like to help the children to communicate and listen to each other more carefully to help them collaborate more effectively. This could be a potential future action research project, to see if facilitating communication after continued mindfulness work would change the environment of the classroom.

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Appendix A

Breath Awareness exercise: Ask the children to close their eyes and observe their breath. See how it is inhaled and exhaled. Watch their breath in their body. Where does it go? This exercise helps the child do two things bring awareness to their body and also learn to step away from their experience so that they can see it more clearly and without emotional attachment. The body awareness will help them begin to understand the signs and signals their body is giving them that would indicate stress or anxious feelings and thoughts. The observant mind aspect of this work will help them to begin to observe their own thoughts and feelings in a way that allows them to handle and deflate the emotion without being caught up in the impulsive emotional side of the experience.

Balloon breath: filling their body with breath as if they are blowing up a balloon. Draw the breath into the body and imagine a balloon filling with air. This exercise gives the child a strong visual cue to help them to really fill with air. This deep breathing technique helps them to relax the body and mind. This coupled with the idea of the observer state of mind gives them another way to access a calmer state of mind. Also by drawing the attention to the breath the child is having an experience of staying in the moment. They are only focused on one thing (the breath) so they are also having an experience of that single pointed focus, otherwise known as meditation.

Candle Breath: The child is asked to visualize a candle right in front of them. When they inhale the flame grows brighter and when the exhale they are focusing on how that candle flame will flicker and go out. Deep breathing is an important aspect of mindfulness, yoga, and meditation. It is a way for the body to be connected with the mind, as the physicality of the breath is connected with the visualizations of the mind as well as the calming aspects of the breath. This work gives the children another simple visual to focus on so that they can practice their single-pointed focus, as well as have a physical experience of the breath.

Body Awareness exercise: lying down close eyes and bring awareness and breath to each part of the body. This exercise brings awareness to the breath but also to the areas of the body where the children might habitually hold stress. Throughout this exercise they will be asked to release the tension from their body and keep track mentally of the area where they were holding their stress. In this way the child is able to observe themselves physically and emotionally. They are also empowered to put down that stress on their own, all the while focusing on the breath, which offers that extra bit of meditative reflection.

Light stretching exercises:

-forward fold. This is considered a light inversion practice which can help them to release tension and anxiety mentally and physically. It does this physically by helping to bring blood and oxygen to the head. Mentally it offers a break from normality as you are literally turning yourself upside down giving a change in perspective and scenery.

Gentle vinyasa practice: Vinyasa is a dynamic movement based form of yoga that encourages movement linked to breath. The movement happens with the breath so the practitioner has the opportunity to observe the natural rhythm of their breath. They are also encouraged to notice how the breath changes and what they can do to bring the breath back to a calming rhythm. Each movement is synchronized to an inhale or exhale. The movements are gentle and are designed to stretch the body and support proper posture. Vinyasa can be compared to dance as the movement is continuous and flowing with some breaks or holding of postures. The movements can also be repeated to allow for a deeper stretch and to support a meditative state of mind.

Tension release exercise: seated position allowing the fingertips to touch the ground. Imagine the breath as a color that is calming (blue or green) draw the breath into the body and fill up with the breath. At the top of the breath hold and say to yourself “I am letting go of tension” then imagine the breath filled with tension exhale and let the breath run down your arms, off your finger tips into the floor. Repeat 5 times. The children will use their breath and the visualization techniques to actively let go of stress. Through the many breath awareness techniques and the yoga and stretching they will learn how to identify tension and anxiety that is building in their bodies and minds and this is one technique to actively rid themselves of that tension.

Tension release in the body: bringing awareness to the different parts of the body and then ask the child to squeeze (ie squeeze your hands) then breath and relax. This activity allows the children to feel what tension feels like in different parts of their body and then mindfully let go of that and feel the opposite, the relaxation.

Robins breath: movements that are linked to breath. This is a seated vinyasa which has an emphasis on moving the spine and building core strength to improve posture. Many times because of poor posture people habitually lock themselves in unhealthy positions for their bodies, specifically the spine. This causes stress to be put on different parts of the body. Over time physical stress can feel like emotional stress. This gentle vinyasa work can help the children to have better posture while offering another form of body and breath awareness. The gentle flowing motions also help to pull the practitioner’s awareness into the present moment along with the gentle sound of the breath.

Gratitude meditation: Holding the hands in front of the heart think of something that makes you smile. Focus on that image and then breathe in through the nose allowing that feeling to flow over you. Then breathe out through the nose allowing that feeling of gratitude to flow out into the room and all around. This meditation allows the child to literally bask in the feelings of happiness and make the connection between gratitude and happiness. Many times children are taught they should be grateful however that is a very abstract concept especially when they are asked to be grateful for what they have. This is difficult because they cannot have an experience of not having what they have further complicating the process. The gratitude meditation allows them to feel the happiness of the things they are grateful for and then translate that good feeling into gratitude.

“I am happy, I am good” children’s meditation: the children chant to themselves “I am happy I am good” as they do arm movements. This is a combination of meditation and simple movements to help the children affirm themselves. The repetition of the words help the children to come to a meditative state. Also by saying these words in their head they are able to literally internalize this message. Through this simple action of repeating that they are happy and good to themselves they will be affirming their self-worth , building their self-confidence, and becoming more self-reflective.

Appendix B

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Duration 11:30 2:30	Duration 11:30 2:30	Duration 11:30 2:30	Duration 11:30 2:30	Duration 11:30 2:30
How many children are sitting on the rug? 11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30
Any spontaneous offers of help? 11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30
“That’s not mine?” “I didn’t do that” 11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30	11:30 2:30

General Observation Form				
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday

Survey

What is your responsibility during clean up time?

How and why is your work important to the community?

Why is it important to take the time to clean the environment?

What is your responsibility during transition times such as walking through the halls, or in between group lessons?

Why are these responsibilities important?

Pre-Survey Responses

1. What is your responsibility during clean up time?

- Doing my job and helping to clean the classroom
- clean up the math area and pick up things on the floor
- To clean
- To clean the classroom and my workspace
- My responsibility during clean up helping everyone out
- To clean
- To clean the room
- My responsibility during cleaning is manager (one of the responsibilities on our job wheel)
- To help the classroom out
- To clean
- To help clean the room and your stuff
- To clean up
- To put up chairs and spray tables
- Clean up
- To do your job and help the community during clean up
- To do your job and help others clean up their works
- To follow the instructions that you are given
- Clean up the classroom
- To make the surroundings clean
- To clean

2. How and why is your work important to the community?

- My work helps people learn stuff
- I have no clue
- I don't know
- So it gets clean faster so we can do other things

- If you have a group project you need to get it done on time
- I do not know
- because you clean the room so it looks nicer
- Because it helps us get to the next activity
- I don't know
- So we can learn
- It helps our community stay clean
- To get the classroom cleaned up quickly or to learn
- I usually help people get ready for lunch and recess by spraying tables and telling them to sit on the rug
- yes
- I just like to get my work done
- Because I could learn something and help others
- It makes the class pretty
- Because if I work hard it shows good to the class
- to learn and make things more sufficient
- Because it makes the classroom clean

3. Why is it important to take the time to clean the environment?

- So it is not messy and looks nice
- So we don't work in messes
- So we can work better
- So that we set a good example
- So it doesn't get dirty
- It making the home good
- Because you need to respect the environment
- Because we need a clean workspace
- So it is not polluted and messy
- So it's not polluted

- So we have a clean environment so we don't live in a pigsty
- So we aren't learning in a pigsty
- So that we are clean and not in a messy place
- So it's clean
- Because you want the earth to be clean
- So it doesn't get gross and dirty and so we don't get sick
- So the class is pretty
- Because if you don't clean it the environment will be bad
- Global warming and to make the world a better place
- Because it is cleaner and it looks better

4. What is your responsibility during transition times such as walking through the halls, or in between group lessons?

- To help make the line silent and be mindful of people who are working
- To clean up your work
- To clean up what we were doing before
- ?
- ?
- To clean up
- To clean up
- To get in line and be quiet
- What is transition time?
- To transition
- To be quiet and listen to instructions
- To walk silently in line back to class or to someplace
- To immediately go to the next place and be quiet
- Be quiet
- Be peaceful and wait
- To be mindful of the time so I don't get distracted

- To be nice to the other people working
- My responsibility is to be quiet and transition
- To be responsible for yourself and to think
- To be quiet

5. Why are these important?

- These are important because they are important
- I don't know
- Same as 2 (I don't know)
- a drawn picture of a smiling mushroom and a cupcake
- I don't know
- They are good
- Because you need to clean and respect the environment
- Because it helps us clean our room
- Because you should keep them in mind during the day
- To keep a normal lifestyle
- They help our community
- Because if we didn't do these things we would learn in a pigsty and would disrupt working people all the time
- So we go to school in a peaceful amazing place
- Because you need to clean
- They are things that help the community
- Because they are
- Because our class is very communitive (this is the word the child wrote)
- Because we are all part of the community
- So you can make life a better time and be responsible
- Because it helps the community

Post-Survey Responses

6. What is your responsibility during clean up time?

-My job during clean up is to clean up my work and items I had out then I have to help the rest of the class clean up.

-To clean your class to your best ability such as your work area or help other people clean

-To clean the room and do your job

-To do my job and help out in the classroom

-preschool (one of the jobs on the job wheel)

-to help clean my area and others

-to clean up my person work and do my job. When I finish both of those I help clean up the class but sometimes I get distracted and start talking to my friends

-My clean up responsibility is to help clean the classroom and environment. This week my main job is to take care of Donatello the tortoise.

-To clean up my work, do my job and help others clean up

-To do your job, wipe the tables and make sure everyone's doing their job too

-To clean the classroom

-To clean up

-Supplies, tables, and to help the community

-To do your job and clean up the room

-Clean the class and do your job

-To clean

-To clean and do my job

-To help the community

-to clean the class and do my job

-To clean up the classroom

-Whiteboard (one of the jobs on the job wheel)

7. How and why is your work important to the community

- It helps your brain and you can get ideas
- It makes other people get ideas about stuff similar to you
- It is important because we clean the room
- because I learn stuff and it helps make the classroom better
- Its important because I learn
- It makes it clean
- I personally don't think my work helps the community but I would like to find
- It is important because I am helping clean the classroom and the more people who clean the faster it gets clean
- If I learn how do something I can help others do that too
- So I can learn more
- Because if you want to have more lunch and recess, everyone has to do their share
- If I clean up other people will
- If I clean and do my work hopefully others will
- So you can learn and help make the earth a better place
- It makes the class look nice
- Because it is
- It makes the classroom beautiful
- If some people clean up other people will clean too
- Because if people don't clean then others have to do more work

8. Why is it important to take the time to clean the environment?

- You have to clean because if you don't it will dirty
- Because you live in your class for half the day and you don't want it to be stinky and not fun
- Because you should be able to work in a clean environment
- Otherwise it would disgusting
- So our Earth doesn't become polluted

- So it's clean
- Because the more time you take the better the environment will look at the end of the day
- It is important to help clean the environment because you may miss some crumbs and scrubs. Also you don't have to rush clean-up
- Because if we hold back cleaning later it's going to be hard
- It helps the community
- So it's not messy
- To keep the class from turning into a pigsty
- So that it looks good
- Cause if we didn't we would have a dirty classroom
- to help get it nice
- Because we don't want the class to look like a pigsty
- So there isn't climate change in the world and we don't go extinct
- So the class is not dirty and yucky
- So it can be clean
- It's important because precision is key
- To help get it nice and neat

9. What is your responsibility during transition times such as walking through the halls, or in between group lessons?

- You have to walk. Also you have to have quiet voices
- To be quiet because other children are working or in lessons and you don't want to disturb them and some kids are sleeping
- To be silent and in a straight line
- Being quiet and respectful
- I do my work
- To be quiet and listen
- To stay in line and try not to talk to other people. Some sixth graders help the teacher get others in line

- My responsibility is to be mindful of the people who are working or people who are still in lessons
- To respect others while they're working and be quiet
- To be in a straight and silent line
- To be as quiet as possible
- To be silent and in a line
- Be quiet
- To be silent so as not to disturb other classrooms
- To be quiet
- To be silent and not talk
- To be silent and respect the teacher
- To be quiet and in a straight line if you are walking somewhere
- To be quiet
- To be nice and quiet
- To be quiet

10. Why are these important

- Because they all relate to the community
- So the school looks its best and presentable and every one is happy
- Because they help the community
- Because otherwise the school would be BIAAAAAAAAAAHAHHHHH!
- So when I'm older I know stuff
- So the environment is happy
- Because they all contribute to making a peaceful and happy community
- They are important because it is contributing to the classroom. And also it helps people realize to be responsible for their words and actions
- They all help the community
- They help the community
- I don't know
- So the school stays in order and doesn't get out of control and filthy
- Because we have a good school and we need to give back

- Because they are life skills that we should know
- Because they will help the community
- Because they help the community
- So you can get places faster and easier
- Because the class should be clean and it would loud if everyone was yelling in the hall
- ?
- ?
- Because they help the community