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Using Technology-Supported Mindfulness Tools to Alleviate Test Anxiety in the Elementary Classroom

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Using Technology-Supported Mindfulness Tools to Alleviate Test Anxiety in the Elementary Classroom

Cover Page Footnote

The researchers would like to acknowledge Ms. Kellie Anders, a professional yoga instructor, who played a key role in designing the mindfulness exercises that were used in this study. Her support and contribution helped to improve the lives of the students who received the mindfulness instruction in this study.

Mindfulness in the Elementary Classroom:

In-person and Remote Mindfulness Strategies to Help Alleviate Anxiety

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Abstract

Childhood anxiety has been an increasing focus of classroom teachers in recent years. It creates an excess of problems, which can lead to other health-related issues. Long-term effects may include mental health problems, such as depression and isolation, due to becoming accustomed to coping with anxiety daily. This curriculum project designed a series of lessons that were delivered on a weekly basis to a class of second-grade students. Once the pandemic forced schools to move online, these mindfulness activities were delivered through remote instruction which greatly benefitted the young students during this difficult time. The purpose of this action research study was to create and evaluate mindfulness-based interventions as an effective approach that may be used to positively impact student learning and their emotional well-being in the classroom. Participants were a small group of teachers who worked or volunteered at the school where the curriculum was used. They were purposefully selected by having knowledge or experience in mindfulness-based interventions. This qualitative study gathered data from an open-ended evaluation questionnaire. Once received, the data was analyzed by identifying codes and themes and then the feedback was used to make improvements to the curriculum. The results of the study indicated that mindfulness-based interventions were highly successful in each classroom and are recommended to be included in the daily practice of elementary schools.

Keywords: mindfulness, educational technology, anxiety, wellness, elementary

Introduction

There has been a rising emphasis on childhood anxiety among classroom teachers in current years. It has created an overabundance of problems, with an emphasis being on health-related issues. Many times, health issues lead to students missing class time due to visiting the school nurse, or even to the extent of missing school. Furthermore, childhood anxiety leads to a lack of focus and attention during class time. In some cases, anxiety leads to negative behavior. Long-term effects may include mental health problems due to becoming used to coping with anxiety daily. Since worrying is often associated with anxiety, it is important to gain an

understanding of why worrying occurs. As Stern (2009) observed, “An improved understanding of how excessive worry (the thought-driven aspect), which is linked with anxiety (the emotional element), affects our mental and physical functions can help us cope with this often self-induced foible” (p. 40). By becoming familiar with why children worry and how it often leads to anxiety, teachers may be able to provide effective in-person and remote strategies for students to become aware of their anxieties and how to address and cope with them.

Missing school or class time has the largest effect on student success because they are losing pivotal instruction time. Faculty meetings across the grade levels at Pineview Elementary School (name changed) where this study took place, focused on how the school could alleviate the anxiety teachers noticed in their students. Teachers were reporting that many students were displaying a lot of signs of stress and worry during class. Additionally, the elective teachers noted that students were displaying more negative behavior in their classes as well. It was suggested that additional social emotional learning (SEL) lessons and activities be incorporated into their everyday classes to promote mindfulness in their daily routine. Holland et al. (2017) found that it is imperative to provide SEL prevention strategies as early as possible to children who may be at risk for mental health difficulties. Powietrzynska and Gangii (2016) wrote, “There is a growing interest within modern nations in how the science of well-being can be used to improve lives” (p. 695). Prevention measures must be offered because as these children grow into young adults, they will continue to have issues with anxiety if it is not effectively addressed. *Education Week* has also featured multiple articles that focused on the increase in childhood anxiety even before the pandemic and how educators may use implementations, such as mindfulness, in the elementary school classroom (Sparks, 2013). This study will present a review of research-based practices and how mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) were integrated

into the curriculum before and during the pandemic so that students could alleviate some of the test anxiety, as well as provide coping strategies they may use as life-long skills.

Context

Pineview Elementary School was a small Pre-K through 12th-grade private school where learners were educated utilizing the whole-child approach (ACSD Whole Child, n.d.). Each student was viewed and treated as an individual and the education they receive was tailored to support their potential and interests. Many students called Pineview Elementary School their “home away from home.” The students were hard workers and were interested in various subjects and topics. They made it enjoyable to be an educator at the school because every day was a unique experience. For the most part, the students were well-behaved and truly loved going to school every day. They wanted to do their very best and please their teachers and parents.

The faculty at Pineview Elementary School were a fantastic group of educators. The staff did their best to nurture the students into becoming the all-around best humans they can be. All the classroom teachers at the private school had state-approved teaching licenses. The teachers collaborated to coordinate the curriculum and discuss individual student issues. The faculty often planned special thematic events and extension activities to enhance the standard curriculum.

The parents/guardians of students at Pineview Elementary truly cared about their student’s education. For the most part, parents/guardians were extremely involved in school life. Many parents/guardians volunteered their time on various occasions to support school activities. They also made donations to the school, which were distributed and used in many ways. Because the parents/guardians were so involved and had very high expectations for their children, the students tended to want to please them, which created higher signs of anxiety and worry when

taking tests. This was very evident when it came to spelling tests because they were done weekly on Fridays. This behavior was also similar whenever they took other tests, such as math unit tests or the state diagnostic test that was done once a year.

Background of the Study

This study was initially intended to take place with a class of second-grade students at Pineview Elementary, before the pandemic. Not only was the second-grade teacher (the first author of this study) noticing increased student anxiety and worry before taking their weekly spelling tests, but so did other teachers at the school notice that before an important test or when transitioning to other classes, students were quite often anxious, nervous, and unable to sit still and focus, which resulted in students not doing their best work (Faculty meeting conversation, February 13, 2019). The school nurse would also report to teachers when their students missed class due to anxiety and stress. The anxiety that children were displaying at this school paralleled with those seen at other schools across the country (Kuzujanakis, 2021). It created a plethora of problems, with an emphasis on health-related issues that many times included depression (Wolters Kluwer Health, 2018). Some additional results of these issues led to students missing class time due to visiting the school nurse, or even to the extent of being absent from school altogether. Other students who were experiencing major anxiety were unable to enter the school building and became sick to their stomachs, cried, or even refused to go to class. These behaviors of childhood anxiety have been shown to lead to a lack of focus and attention during class time. In some cases, anxiety leads to negative behavior and can often be misdiagnosed as a cognitive disorder (Miller, 2020).

Because so much anxiety and stress were evident in the elementary students, the second-grade teacher (the first author) hoped that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), that support

SEL, would positively impact the students' emotional well-being, especially before test-taking or when students felt anxious. The teacher had previously incorporated mindfulness techniques in her classroom often as brain breaks, or as a way to decompress before transitioning from one subject to the next. Students practiced yoga, participated in breathwork exercises, and focused on simple meditations from time to time. The months prior to schools closing for the pandemic, the teacher introduced a few mindfulness techniques as needed when she noticed that the class was experiencing high anxiety.

Beginning the Mindfulness Instruction

Before the formal curriculum was utilized, the teacher informally taught students several mindfulness techniques when students' stress levels were noticeably high during the first several months of the school year. The first mindfulness technique introduced was the use of breathwork (Children's Health, 2024). The classroom teacher shared guided meditations from YouTube with her students. The teacher and students participated in the guided meditations. Breathwork activities included exercises that elementary students could relate to, including engaging multimedia elements. The students' favorite breathwork meditations included "rainbow breathing" and "butterfly breathing" (The Mindfulness Teacher, 2021). They loved the body movements that went along with each of the activities. The breathwork exercises allowed the students time to focus on their breathing and calm their bodies. The teacher noticed that the students felt calmer and relaxed after participating in the breathwork.

Next, the classroom teacher incorporated a book, *Good Morning Yoga* (Gates, 2016), which included the use of yoga poses that the students mirrored. The students utilized yoga mats during this activity and spread out around the room. Desks were moved to the perimeters of the room to give the students more space to move their bodies freely. Students were reminded to use

the breathwork skills they were taught during the yoga activity. During other mindfulness sessions, the teacher utilized the YouTube channel “Cosmic Kids Yoga,” which created fun mindfulness activities based on popular books (Cosmic Kids Yoga, 2016). The children were led through a series of engaging stories incorporating yoga, which they really enjoyed and looked forward to.

Alexa (a virtual assistant technology) was also used to support the delivery of mindfulness instruction. Their focus was often listening to a story, so students were mentally engaged while practicing mindfulness. Alexa was used to play soothing music and sounds during meditation practices. The teacher found that incorporating mindfulness in the classroom seemed to benefit her students, leading to a clearer mindset. This led to the idea of incorporating mindfulness-based interventions before students took the weekly spelling tests.

On days when the classroom teacher noticed that her students needed a session that provided total calmness and relaxation, Alexa (the virtual technology assistant) was utilized to play calming music for children. The students were instructed to put their heads down on their desks, close their eyes, and truly relax. This led to the class participating in “body scan” activities, which instructed the students to draw their attention to various parts of their body in an effort to gain relaxation and calmness (Mindful, 2024). These activities helped the students refocus before transitioning to their elective classes in the afternoon.

Childhood Anxiety and Stress

Student anxiety and stress are major challenges for children due to the expectations placed on them. Beginning as early as kindergarten, small children have displayed signs of anxiety from the pressures placed on them (Flannery, 2019). There are several causes of anxiety, such as separation from parents, high expectations of parents, socialization with peers, school

grades, and test performance. These anxieties can result in students' lack of attention, attendance problems, inability to concentrate on assignments and tests, and trouble with answering questions or working with peers in class (Ehmke, 2020). There is a definite need for further research to address the increase in childhood anxiety, and how it affects the way students learn within the elementary classroom (Felver et al., 2016; Renshaw & Cook, 2017; Waters et al., 2015).

Childhood anxiety has been an increasing interest of classroom teachers within the last few years, especially during and post-pandemic (Flannery, 2018; Ni & Jia, 2023). The principal at the school where the study took place decided to support MBIs because of the current research which "is increasingly showing that students' stressors and anxiety are not leaving them 100% ready to learn. In addition, practicing mindfulness impacts many other facets of a students' character, including their ability to be empathetic, self-aware, and better communicators" (A. Vandiver, personal communication, April 10, 2019). Since worrying is often associated with anxiety, it is important to gain an understanding of why worrying occurs. By becoming familiar with why children worry and how it often leads to anxiety, teachers may be able to provide effective strategies for students to become aware of their anxieties and how to address and cope with them.

Childhood anxiety is of increasing concern for many educators because it can harm the emotional health of students, which may influence their ability to learn successfully. This study aimed to create a four-week curriculum based on implementing MBIs in the second grade. This project gathered qualitative data that included the feedback from a questionnaire sent to an evaluation committee of teachers tasked with reading and providing detailed comments and evidence regarding the benefits, effectiveness, instructional quality, and depth of understanding

perceived by the students. The results of this project can be used by other elementary educators when considering implementing MBIs with their students.

This study will contribute to the existing gap in the mindfulness curriculum for elementary schools. This curriculum (see Appendix A) can be easily adapted for use by different grade-level teachers as a way to introduce mindfulness and teach stress-reducing techniques to their students. Mindfulness has only begun to be seen in schools across the country in recent years and several researchers are asking for more empirical studies to be completed to better understand the effects and potential benefits of mindfulness on students' anxiety, classroom behavior, and school environment (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). Although there have been several decades of research on the benefits of mindfulness and yoga on adults, there is very little information available about the benefits and impacts that mindfulness has on youth and children (Gerszberg, 2020). More recently, schools have been recognizing the importance of SEL which has shown to improve the overall well-being of students. Youth can benefit from learning to incorporate stress-reducing activities when experiencing anxiety. Providing a mindful curriculum for elementary teachers could lay a foundation for much-needed future classroom studies.

Background Literature

Social Emotional Learning Theory and Mindfulness

SEL pertains to a set of skills that can be taught to students to improve their ability to manage their emotions, behaviors, and attitudes which can help lead them to positive school and overall life successes (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). The purpose of teaching SEL skills is to help students to recognize “their thoughts and emotions, to become more self-aware, and to develop more empathy for others within their community and the world around them” (National University, 2024, para. 3). Students who are taught SEL strategies and

skills become more capable of managing their emotions and show greater empathy for others which helps them to make decisions that are positive, responsible, and better achieve their goals.

There are five major competencies in SEL, which are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013; Lawlor, 2016). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, www.casel.org) is a leader in promoting SEL curriculum in schools across the world and has helped to define the five competencies. Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's emotions and how they influence one's behavior. Self-management is the ability to be in control of your actions, thoughts, and emotions in a variety of situations, along with progressing towards one's goals. Social awareness is the skill of empathy and putting oneself in another's place who could be from a different culture or background. Relationship skills refer to the ability to create and sustain healthy relationships with a variety of people from a broad range of backgrounds. This competency concentrates on communication and listening skills, finding resolutions to conflicts, and knowing the right circumstances to offer or ask for help. Making responsible decisions involves the capability of knowing how to act or react to different situations and being aware of the consequences (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013; Lawlor, 2016; National University, 2024).

Mindfulness directly supports SEL's self-awareness and self-management competencies by teaching students to be aware of their mental and emotional well-being, attitudes, and feelings (Lawlor, 2016). "Mindfulness training involves the cultivation of conscious attention and awareness to the present moment. This intentional practice ... may include such practices as mindful breathing, open awareness meditation, walking meditation, and focusing on sensations

in the body” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 66). Self-awareness is supported by mindfulness by focusing on one’s feelings and thoughts, and how they manifest in one’s behaviors. “This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 66). Self-management is also supported by mindfulness techniques by being able to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different environments. This competency reflects in one’s ability to self-regulate, delay gratification, manage stress, self-motivate, control impulsive behaviors, and being able to progress in one’s goals (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012). These skills can be developed through digital modules or games, they can also be taught through physical activities, such as yoga, aerobics, martial arts, and through a well-designed school curriculum (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Mindfulness can also be integrated into social awareness by displaying empathy for others and in building successful relationship skills through mindful listening, thoughtful dialogue, and resolving conflicts. Finally, mindfulness techniques are also found in responsible decision-making by taking responsibility for one’s behaviors, making ethical decisions, and being non-judgmental of others (Lawlor, 2016).

Causes of Childhood Anxiety

There has been a noticeable increase in childhood anxiety. To find solutions, educators must understand the underlying causes of childhood anxiety. First, educators must recognize what the attributes of childhood anxiety are. Teachers must also consider the differences between worrying and anxiety. There is a fine line between normal worry and worrying in excess, which leads to anxiety. It is also beneficial to consider the environment in which the child with anxiety is growing up. This may provide insight into factors such as parenting and home life. Sources in this section examine factors that influence the onset of childhood anxiety.

Missing school or class has a negative effect on students because they are missing pivotal instruction time. Absent students are missing out on the necessary, consistent instruction to build on fundamental skills, as well as reteaching and enrichment opportunities (Kelly, 2020). Recent teacher meetings across the divisions, (elementary through secondary) have focused on how educators can alleviate the anxiety we saw in our students within the classroom. One of the most common suggestions was to teach mindfulness and relaxation techniques to students to use before stressful situations (A. Vandiver, personal communication, April 10, 2019).

Holland et al. (2017) found that it is imperative to provide prevention strategies to children who may be at risk for mental health difficulties as early as possible. Prevention measures must be offered because as these children grow into young adults, they will continue to have issues with anxiety if it is not effectively addressed. Educators should understand the importance of students' social-emotional learning, which includes anxiety, and how to use implementations, such as mindfulness, in the elementary school classroom, to help reduce students' stress levels (Sparks, 2013). Educators who choose to implement mindfulness-based interventions into their curriculum may help to alleviate some of the anxiety in students, as well as provide coping strategies they may use as life-long skills.

Laurin et. al. (2015) conducted a study on the association between controlling parenting and higher childhood anxiety. This hypothesis relates closely to how controlling parents create anxiety in their children. While it is important to respond to possible threats, anxiety in excess can create issues with one's well-being. Laurin et al. (2015) found that "among environmental influences, the familial environment has been shown to account for a sizable part of the variance in child anxiety" (p. 3,280). Risk factors for greater childhood anxiety often include negative home life and family environment. However, it has also been found that maternal characteristics,

especially depressive indications, have also been associated with the child internalizing complications.

Children of parents with anxiety disorders are five to seven times more likely to be diagnosed with one, as compared to children of parents without anxiety disorders (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Family characteristics, such as maternal depressive indicators and family socioeconomic status, were additional risk factors included in the study. Additionally, one of the most interesting factors of this study included the concern about “helicopter parenting” where the mothers’ reluctance to separate from their child and concern for the safety and protection of their child, also causes higher levels of anxiety in the child, instead of demonstrating confidence, assurance, and supporting the child’s independence from the mother. Overprotective parenting plays a significant role in the development of anxiety. It has been proven that provoking fear in children increases their own anxiety. Similarly, an overprotective parent who is showing signs of depression may reduce their child’s self-confidence. A high-controlling parent, as well as parents who are extremely involved in their child’s life, increase the likelihood of that child developing internal difficulties (McLaughlin et al., 2008).

Solutions to Childhood Anxiety

Once factors are considered, educators must next determine how we can alleviate childhood anxiety. There are many programs and implementations that have been put into practice. Many anxiety-relief practices include mindfulness-based interventions which are a treatment option for adolescents who show signs of a mental health disorder, such as anxiety. Wellness implementations and programs often assist children with developing lifelong skills, which also leads to healthy lives (Felter et al., 2016). The following studies indicate the successes that mindfulness has shown in many schools to effectively alleviate childhood anxiety.

Lobman (2014) conducted an action research study to provide productive solutions to how testing causes anxiety that may be used to effectively alleviate test anxiety. The study showed that between 10% to 30% of school children have a significant fear of taking tests and the percentages are even higher for minority students living in poor socio-economic communities (Lobman, 2014). The study noted that “the experience that one’s test scores will confirm negative beliefs about your racial group, produce added anxiety, a negative aversion to testing, and lower test scores among non-White students” (Lobman, 2014, p. 330). Due to these findings, Lobman (2014) focused her study on inner-city schools where there is a huge demand for tools that effectively address the stress that occurs while preparing for tests within the classroom. Lobman (2014) found that the implemented program, *Performing Beyond Fear*, allowed for both students and educators to lead discussions about testing fears, as well as develop games to assist with test prep. The results of the study provided significant information regarding how students may use learned cognitive tools to not only effectively alleviate test anxiety but to assist students and teachers with dealing with test anxiety in positive ways. *Performing Beyond Fear* was successful in the sense that an environment was created where “students and teachers talked about, addressed, and played with fears around testing” (Lobman, 2014, p. 329).

Similarly, Malboeuf-Hurtubise, et al. (2017) conducted a study on implementing mindfulness-based interventions and the effects of the implementation on anxiety and depression in children in elementary school. “Ten percent to 20% of youth are diagnosed with a mental disorder and present significant psychosocial adjustment difficulties at home, in school, and with friends as a result of their mental illness” (Malboeuf et al., 2017, p. 856). Their results showed that mindfulness-based interventions had positive effects in improving anxiety symptoms in children. Furthermore, they found that mindfulness-based interventions led to increased empathy

skills and allowed children to better control their emotions. Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. (2017) suggested that mindfulness-based interventions may also have a short-term positive impact on elementary-age students with mental health disorders, such as anxiety. This study's results proposed that mindfulness-based interventions are beneficial for any elementary-age child with a mental health disorder.

In a comparable study, Bazzano et al. (2018) studied the effects of implementing mindfulness and yoga into an elementary school curriculum. Recently, an increasing number of schools have considered ways to assist with improving SEL within the classroom. SEL has proven successful in minimizing stress while assisting with psychosocial growth in children. Adolescents have expressed feeling stressed about multiple aspects of their lives, often with a focus on feeling worried about their academic performance. Stress is proven to have a negative impact on the health of children, which often leads to anxiety or other health risks. Bazzano et al. (2018) found that “more than two decades of evidence support the application of yoga and mindfulness practices for improving individual mental health and well-being, particularly for stress” (p. 81). Their results showed that mindfulness-based approaches in the classroom have become more popular over the last ten years in the United States and have resulted in positive effects on children. Research suggests that SEL be implemented in K-12 classrooms and even adopted as part of the state curriculum due to its importance (Bridgeland, et al., 2013).

Long-term Effects of Mindfulness

Higgins and Eden (2017) investigated how classroom teachers may transform their classrooms to effectively implement mindfulness-based practices. The study examined how elementary students may become more aware of their emotions by utilizing mindfulness-based breathing. Additionally, calming conversations may be developed between teachers and students

that encourage relaxation prior to beginning math lessons. The goal of this study was to encourage positive social interactions between classroom teachers and students, with a focus on how emotions are present in the practices of teaching and learning. The authentic inquiry drew from a variety of perspectives to better understand the communal life of each classroom.

Saavedra et al. (2010) directed a study on the long-term effects of commonly used treatments of “exposure-based cognitive behavior treatment for phobic and anxiety disorders in children and adolescents” (Saavedra et al., 2010, p. 924). Cognitive behavioral treatments share several strategies in common with mindfulness, such as meditation, calming one’s thoughts and emotions, and becoming more aware of a person’s thoughts (Schimelpfening, 2024). The researchers explained that anxiety disorders in children can lead to other various health issues and negative developmental results. Oftentimes if anxiety disorders are not treated, new ailments such as depression and substance abuse occur. There has been an influx of treatment research within the last two decades to assist with lessening the anxiety we see in children (Saavedra et al., 2010). Additionally, there have been many short-term ailments that have been put in place, but Saavedra et al. (2010) found evidence for the long-term efficacy of the cognitive behavior treatment practices as children grew into adults.

Jakobsen et al.'s (2012) study reported similar results to Saavedra et al.'s (2010) work. This longitudinal study attempted to examine the positive effects of positive parent-child attachment to lessen the long-term effects that children may have who are diagnosed with anxiety disorders. The study explained that childhood anxiety can manifest as a result of many factors, such as poverty, abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), school-related stress, and family history. The results showed that children with high levels of anxiety have higher risks of developing internalizing disorders as a teen. Yet, with positive parenting styles that are more

supportive and encourage independent behaviors in children, adolescents were less likely to show signs of major anxiety and depression.

Using Multimedia for Mindfulness Instruction

Technology has provided many free and easy-to-use tools, videos, and resources for anyone who desires to practice mindfulness. From podcasts and apps to YouTube and Alexa, content creators all over the globe have been producing accessible content to help with stress reduction, anxiety, breathing exercises, reducing depression, and overall mental wellness (Agapito et al. 2023; Sevilla-Llewellyn-Jones et al., 2018). Classrooms that permit artificial intelligence tools, such as Alexa, can stream a mindfulness podcast or a relaxation exercise to complete before a test or other stressful situations, such as a presentation (Ask My Class, n.d.). Multimedia mindfulness resources have been used successfully personally, in education, as well as in health care.

Several online resources and organizations are also producing digital content for teachers to integrate into their classes. Mindful Schools and Common Sense Education both provide free tips, tools, and techniques for incorporating mindfulness into education (www.commonsense.org; www.mindfulschools.org). These organizations also provide teacher training to support educators in learning how to guide mindfulness exercises on their own as well as many free curriculum resources. By using online materials, teachers can instruct students how to better handle stress, have better trust in others, and learn how to communicate without violence.

Apps, such as GoNoodle, Stop, Breathe and Think, Calm, Ninja Focus, and Mind Yeti provide guided breathing exercises, videos, and support to teach children (and adults) yoga, relaxed breathing, and mindfulness techniques (Dormoy, 2020; Solano, 2020; Tech Tools, 2017).

These apps can contribute to help students deal with stress and control their breathing to help process difficult emotions (Salzman, 2015). With regular practice, students and their teachers can become more aware of their bodily sensations, reduce stress, and alleviate anxiety.

Methods

Prior to creating a formal mindfulness curriculum to be evaluated and then utilized in a second-grade classroom, students at Pineview Elementary participated in MBIs a few times a week conducted by the classroom teacher who practiced yoga and wanted to share the techniques with the students. This is what led to the idea of creating a mindfulness curriculum to evaluate the alleviation of test anxiety in second graders. Before the school closures in March of 2020, when teachers and students moved to remote learning, students participated in activities focused on mindfulness in the afternoon before transitioning to “specials” time (elective classes) outside of the classroom. The second-grade teacher felt that mindful activities helped students regain focus and prepared them for the transition of leaving the classroom and working with another teacher.

Typical mindfulness activities that were incorporated into the second graders’ daily routines included the use of grade-level appropriate texts with pictures, YouTube videos, and an iPhone application (InsightTimer). Many activities involved breathing activities, yoga exercises, and body scans (Anders, n.d.; Bertin, 2016; Elfenworks, 2010; Gates, 2016). (A body scan is a guided reading exercise that causes students to draw their attention to certain points of their body to help relax that area.) When the school closure took place due to COVID-19, the second-grade teacher continued mindful practices through the use of virtual remote meetings. Students participated in yoga classes through Zoom meetings and the teacher researcher kept a journal to

reflect upon the effectiveness of each mindfulness session. The teacher took notes about the students' comments, behaviors, and their reactions to the strategies.

The research questions that guided this study were:

- How does the mindfulness curriculum provide perceived benefits for students in second grade?
- How beneficial is the mindfulness curriculum for second-grade students?

Procedures

This project study followed a qualitative action research model (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It focused on designing a mindfulness curriculum to be implemented with the second-grade students at Pineview Elementary School. Data collection constituted a document and resource collection of mindfulness curricula (see Appendix A), similar action research studies, audiovisual materials, mindfulness technology support tools, and class observations (see Appendix B). The curriculum was also evaluated using an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix C) by a purposeful sample of professionals who were connected with the school and were familiar with the students' needs. The data from the evaluation was organized into themes and trends which were used to make improvements to the curriculum. The study took place over four weeks. It commenced with a document and technology resource collection. Additionally, a professional yoga instructor provided lesson outlines that were used to develop four detailed lesson plans (Anders, n.d.). Each lesson introduced new mindfulness techniques that were planned to be taught to students once a week, for four consecutive weeks. Some of the MBIs that were included in the lessons were: breathwork, guided practice, soothing sounds, and yoga. Each teacher participant was sent the consent form, the curriculum, and the electronic questionnaire. They were given a week to review and send back the questionnaire with their feedback. Once the

data collection time was closed, the researcher reviewed the data, improved the curriculum, and delivered the mindfulness lessons remotely using Zoom to the students.

Remote Mindfulness Strategies

Just as the students were becoming familiar with the mindfulness-based activities that were being incorporated into their classroom routine, COVID-19 struck, and the school moved to distance learning. This was thought to only last for two weeks but ended up continuing for the remainder of the school year. Fortunately, the class had already been exposed to mindfulness-based interventions, so the students continued utilizing the strategies during specified remote sessions. The formal curriculum (see Appendix A) was implemented when school transitioned to remote teaching. Most of the lessons included similar elements to those that had been introduced in person. The mindfulness Zoom sessions were not mandatory, but the teacher wanted to provide the students with some sense of community, in addition to continuing the use of mindfulness to ease any anxiety the children may have been experiencing due to all the elements of the pandemic.

Various sessions were offered to the students weekly through Zoom. To begin with an activity the students were already familiar with, the teacher used the *Good Morning Yoga* (Gates, 2016) book that had already been introduced to students when they were together in person. The students knew what was expected and were familiar with the story, so they simply followed along with the yoga poses demonstrated by the teacher as she read the story out loud. During another session, the teacher chose a “Cosmic Kids” (2016) video that was a new story, but the students were already familiar with the format.

In addition to the mindfulness strategies to provide some sense of school community, the second-grade students met with students from the middle school during special Zoom sessions.

Students participated in guided drawing activities, one of which was where students created their own dragon pictures by listening carefully to step-by-step instructions. The students were mindful of how they were listening, and they had fun with seeing how each of their peers' dragons turned out at the end due to how the directions were perceived. The students met again to participate in a "Dragon ABC" breathing activity. (For novelty, the term "dragon" was added to the activity names to tie in with the school's mascot.) This time, the middle school students created a mindful breathing technique, along with a piece of artwork that demonstrated each technique, that started with each letter of the alphabet. Second-graders followed along and participated in each of the "Dragon Breathing Techniques." These activities helped to calm them and learn to focus.

Results

After having reviewed the participant teachers' responses, who completed the Mindfulness Curriculum questionnaire, various themes were identified regarding the feedback provided. All four of the participants responded that the curriculum was very age-appropriate regarding the resources utilized and activities presented. The participants also all responded that the content was significant and relevant to the students' daily lives. All participants expressed the idea that the lessons focused on the feelings that many second graders exhibit daily and how to manage feelings such as stress and anxiety. Another noted response was the importance of the use of class interactions and the development of positive social skills, as displayed through the community circles and the interactions with their peers that promoted kindness and awareness during the lessons.

A very common theme throughout the data was the mindfulness teaching methods. All participants agreed that the curriculum supported the health and well-being of second-grade

students, as mindfulness is a healthy practice and allows students to become more calm, responsive, and focused (Gerszberg, 2020). All the participants shared that they felt mindfulness was taught, modeled, and practiced effectively through the use of breathwork. Additionally, the participants noted the importance of the use of the straw breathing technique, as well as the butterfly breathing method (Aggarwal, n.d.; Elfenworks Foundation, 2010). All participants believed that the materials actively engaged the students to promote their understanding of the content. The participants felt that there were various beneficial parts of the instruction. Breathwork activities were mentioned multiple times, as well as modeling behavior for students. One participant noted, “The actual practice of mindfulness and the sharing of feelings are most beneficial because they allow the children to see that they are not alone in how they feel and struggle and that there are actual things they can do to deal with difficult emotions like fear, anxiety, and anger.”

The integration of technology was another popular theme from the data. Each participant noted the effectiveness of utilizing technology as an engagement tool by using Alexa for playing relaxing music and the internet to share videos. A participant stated, “Technology use aids in the audio and visual aspects to relax and learn.” It was recognized by all of those who evaluated the curriculum that technology was integrated in each lesson using Alexa, YouTube videos, and digital presentations.

The use of literacy skills in this curriculum was also a common theme. All the teacher participants believed that there were sufficient experiences and opportunities for discussion or written reflection so students could develop a deep understanding of mindfulness. Another participant stated that there were many chances for discussions and “students are asked to write about someone they admire and have become good as something by practice.” This trend showed

the importance of the use of discussions, as well as written reflections or drawings. A participant shared, “There was also a community circle, which provided the opportunity for sharing and asking questions at the end of each lesson to deepen understanding of the concepts taught.” All the participants agreed that they would not eliminate any parts of the provided curriculum and that the curriculum provided clear and adequate information about why the students are being taught mindfulness. Each participant mentioned that the objectives were clearly defined, and the standards were stated. Additionally, each participant felt that the lessons and strategies progressed well throughout the entire unit of instruction and that the lessons had clear descriptions and materials.

In response to allowing participants to share any additional comments, one participant suggested sharing a YouTube Kids video sharing the 4-7-8 breathing technique. It was also noted to ensure that students understand the definition of the word “meditation” before introducing the butterfly breathing video. Additionally, a participant shared that they wondered how useful it was to include actual straws when practicing the breathing technique. This participant believed that second graders would lose focus on their breath and pay more attention to the straws. It was suggested to eliminate the use of straws when practicing breathwork. As a whole, the feedback was extremely positive, and their comments provided rich evidence from the lessons.

Discussion

The first research question asked: How does the mindfulness curriculum provide perceived benefits for students in second grade? The results of this study show that the proposed mindfulness curriculum is not only age-appropriate but provides benefits for students to strengthen their literacy skills. Other benefits included the community circle group discussions, which will allow for those to share their reactions, ask questions, and practice being non-

judgmental and respectful, which may not be evident in other areas of the lesson. These results are supported by Bazzano et al.'s (2018) study of the benefits of mindfulness techniques. Additionally, a study by Vickery and Dorjee (2016) evaluated the elementary students' emotional well-being and discovered that MBIs helps students be more engaged, positive, and also increases higher-order thinking. Several comments were made to the benefits that the technology provides a lot of support, from music and calming sounds to instructional videos and lessons that teach the principles and movements of mindfulness. Similarly, Karadjova-Kozhuharova and Baker (2022) noted the successful implementation of mindfulness techniques supported by the use of technology and in online environments to learn about mind-body connection, reduce stress, and to improve learning.

The second research question asked: How beneficial is the mindfulness curriculum for second-grade students? After reviewing the results, all the participants believed that the resources and activities utilized were extremely age appropriate and beneficial. These results are also supported by studies showing the benefits of mindfulness curriculum (Bazzano et al., 2018; Bridgeland & Hariharan, 2013; Felver et al., 2016; Gerzberg, 2020). Additionally, all the participants noted that the topics introduced were significant to children's daily lives. It was stated that the use of the curriculum could assist children who display feelings of stress and anxiety (Lobman, 2014; Malboeuf-Hurtubise, et al., 2017). Additional evidence of the age-appropriateness are the use of simplified worksheets and videos that are for younger children. Teaching them the vocabulary associated with mindfulness also supported how the teaching was being scaffolded to the appropriate level of the students (Diamond & Lee, 2011).

After carefully reviewing the participants' responses to the survey, the mindfulness curriculum was edited to incorporate additional YouTube videos before or during the

introduction of some of the mindfulness exercises to provide a more effective visual examples (Karadjova-Kozhuharova & Baker, 2022). Another edit from a teacher participant suggested the importance of introducing a new vocabulary word, “meditation,” prior to sharing the butterfly breathing video. The term “meditation” is likely a new word for most second-grade students. To teach this term, a short video from BrainPop (www.brainpop.com) was added. This video could also be extended to a writing activity in the students’ journals. Finally, the last adjustment from a teacher participant was to eliminate the use of actual straws from the straw breathing activity. Oftentimes, second-grade students become easily distracted and the straws could have become more of a toy than a manipulative.

Practitioner Recommendations

The use of mindfulness in the classroom, as well as during remote instruction is extremely beneficial to students of all ages. The stressors of today’s world were felt by students in this study and the teacher had seen first-hand how much of a positive difference mindfulness-based interventions made on the class. A piece of advice to educators is to infuse mindfulness in their classrooms in an organic manner, specifically when they feel their students would benefit from a calming activity. The incorporation of mindfulness can start out simple, such as conducting a guided body scan where students simply listen and become aware of their bodies and feelings. Then, teachers can add on to this type of activity and slowly incorporate yoga sessions and specific breathing techniques into their class routines. Once the mindfulness strategies have been introduced by the classroom teachers, elective teachers could also incorporate them. Students should begin to anticipate mindfulness-based interventions as a part of their daily routine. Once students become used to these types of activities, they should be able to use strategies on their own when they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious.

Conclusion

The study of mindfulness in the classroom has been truly eye-opening and the proposed benefits leave such a positive impact on school-aged children. Stressors and anxieties in children continue to rise; therefore, teachers must have plans in place to assist our students with these feelings. Based on this study, the second-grade students would benefit and need to be exposed to mindfulness-based interventions as a part of their daily curriculum which could transfer to better mental health throughout their lives (Felver et al, 2016). If educators can incorporate mindfulness in the classroom beginning at an early age, students may be able to develop a mindfulness “toolbox” that they will be able to refer to as they grow and live healthier lives.

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Appendix A

Mindfulness Curriculum Examples

Lesson Plan Title: Defining Mindfulness, Grade: 2

Lesson Objective(s): SWBAT - Learn the definition of mindfulness - Understand mindful practice - Downregulate the sympathetic/upregulate the parasympathetic nervous system using proven relaxation techniques	Assessments: Informal - Mindfulness Exercise: “Straw Breath” - Journal Entry - Community Circle group discussion - The Meaning of Mindfulness worksheet	
Technology Tools: - Laptop - Alexa: Yoga for Kids station		
Materials: Mindfulness Infographic <i>Freckle Juice</i> book - Alexa: Yoga for Kids station - Mindfulness Program Folders - Mindfulness Journal - Straws - Handouts/Worksheets: The Meaning of Mindfulness		
State Standards: National Health Education Standards - Pre K - 2 1.2.1. Identify that healthy behaviors affect personal health. 4.2.1. Demonstrate healthy ways to express needs, wants and feelings. 4.2.2. Demonstrate listening skills to enhance health.		
Time	Materials	Lesson Directions
8:30	-Mindfulness Infographic -“The Meaning of Mindfulness” Worksheet	Introduction: Introduce the meaning of mindfulness by sharing a Mindfulness Infographic. What does mindfulness mean to YOU? -What mindfulness looks or feels like when we’re being mindful – and what when we’re not. Define Mindfulness, fill in the blanks on the worksheet, and discuss unfamiliar words. *Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, with curiosity, openness, and acceptance; noticing how I feel (emotions), and what I sense (what I see, hear, smell, touch, taste).
8:45	-Story of <i>Freckle Juice</i> -Mindfulness Program Folder	<u>Lesson:</u> Write the name of someone you admire for being really good at something. Share who it is and what they are good at.

	-Mindfulness Journals	Emphasize the point of how they became good at it, and relate it to mindfulness as an actual ‘practice’ – something that has to be done on purpose, repeatedly, for it to get easier. Connect this idea to full group novel study, <i>Freckle Juice</i>, where the main character Andrew Marcus wants to be like his classmate, Nicky Lane. Students the “top 5” things they like most about themselves. Promote the idea that “Like with any skill, mindfulness only gets better with practice.”
9:00	-Mindfulness Journals -Straws	<u>Practice:</u> Students write up to 4 ways to practice mindfulness in their mindfulness journals. • Use this as a way to introduce some of the practices we’ll explore in this program: mindful...listening, moving, eating, breathing, communicating, awareness (of body and feelings). Introduce “Straw Breath” (4-7-8- Breath) Hand out (one) disposable paper straw to each child. Lower the lights, have students find a comfortable seat, invite a few deep inhales and exhales. Explain and demonstrate the exercise, then do it together: •Step 1 – Inhale deeply through the nose (4-count) •Step 2 – Pause (7-count) •Step3 – Exhale slowly through the straw (8-count) After three rounds of Straw Breath with the straw, we will practice another three rounds without it, focusing on a lengthened exhale.
9:15	-Alexa: Yoga for Kids station -Mindfulness Journals	<u>Check for Understanding:</u> Leave the lights lowered, and use Alexa to turn on relaxing music on Yoga for Kids station using Alexa. Ask children to follow the sound of the music to practice their “straw breath” using the 4-7-8 count independently. After a few minutes, slowly lower the music and bring the students back to their setting by slowly turning up the lights gradually. Allow students a few minutes to journal about their feelings. Students may use words, pictures, or a combination of both.
9:30		<u>Conclusion:</u> Invite students to create a community circle on the carpet. Allow students to voluntarily discuss what they learned after having participated

		in the first mindfulness session. Encourage students to share observations of their feelings and overall mood after having participated in the lesson on mindfulness.
		<u>Assessment:</u> Teacher will assess students informally during the independent “straw breath” activity. Journals will also be collected as an informal assessment.

Resources & References:

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Instructor Notes:

Mindfulness Program Folders will be given to each student during the first class session. Students will use the folders to store any mindfulness-related worksheets they are given during the program.



The Meaning of Mindfulness

What it means to ME:

What is NOT mindfulness?

Definitions of Mindfulness

Paying _____ in a particular way:

on _____, with _____,

openness, and _____.

Noticing how I _____ (emotions), and what I

_____ (what I _____, _____,

_____, _____, and _____).

Lesson Plan Title: Mindful Body Scan, Grade: 2

Lesson Objective(s): SWBAT • Understand mindful practice • Improve self-regulation through increased awareness of body, emotions, and thoughts • Downregulate the sympathetic/upregulate the parasympathetic nervous system using proven relaxation techniques	Assessments: Informal • Mindfulness Exercise: Butterfly Breathing • Mindfulness Exercise: Body Scan for Kids • Journal entry • Community Circle group discussion • Body Scan Map worksheet	
Technology Tools: • Laptop • YouTube • Alexa: Relaxing Background Music station		
Materials: • Butterfly Breathing Exercise Video • Alexa: Relaxing Background Music • Mindfulness Program Folders • Mindfulness Journal • Colored Pencils/Crayons • Handouts/Worksheets: ◦ Body Scan Map. ◦ Mindfulness Practice Log		
State Standards: National Health Education Standards - Pre-K - 2 1.2.1. Identify that healthy behaviors affect personal health. 1.2.2. Recognize that there are multiple dimensions of health. 4.2.1. Demonstrate healthy ways to express needs, wants and feelings. 4.2.2. Demonstrate listening skills to enhance health. 6.2.1. Identify a short term personal health goal and take action toward achieving the goal. 7.2.1. Demonstrate healthy practices and behaviors to maintain or improve personal health.		
Time	Materials	Lesson Directions
8:30		<u>Introduction:</u> Invite students to share if they practiced “Straw Breath” over the last week. Ask students if they had conversations about mindfulness with family members or friends.
8:45	-Laptop - Butterfly Breathing Exercise Video	<u>Lesson:</u> As a review, invite students to participate in the “Butterfly Breathing” activity. This will be a led breathwork activity, similar to “Straw Breath.”

	- Body Scan for Kids	Invite students to lay supine or side-lying in a comfortable position where they can find stillness. Give them a few breaths to adjust to this new orientation and get settled. Complete a guided Body Scan, utilizing the attached instructions.
9:00	- “Body Scan Map” Worksheet -Alexa: Relaxing Background Music station	<u>Practice:</u> After having completed the led body scan, allow students 10 minutes to complete the worksheet using colored pencils or crayons to draw shapes, lines, squiggles, dots or color to indicate what they felt during the body scan. This activity should be completed quietly. Utilize Alexa to play Relaxing Background Music station. Invite students to share their completed worksheets
9:15	-Mindfulness Journals - Alexa: Relaxing Background Music	<u>Check for Understanding:</u> Allow students a few minutes to journal about their feelings after having completed the Body Scan. Prompt students with the question, do you feel different than before you participated in the mindfulness activities? Students may use words, pictures, or a combination of both. Continue playing the music on Alexa.
9:30	Mindfulness Practice Log	<u>Conclusion:</u> Invite students to create a community circle on the carpet. Allow students to voluntarily discuss what they learned after having participated in the second mindfulness session. Encourage students to share observations of their feelings and overall mood after having participated in the lesson on mindfulness. Introduce the “Mindful Practice Log.” Students will be encouraged to track their mindfulness practices when they do them, and what they observe.
		<u>Assessment:</u> The teacher will assess students informally during the independent “Body Scan” activity. Journals will also be collected as an informal assessment.

Resources & References:

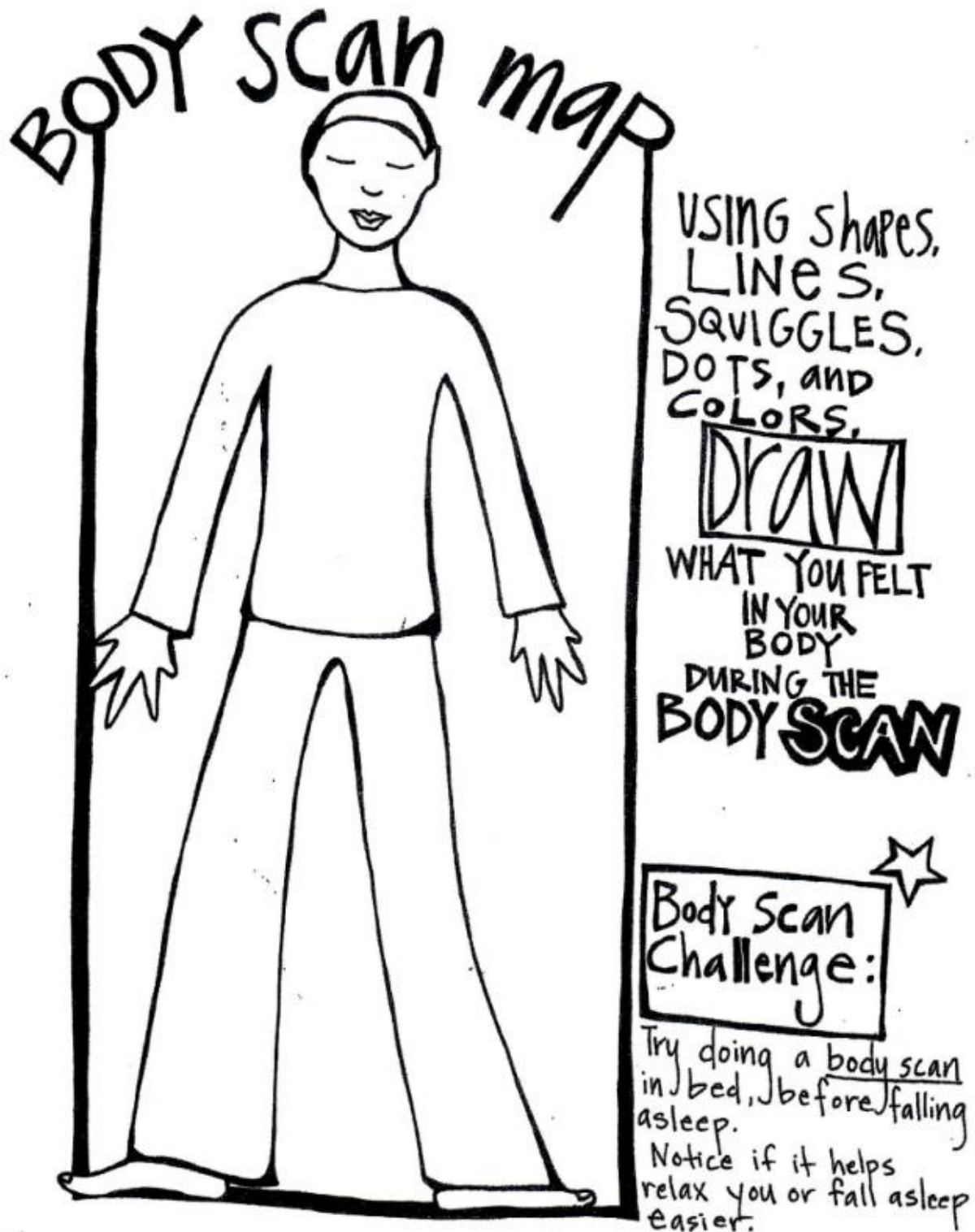
Anders, K. (2020). [Body Scan Map](#).
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLb3OV6LO_s&t=3s

MINDFUL DRAGONS



MINDFULNESS PRACTICE LOG FOR: _____

DATE AND # OF MINUTES	MINDFULNESS PRACTICE	JOURNAL/OBSERVATIONS/QUESTIONS/NOTES



Appendix B**Class Observation Form**

Date:

Class:

Lesson or Activity:

Behaviors and Strategies:	Observations and Notes:
Student comments before the mindfulness activity:	
Behavioral signs of anxiety:	
Mindfulness strategy used:	
Behaviors after the strategy:	
Student comments after the mindfulness activity:	

Appendix C

Mindfulness Curriculum Evaluation Questionnaire

1. How appropriate is the content for second grade? Please explain.
2. How significant and relevant to students' daily lives is the content? Provide evidence.
3. How does this curriculum support the health and wellbeing of the students?
4. Is mindfulness taught, modeled, and practiced where appropriate? How? Provide evidence.
5. Do the materials actively engage the students to promote their understanding of the content? How? Provide evidence.
6. Are there sufficient experiences and opportunities for discussion or written reflection so students can develop a deep understanding of mindfulness? How? Provide evidence.
7. What parts of the instruction are most beneficial and why?
8. What parts of the curriculum would you eliminate and why?
9. Does the curriculum provide clear and adequate information about why the students are being taught mindfulness? Please explain.
10. Do the lessons and strategies progress well throughout the entire unit of instruction?
11. Are the format and structure of the lessons easy for the teacher to follow? Please explain.
12. Please share any additional comments you may have in regard to the shared curriculum.