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## **An Examination of the Effects of Mindfulness Practices on Self-Regulation and Social-Emotional Skills Among Students in the Early Elementary Grades**

Erica Sederstrom

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An Examination of the Effects of Mindfulness Practices on Self-Regulation and  
Social-Emotional Skills Among Students in the Early Elementary Grades

by

Erica Sederstrom

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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To all my past and future students. May we all live healthy, happy, and balanced lives in an unbalanced world. Thank you for being my reason for teaching.

“You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”

– Jon Kabat-Zinn

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

In recent years, we have seen an increase in youth with mental health disorders. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2022, “1 in 6 U.S. children aged 2–8 years (17.4%) had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder” (Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health). The CDC indicates that the more common mental health disorders that are identified in youth include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and behavior disorders. The CDC (2022) stated:

Mental health is an important part of children’s overall health and well-being.

Mental health includes children’s mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being. It affects how children think, feel, and act. It also plays a role in how children handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. (Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health)

With these numbers at an all-time high, many schools are beginning to introduce social-emotional learning curricula into their routines as a way to educate the whole child. Social-emotional learning encompasses teaching students a variety of tools to develop self-awareness, social awareness, self-management skills, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023).

One tool that can be introduced to students is the practice of mindfulness. “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present



moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 4). Mindfulness practices can be introduced to all students and are easily accessible without needing to purchase expensive tools or curriculums, which makes it accessible to a wide range of students and educators. Bringing mindfulness practices into teaching can directly impact teachers and students, and it takes as little as five to ten minutes daily. Throughout my career in education, I have worked with students in early childhood education who are developing their sense of identity and ability to self-regulate. My experiences have led me to the research question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?*

This chapter outlines my journey as an educator, which has guided me to this research question. I share my professional experiences and rationale for why this research question is important and valid in today’s society. In my conclusion, I provide a preview of Chapter Two, where I present a literature review of previous research surrounding mindfulness in educational settings. Chapter Three outlines my Capstone Project, which focuses on the design stage of curriculum development. Finally, Chapter Four provides an elaborate self-reflection on the process of creating a mindfulness curriculum.

### **Professional Experience**

This research interested me for many reasons, most of which were inspired by my journey of becoming a licensed elementary teacher. When people think of teachers, they often expect us to only teach students about academics. This is especially true with the push for high standardized test scores. However, for students to successfully take in and process new information, they need to be in a state of calmness. For students to truly learn, teachers must teach the whole child and not just focus on academics (Iberlin &

Ruyle, 2017). When teaching the whole child, you focus on more than academic knowledge acquisition. Instead, you are focused on developing children's "creativity, imagination, compassion, self-knowledge, social skills, and emotional health" (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010, p. 6).

I have previous teaching experience in early childhood education, specifically from birth through five years of age. I have taught in schools with high hiring standards for their teachers and provided care for families that can afford high tuition rates. As a result of being an educated woman with a bachelor's degree and previous teaching experience, I was able to teach in an environment that educated me on the importance of social-emotional learning. Throughout my career, I have attended professional development courses and developed my personal teaching philosophy, which is rooted in teaching the whole child. Through professional development, I learned about mindfulness and how to implement the practice in an educational setting.

When I first began teaching in early childhood education, I was unaware of the importance of developing children's social-emotional learning. During my early stages as a teacher, teaching was heavily focused on teaching academics and writing to prepare students for entering elementary school. As I progressed in my career, new best methods were identified, which focused on developing social-emotional learning. This is when I learned the importance of teaching to the whole child. I developed an understanding of how social-emotional learning affects students' ability to manage anxiety, attend to tasks, and problem-solve independently (Meyer & Eklund, 2020; Ritter & Álvarez, 2020). I also developed an understanding of how these skills directly relate to students' ability to take in and process new academic knowledge, which can directly correlate to academic

performance later in life. There are many components to teaching social-emotional learning, and incorporating mindfulness is one aspect of this teaching.

I began implementing mindfulness practices into my early childhood education classes shortly after being introduced to the concept. I started by implementing my own practice and making small, subtle changes in our daily routine. We began our day with a guided breathing exercise, set an intention for the day, and sometimes shared our intentions with the larger group. These practices were easy to implement and took five minutes of instructional time to complete.

Once these practices were implemented, I noticed a positive shift in the attitudes and behaviors among the students in my classroom. They were able to self-regulate their emotions. Students began to see themselves as capable individuals and as a classroom community. I noticed that students independently solved problems that once required teacher guidance. Students persevered and attended to challenging tasks without giving up right away. My students were no longer afraid of taking educational risks. I noticed that the overall feeling in my classroom shifted from one of chaos at times to one of calmness and understanding. Do not get me wrong, my classrooms have always been vibrant places with students engaging in conversations. I have never been a teacher with a completely quiet classroom. However, now the conversations were focused on feelings and problem-solving rather than being right or wrong. I noticed my students could identify their feelings, seek peer or teacher support, and were not afraid to ask for help.

As I have progressed in my career from teaching in a setting focused on birth through five years of age to the world of elementary education, I have noticed a shift in where my focus is expected to be as a teacher. There is a heavy focus on academics

instead of teaching to the whole child. As I entered the elementary school setting, I noticed many students have a heightened emotional state. Dr. Becky Bailey is the founder of Conscious Discipline, and she has developed the Brain State Model. The Brain State Model examines the fight, flight, or survive response that occurs during heightened emotional states (Conscious Discipline, 2021). Students in a heightened emotional state may be nervous, sad, angry, sick, or tired. When students are in a heightened emotional state, they cannot process the information being delivered. For students to take in and process information taught at school, they need to be emotionally ready to accept and process it (Conscious Discipline, 2021). This can only occur when teachers are prepared to teach to the whole child and not focus solely on academics.

### **Professional Rationale**

As I have stated in the previous sections, many schools are beginning to implement social-emotional learning curricula in their classrooms due to more students facing increased mental health issues. However, not all states, cities, or districts have the resources to implement complete social-emotional learning curriculums. Implementing mindfulness practices is one step individual teachers can take to teach their students social-emotional learning and to self-regulate their emotions. I want to provide teachers with a resource they can use to bring mindfulness practices into their classrooms that are both cost and time-efficient. This is why, for my capstone project, I created a five-week mindfulness curriculum for teachers to use for kindergarten through second-grade students.

Each week consists of five lessons, for a total of 25 lessons. Three lessons each week are written as 15-20 minutes long, and two lessons are 5-10 minutes long. Students

will build upon the skills and techniques taught in previous lessons each week. The curriculum begins by briefly introducing students to mindfulness and various mindful breathing techniques. Then, students will be introduced to mindful movement and listening activities. In the final two weeks of the unit, students are introduced to activities that integrate mindful breathing, movement, and listening. Upon completing the five-week unit, students will have learned various techniques and activities they can utilize independently when needed throughout their day-to-day lives to support relaxation, emotional regulation, and develop focus.

I am a kindergarten teacher at a public school in a large urban city in the upper Midwest. I have been in my current role for less than a year. I developed this curriculum with my current students and their social-emotional and self-regulation needs in mind. I chose to focus on kindergarten through second-grade because it is within the scope of early childhood education, where students rapidly develop social-emotional and self-regulation skills. When teachers utilize mindfulness practices, it will benefit not only their students but also them—hopefully, instilling their love of teaching to the whole child. Hopefully, the curriculum I created will be one tool for educators to use to easily and thoughtfully implement mindfulness into their everyday classroom routines.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I laid out my why for completing this research. I seek to answer the question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* I have described why this research is important to me personally and professionally. While many states, cities, and districts are implementing social-emotional learning curriculums, not all school settings

are, thus creating a gap in access. Every teacher and student faces emotions. In today's world, emotions are an extensive discussion within the context of education, whether discussing student behavior or lower test scores. Perhaps by implementing mindfulness in lower elementary school classrooms, we can teach the whole child better and, in return, set our next generation up for success in and out of the classroom.

In Chapter Two of this paper, I define mindfulness and provide an overview of the history of mindfulness practices. Communities in the East have practiced mindfulness for many years; however, secular mindfulness for educational purposes in the West is relatively new compared to its long history. I analyze research and studies to identify the effects of mindfulness within the classroom setting and explore different mindfulness practices teachers can implement in their classrooms.

In Chapter Three, I describe the project I created to support teachers in implementing mindfulness practices in their kindergarten through second-grade classrooms. The project description includes the main components related to curriculum design, the intended setting, and the intended audience for which I developed the curriculum. I also review the development and implementation timeline in great detail. Chapter Three finishes with a discussion of potential assessments that may be used to collect data to evaluate the effectiveness of the project.

Chapter Four is the concluding chapter of my capstone. In this chapter, I elaborate on my self-reflection on the process of creating a mindfulness curriculum. I highlight significant learnings throughout this process and from the existing literature. I examine any challenges and successes of the curriculum and discuss some potential limitations to

the implementation of my project. I conclude the chapter by discussing my project's benefits to the teaching profession.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This project intends to advance our comprehension of the ways in which engaging in mindfulness practices in early elementary school affects our youth by asking the question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* This chapter provides a review of the research that has previously been conducted around the use of mindfulness practices in early elementary school settings. I have analyzed this research to assist in answering my research question.

This chapter is divided into four main sections closely related to my research question. It begins with exploring holistic well-being and defines social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and self-regulation by examining multiple definitions and identifying similarities. It goes on to explore the benefits and challenges related to mindfulness practices identified in the research, specifically focusing on mental health concerns and the ability of students to self-regulate. Next, this chapter explores the many different varieties of mindfulness practices. Finally, it examines the purpose of implantation and the steps to follow when implementing mindfulness in public schools. My objective for this chapter is to provide you, the reader, with a comprehensive understanding of the research focused on mindfulness practices in early elementary school classrooms.



## **Holistic Well-Being**

Holistic well-being is a term that educational psychologists have used to describe educating the whole child (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010). In society and education, it is essential to understand what the term educating the whole child means. As Kochhar-Bryant and Heishman (2010) stated, “Education must inspire children's creativity, imagination, compassion, self-knowledge, social skills, and emotional health” (p. 6). Education today must go beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge and provide students with the tools necessary to maximize their abilities and capabilities (Kochhar-Bryant & Heishman, 2010). This is especially true since, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), in 2022, society has seen a drastic rise in the number of children dealing with mental health concerns (Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health). With the rising number of children diagnosed with mental health concerns, it is crucial that educators in the formative years of early childhood education, birth through 3rd grade, truly understand the definitions and impacts of social-emotional learning (SEL), mindfulness, and self-regulation strategies on their young students' development. In this first section, I define SEL, mindfulness, and self-regulation and reveal how these terms are interconnected.

## ***Social Emotional Learning***

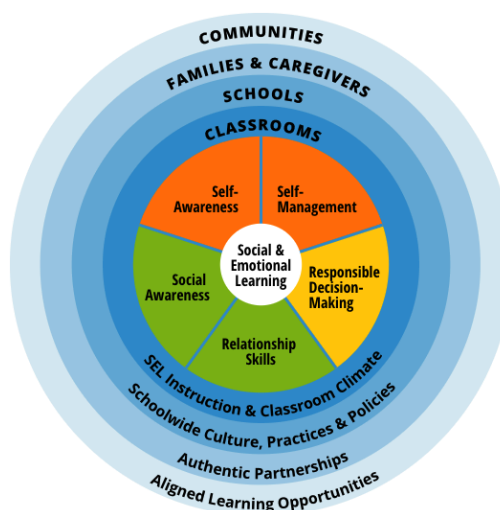
SEL is often referenced or mentioned when researching mindfulness. It is essential to understand what SEL is and the role it plays in elementary schools. SEL has been used often in education in the past 20 years (Greenberg et al., 2017). Especially since schools are places where the goal is to educate the whole child (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Greenberg et al. (2017) stated

To become the kind of citizens the founders wanted public education to create, children need more than the ability to read, write, and do arithmetic. They also need skills that will help them develop personal plans, and goals, learn to cooperate with others, and deal with everyday challenges, setbacks, and disappointments. (p. 16)

SEL is defined as a way for all people, young and old, to develop and apply “knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023). The CASEL framework, known as the CASEL wheel (see Figure 1), is one of the most widely used frameworks for SEL worldwide.

**Figure 1**

*CASEL wheel: SEL framework*



This framework is organized around five main areas of competencies. These areas are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management skills, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2023). Philibert (2021) stated that after examining multiple definitions of SEL from research and from educators, simply put, SEL is “the practice of finding balance between the intrapersonal (self) and the interpersonal (social)” (p. 13).

Each of the five main areas of competencies on which the CASEL framework is organized will be described for deeper understanding. The first competency is self-awareness, which relates to how our students view themselves and relate to others. Young learners need to develop a growth mindset, be able to identify their emotions, and experience self-efficacy, which can all be developed through SEL practices (CASEL, 2023). The following competency is self-management, which allows individuals to manage emotions, have delayed gratification, and engage in stress-management strategies (CASEL, 2023). The third competency is social awareness, which allows individuals to understand different perspectives. When students develop social awareness, they can understand perspectives other than their own and develop empathy towards others (CASEL, 2023). The fourth competency is relationship skills, which allows individuals to develop and sustain healthy relationships with various people. When individuals develop relationship skills, they can effectively communicate, work collaboratively, and problem-solve with others (CASEL, 2023). The final competency is responsible decision-making, which supports individuals in developing ways to make constructive decisions across a variety of different situations. Developing skills in responsible decision-making allows individuals to identify solutions to personal or social problems, show curiosity, and be open-minded (CASEL, 2023). While these five main competencies can be taught to individuals at any age, the earlier individuals develop these skills, the more they become a part of their everyday lives. While this section provided a concise overview of social-emotional learning, an in-depth examination goes beyond the current scope of this project.

### ***What is Mindfulness***

Until we truly understand the meaning of mindfulness, we cannot determine the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills. Mindfulness is one tool used in social-emotional learning (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018; Schussler et al., 2023). While many definitions of mindfulness exist throughout the literature, many similarities have been identified. Most of the literature related to mindfulness practices referenced the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Clinic in 1979. Kabat-Zinn (2005) defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). The act of practicing mindfulness allows individuals to take control of their emotional state and be present in a non-judgmental way (Fung et al., 2018; Kabat-Zinn, J. 2005; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018; Wheeler et al., 2017; Wrathall, 2021). Mindfulness allows individuals to use the tools they have learned to slow down and be aware of their emotional state (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Jones and Lee (2022) defined mindfulness as “an active psychological and behavioral approach to attend to and respond to the environment and adopt a healthy engagement with emotions” (p. 2087).

After analyzing and cross-referencing the various definitions of mindfulness, a pattern of identifiers emerged. In the simplest form, mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to your current emotional state in a particular moment of time, free of judgment.

### ***What is Self-Regulation***

SEL and mindfulness both provide strategies that promote self-regulation. Self-regulation is one's ability to be consciously aware of and in control of their

emotional, behavioral, and cognitive states (Gagne et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2023). Savina (2020) stated, “Self-regulation is essential for learning as it allows students to attend to important information, remember instructions, stay on task, and process necessary information” (p. 494). Students' ability to self-regulate is essential when considering the amount of information and directions students are expected to process and retain throughout a school day. Self-regulation is a term that has several areas of regulation that fall within the parameters. These significant regulation areas include cognitive, emotional, learning, behavior, following instructions, and social. Each domain has several subdomains. For example, under the domain of cognitive regulation, there are the subdomains of inhibition control, attention, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and meta-cognition (Savina, 2020; Timmons et al., 2023).

It is also essential for educators to be mindful of the classroom environment and how that plays into students' abilities to self-regulate (Savina, 2020). When thinking about the classroom environment, educators need to be aware of classroom management, establish classroom routines, develop rules and expectations together, and have emotional support in place for students (Savina, 2020). Students will develop self-regulation skills when the classroom environment is seen as important as the instruction. When self-regulation is promoted in the classroom, it “helps to increase learning time and decrease time spent on managing students’ problem behaviors” (Savina, 2020, p. 496).

After reviewing the research, it is clear that, while different, SEL, mindfulness, and self-regulation have many similarities. SEL, mindfulness, and self-regulation are all about individuals learning how to attend to their own needs and the needs of others in their communities. When we can see beyond ourselves, we can be positive members of

society. Life is full of unexpected stressors and challenges. When individuals develop skills in SEL, mindfulness, and self-regulation, they are more equipped to move through situations of stress, which directly impacts behaviors and academic achievement. SEL is a more extensive term that encompasses mindfulness and self-regulation practices. From the research, it has become clear that self-regulation is a vital component of SEL.

Mindfulness practices can improve both self-regulation and SEL skills in individuals. By integrating mindfulness practices into SEL, educators can leverage these interconnected concepts to support individuals' overall growth and well-being. In the next section, I examine the benefits and challenges associated with mindfulness practices, specifically those related to students' social-emotional learning and self-regulatory skills.

### **Mindfulness Benefits and Challenges**

The previous section defined SEL, mindfulness, and self-regulation and revealed how these terms are interconnected. This section goes beyond the definitions and examines the benefits and challenges associated with mindfulness practices, specifically in relation to students' social-emotional learning and self-regulatory skills. Over the past decade, there has been an increase in research emerging around the benefits of mindfulness practices and the benefits of educating the whole child. More recently, many of the studies have focused specifically on mental health concerns and the ability of students to self-regulate. This research is valuable since the CDC reported in 2022 that “1 in 6 U.S. children aged 2–8 years (17.4%) had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder” (Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health). These increasing numbers of youth with diagnosed mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders are why it is essential to look at the research to determine best practices for

supporting our youth. The research repeatedly found that students who participated in mindfulness practices improved attention, self-regulation, mental processing, cognition, academic performance, and behavior (Meyer & Eklund, 2020; Ritter & Álvarez, 2020). The benefits of mindfulness practices can be organized into various subcategories, including emotional, social, and academic. While these subcategories are separate, they directly affect one another. Mindfulness promotes neurological changes in the brain (Wheeler et al., 2017).

### ***Emotional Benefits***

Mindfulness has been shown to provide many emotional benefits to humans who engage in the practice. The practice of mindfulness encourages individuals to regulate their emotions in safe ways. Mindfulness also allows individuals to be aware of their emotional state without judging or avoiding their emotions. Everyone in life faces stress. Stress is a regular part of life, and youth today face more stress than previous generations. These everyday stressors may result from school pressure, home life, and navigating friendships (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Students should not avoid feelings of stress, anxiety, anger, or sadness, as those are normal feelings. Instead, the goal is for individuals to utilize strategies for managing emotions when they become overwhelming (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Educators in New Zealand have reported that “many children are coming to school without any coping techniques or resilience. Mindfulness may help to address these needs” (Kenwright et al., 2021, p. 743)

When students participate in mindfulness practices, the research reveals that students have fewer perceived stressors and feel confident in managing everyday stressors positively (Devcich et al., 2017; Fuchs et al., 2017; Fung et al., 2018; Jones &

Lee, 2022; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018). Participants of mindfulness practices within school settings have reported decreased levels of anger, aggression, and anxiety (Fuchs et al., 2017; Fung et al., 2018; Jones & Lee, 2022; Van De Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012). Students participating in mindfulness practices develop skills for emotional control, increasing attention, and reducing stress (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Black and Fernando (2014) studied the before and after classroom behaviors of 409 kindergarteners through sixth-grade students who participated in a five-week mindfulness-based curriculum. Students participated in 15-minute sessions running three times a week for five weeks. The results indicate that participants improved positively in the four measured areas: attention, self-control, participation, and respect.

Recent research indicates that utilizing mindfulness practices with adults positively impacts depression, anxiety disorders, and treatments for chronic pain. The practice of mindfulness has also been studied in the area of neuroscience. It has been shown to improve cognitive control positively, which is valuable in the areas of attention and self-regulation (Lawlor, 2016). While this research focuses on how mindfulness impacts adults, the findings can be utilized to support mindfulness practices in K-12 settings (Lawlor, 2016). The research presented in this section is valuable as it highlights numerous emotional benefits of mindfulness practices for youth. The focus is not to be void of emotion but to have tools to support acknowledging and moving through emotions in ways that support the individual.

### ***Social Benefits***

While mindfulness practices offer significant emotional benefits, their positive impacts extend beyond the realm of emotions. Interpersonal relationships are another



critical area when examining the effects of mindfulness practices. If educators are to prepare students for life beyond the classroom and to be positive members of society, then students need to develop interpersonal skills. Elementary school is a time when children learn how to engage in a community beyond that of their family and neighborhood. They learn to develop and sustain friendships (Hosan et al., 2022). It is also a place where children learn to work collaboratively. D'Alessandro et al. (2022) reported a direct comment from a sixth-grade student who participated in mindfulness activities in their classroom.

The students perceived a direct connection between the mindfulness activities and the class arguments: 'When we started doing the mindfulness activities at break, our class like didn't fight as much as we used to. Then as soon as we stopped doing them as much, everybody started fighting over every single thing.' (pp. 2112-2114)

When students participate in mindfulness practices, they learn how to manage their emotions and increase their focus, which directly impacts their behavior and their relationships with peers, teachers, and other trusted adults (D'Alessandro et al., 2022; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Jennings, 2015). Segal et al. (2021) indicated that data collected from student self-reports stated that students felt the mindfulness practices assisted them with stress management, emotion awareness, understanding, and acceptance. Students also stated that mindfulness practices were helpful to them in dealing with events that occurred outside of school in their everyday lives. When students have improved understanding and acceptance, this positively correlates with stronger interpersonal relationships. Mindfulness has been shown to calm the mind. When students calm their

minds, they can focus on what is in their control and “cultivate healthier relationships with the people and events around them” (Armstrong, 2019, p. 48). As the research indicates, there is a direct correlation between mindfulness practices, emotional benefits, and social benefits. When students actively participate in mindfulness activities, they are more equipped to handle difficult social situations, creating more robust, healthier relationships.

### ***Academic Benefits***

Although mindfulness practices yield considerable advantages for emotional well-being and interpersonal relations, their favorable effects transcend solely psychological and social domains. Research has indicated that there are a variety of academic benefits directly linked to the practice of mindfulness. Individuals who have participated in mindfulness practices have improved their ability to focus their attention for more extended periods on challenging tasks (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Wheeler et al., 2017). When students can focus on challenging tasks for more significant periods, this positively correlates to their learning ability. A study by Ritter and Álvarez (2020) found that students who participated in mindfulness practices demonstrated increased cognitive flexibility and working memory from pretest to posttest results. Academic knowledge is acquired directly and indirectly, and when students take part in mindful movement activities, it can increase their ability to process and retain information (Rosenstreich et al., 2021). Previous research has suggested that mindfulness practices are a low-cost, beneficial approach to meeting the needs of at-risk students (Meyer & Eklund, 2020; Rosenstreich et al., 2021; Segal et al., 2021). Students in elementary school settings who have participated in school-based mindfulness practices have reported improved grades,

school engagement, and sense of belonging (Hosan et al., 2022). The research reviewed in this section explains how mindfulness practices in school-based settings can positively impact students' academic performance by increasing attention, cognitive flexibility, and working memory.

### ***Challenges of Mindfulness***

As the research has shown, mindfulness has numerous emotional, social, and academic benefits. While it is important to be aware of these benefits, reviewing the literature on the challenges associated with mindfulness in classroom settings is vital. The following sections analyze the challenges identified in the research related to student buy-in and the historical context of mindfulness practices.

**Buy-in.** Research has proven that implementing mindfulness practices in school-based settings has many benefits. There are also some limitations and challenges with mindfulness. One challenge identified in the research relates to buy-in (Schussler et al., 2023). Buy-in needs to occur with the educator, students, parents, and administrators. Educators should participate in the practice of mindfulness before implementing practices with their students. This allows the educator to be authentic and aware of their biases before guiding students (Armstrong, 2019; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Schussler et al., 2023). Educators should not view mindfulness as another task added to their to-do list but as part of their daily lessons and classroom culture (Armstrong, 2019; Philibert, 2021; Schussler et al., 2023). Older elementary and secondary students self-reported that they sometimes found the mindfulness activities implemented in their classrooms boring, uncomfortable, and pointless (D'Alessandro et al., 2022). When student engagement is low, the benefits of skill development decrease as well.

**Religious Context.** Another challenge with implementing mindfulness practices in school relates to the historical context. Mindfulness has been practiced for many centuries in Eastern cultures. Mindfulness has sacred spiritual roots in both Hinduism and Buddhism. The practice of mindfulness has been utilized as a way to reach enlightenment. The origins of mindfulness can be traced back 2500 years (Gupta, 2019; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Wheeler et al., 2017). In the West, scientific research has focused on using mindfulness “as a means to reduce stress, anxiety, and improve focus and attention” (Gupta, 2019, p.23). The focus on mindfulness practices in the West is heavily based on scientific research and has separated the practice from its cultural and religious foundation (Gupta, 2019). Educators must ensure that when implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom, the tools used in religious practices are not used in classrooms to ensure the practice stays secular. (Jennings, 2015). When describing mindful listening, Jennings (2015) mentioned:

Focusing attention on the sound of a bell or chime is a mindfulness-awareness practice commonly introduced to younger children. Using a bell from a religious tradition (such as a Tibetan bowl or cymbals used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals) may give the impression that the practice has religious significance, when the intention is purely secular. Therefore, it is recommended that educators use bells and/or chimes that are devoid of these associations. (p. 176)

Educators should be aware of the religious context in which mindfulness originated. When implementing mindfulness in their classrooms, educators must ensure that the practices are solely based on science (Jennings, 2015).

After analyzing the benefits and challenges of mindfulness practices, the research repeatedly revealed that mindfulness practices provide participants with various positive emotional, social, and academic benefits (Jones & Lee, 2022; Wrathall, 2021).

Neuroscience has taught us that an individual's brain is fully developed at age twenty-five. The prefrontal cortex is the last area of the brain to develop. Higher-order thinking, judgment, and executive functioning occur in the prefrontal cortex. Based on the development of the human brain, children need to be provided with tools such as mindfulness practices to increase their ability to slow down thought processes, increase emotional awareness, and increase their ability to make effective choices (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Individuals exposed to mindfulness practices have reported increased positive interpersonal relationships, attention, empathy, engagement, and academic achievement (Fuchs et al., 2017; Jones & Lee, 2022; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018). The research examined in this section directly informed how mindfulness practices affect students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills by reviewing mindfulness's emotional, social, and academic benefits. The research also discussed some challenges associated with implementing mindfulness in educational settings. The following section of the literature review highlights various forms of mindfulness practices.

### **Mindfulness Practices**

The previous section examined the research that directly informed how mindfulness practices affect students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills by reviewing the emotional, social, and academic benefits of mindfulness, which will help to answer the research question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* This section

explores and provides examples of the three main types of mindfulness practices in classroom settings found within the supporting literature. Mindfulness practices include breathing techniques, movement, and listening (Devcich et al., 2017; Fuchs et al., 2017; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017).

### ***Mindful Breathing***

Usually, the first type of mindfulness practice introduced to students, especially young students, is the practice of mindful breathing. Breathing seems like a simple task, especially since we take part in breathing daily. It becomes challenging for individuals to slow down and be aware of their breath instead of focusing on external factors (Greenland, 2016; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). When first introduced, mindful breathing can follow a script or be guided. Once students have learned the practice and a few breathing techniques, they can implement mindful breathing on their own whenever they need to slow down. Mindful breathing can be implemented into classroom routines in as little as two minutes and can last as long as ten minutes, depending on the practice (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Philibert, 2021). Mindful breathing is a technique that allows participants to foster stillness, calmness, and reflection, which can create conditions for self-exploration and develop self-awareness and self-management skills (Lawlor, 2016). Kabat-Zinn (2005) explained the practice of mindful breathing:

To use your breathing to nurture mindfulness, just tune in to the feeling of it...the feeling of the breath coming into your body and the feeling of the breath leaving your body. That's all. Just feeling the breath. Breathing and knowing that you're breathing. (p. 18)

Tuning in to the feelings of your breath is part of mindful breathing, and it takes time and practice.

When first introduced to mindful breathing, students often breathe quickly and hard. The cotton ball breath is a mindful breathing technique that requires students to find their just right breath. Philibert (2021) introduced the cotton ball breath as a five-minute practice. It begins with each student getting a cotton ball or small crumpled piece of paper. Students are asked to place the cotton ball in one of their hands. Students are then encouraged to blow the cotton ball from the palm of their hand to the tip of their fingers without it falling onto the table or floor. Students will continue to practice blowing slowly on their cotton balls. Throughout this practice, the teacher can remind students to slow their breath down and ask questions about finding their just right breath. After completing the practice, students should participate in a discussion about how this activity felt.

Another example of a mindful breathing technique that does not require materials is called box breathing (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Box breathing can be done sitting on the ground or in a chair. Students should be instructed to imagine a box shape or have a visual provided. Students trace an imaginary box starting in the bottom left-hand corner. As students trace up, they inhale slowly. As students trace slowly along the top, they hold their breath. As students trace down the box's right side, they exhale slowly. Then, as they move along the bottom of the box, students hold their breath. Then, they are at the beginning and can repeat. Box breathing is a mindful breathing activity that students of all ages can participate in “whenever they feel anxious or stressed” (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017, p. 23). These two examples are just a few of the many different mindful breathing

techniques available for implementation in classroom settings to provide students with opportunities to slow down, reduce stress, develop self-awareness, and increase attention.

### ***Mindful Movement***

Another form of mindfulness is mindful movement. Movement can take many forms, from yoga to mindful walking. Mindful movements can increase students' verbal and nonverbal academic achievements (Rosenstreich et al., 2021). Many times, mindful movements incorporate mindful breathing techniques, like those used in yoga (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Many mindfulness intervention programs incorporate some form of yoga into the practice (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Sibinga et al., 2016). This may look like introducing students to a few movements at a time or developing a sequence for students to follow (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Philibert, 2021).

One example of a mindful movement is mindful walking. This activity requires no specific materials and can be implemented quickly. Mindful walking brings awareness to how we move and where we walk. When individuals participate in mindful walking, it can allow them to reduce stress, induce relaxation, and develop self-control (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Mindful walking allows participants to become aware of “others’ personal space by walking mindfully, with intention, and by noticing what they are doing” (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017, p. 42).

Not all mindful movement activities need to take place in the classroom. It can be beneficial for students to participate in activities beyond the confines of a traditional classroom and connect with nature (Vella-Brodrick & Gilowska, 2022). For example, taking students on a nature walk can be beneficial. Being in nature is healing and can calm the nervous system (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Vella-Brodrick & Gilowska, 2022).



Nature walks require no materials and can be implemented in as little as 15 minutes.

Nature walks can be done in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Participants should be encouraged to be quiet during the nature walk and notice the sounds, colors, smells, and textures in nature (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). In an urban setting, encourage participants to key into signs of nature around them, such as birds, sky color, dirt, and flowers in planters (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). At the conclusion, it is essential to provide participants with some sort of discussion or debriefing of the experience. Debriefing can be done verbally or non-verbally by writing in a journal with provided prompts and questions (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017).

Mindful movements can stand alone or be incorporated with mindful breathing techniques. Either way, mindful movements can be implemented in school-based settings with minimal material and minimal time and have rewarding payoffs for participants in stress reduction and academic achievements.

### ***Mindful Listening***

Mindful listening is another form of mindfulness. It requires participants to use their sense of hearing. Mindful listening is valuable because it teaches participants to actively listen, where the listener must pay attention to what the speaker is saying in the present moment (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Philibert, 2021). Too often, when individuals listen, they are not truly focused on the speaker. They are either thinking about their response, or their minds have wandered to other topics. Participating in mindful listening activities can develop an individual's self-awareness and strengthen relationships (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Philibert, 2021).

Draw What I See (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017) is an activity that develops students' mindful listening skills. It can be implemented in 15-30 minutes and requires two images per student, paper, and drawing tools. Students are partnered up, and each student will be given an image. They should not show their image to their partner. Instead, they will take turns describing their image to their partner, who will have to draw the image being described. Students must decide who will be the talker and the listener first. Students will have a set amount of time to describe their image to their partner using simple words. For example, if describing an image of a tree, the talker might say at the bottom center of the page, draw a straight line up, and stop in the middle. Draw a parallel line to the right of the first line and continue. When time is up, the listener will share their drawing with their partner and compare it to the original image. Partners will be encouraged to brainstorm ideas on how to communicate for next time better. Then, partners will switch roles and repeat the activity. After completing the activity, students should discuss what they have learned in a group discussion (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Students should consider whether it was easier to be the talker or the listener, what worked well for them, and whether their drawing looked like the original. When working with lower elementary students, the images should be simple, like a circle, triangle, or square. As students age, the images could become more complex (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017).

Mindful listening is a valuable life skill that can be taught and modeled for students. When students develop skills in mindful listening, they become more attentive to others and develop positive relationships with peers and teachers (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Philibert, 2021). Prosocial behaviors are valuable life skills that can transcend

beyond the classroom that students can carry throughout their lives (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017).

After analyzing the main types of mindfulness practices in classroom settings, it is evident that they require participants to be actively aware of how they feel in the moment. While each type of mindfulness practice can be implemented by itself, mindfulness practices often combine breathing, movement, and listening techniques (Devcich et al., 2017; Fuchs et al., 2017). The research examined in this section provides evidence that mindfulness practices positively affect students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills. Whether participating in mindful breathing, movement, or listening, students develop skills to reduce stress, focus attention, and build prosocial habits for a lifetime (Devcich et al., 2017; Greenland, 2016; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). The following section focuses on the practicality of implementing mindfulness practices in early elementary classrooms. It is essential to address the purpose and steps for implementation.

### **Mindfulness in School Settings**

The previous section examined the research that directly informed how mindful breathing, movement, and listening practices affect students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills. After analyzing several pieces of literature directly related to mindfulness, it can be concluded that participants in mindfulness practices experience various benefits related to self-regulation and social-emotional skills. These skills range from stress reduction to developing prosocial skills. This section explores the practicality of implementing mindfulness practices in school settings while exploring the purpose and steps to implementation.

### ***Purpose***

Mindfulness practices were first introduced to adults in the West in the 1970s (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Over the years, there has been an increase in the use of mindfulness practices with youth. Research on the practice of mindfulness supports the implementation of mindfulness in elementary classrooms (D'Alessandro et al., 2022; Devcich et al., 2017; Fuchs et al., 2017; Fung et al., 2018; Jones & Lee, 2022; Lawlor, 2016; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018; Meyer & Eklund, 2020; Ritter & Álvarez, 2020; Rosenstreich et al., 2021; Sibinga et al., 2016). One study stated that schools are frequently regarded as the primary environment for young learners to acquire valuable academic and social skills (Meyer & Eklund, 2020). Mindfulness practices “are designed to serve as a preventative model to combat the onset and/or future development of mental health concerns by focusing on student competencies and problem-solving skills” (Meyer & Eklund, 2020, p. 991). Life is full of expected and unexpected events, and “the effects of mindfulness are directly related to the way the brain and body respond to external events” (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017, p. 9).

### ***Implementation***

Mindfulness practices have begun being implemented in school systems worldwide. There has been an increase in the United States over the past several years. Educators can choose to implement mindfulness practices formally or informally in their settings. Mindfulness practices can be introduced as whole-group or small-group activities.

**Educating Yourself.** As an educator, you should feel free to adjust implementation to fit your classroom and setting (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). While there is

no one-size-fits-all method for implementation, there are a few key steps (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). A crucial first step is educating yourself and participating in your own practice of mindfulness (Armstrong, 2019; Devcich et al., 2017; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). When you take up your own practice of mindfulness, it allows you to experience and understand your intended outcomes for students. It also provides you with the necessary tools to keep yourself calm throughout your day of teaching (Armstrong, 2019).

When educating yourself in mindfulness, you can do this independently by accessing information online, in magazines, through printed texts, or by registering for a course (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). MindUP and Calm Classrooms are research-based programs that provide online or face-to-face training opportunities for individuals in school settings (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017).

When starting the implementation process, it is essential to start slowly and allow the practice to feel comfortable (Armstrong, 2019; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Like many new experiences, individuals need time and repetition to feel comfortable (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). It is also essential to ensure that practices in the classroom are linked to science and not to the religious context of mindfulness (Jennings, 2015). It is crucial to connect the practice to science to ensure that the practice implemented in public school settings is secular-based. One way to ensure secular implementation is to avoid using methods, language, and materials directly connected to religion or spiritual practices (Armstrong, 2019; Jennings, 2015).

**Educating School Leaders, Parents, and Students.** The success of implementing mindfulness practices in schools directly requires educating school leaders, parents, and students. When individuals understand the benefits of mindfulness, they are

more likely to support the program and, in turn, promote buy-in (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). When in the process of educating school leaders, parents, and students, it is important to talk about why there is a need for mindfulness practices. When discussing with parents, it is also important to communicate often and openly. Provide opportunities for parents to participate in mindfulness discussions, participate in what the practice involves, and ensure the secular nature of your mindfulness practices.

Having parental support can also increase the benefits of mindfulness practices, as they may incorporate simple practices at home (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). When introducing mindfulness to students, it is crucial to keep the language simple and engage students in various simple activities (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Philibert, 2021). It is essential to let all individuals involved know they have the right to choose to participate or not (Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). Based on the research provided, typically, students may feel silly at first, but after a few lessons and activities, they begin to enjoy the benefits of mindfulness (D'Alessandro et al., 2022; Devcich et al., 2017).

As previous research suggests, mindfulness practices will look and feel different in every classroom and school setting. Mindfulness allows individuals to find the just-right fit for their setting and goals. Mindfulness practices should not feel like an add-on but should instead complement programs already being implemented in classrooms (Armstrong, 2019). Mindfulness practices can be implemented at various times of the day and last anywhere from 1 minute to 15 minutes, depending on the activity.

## Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter has been divided into four main sections that are closely related to advancing our comprehension of the ways in which engaging in mindfulness practices in early elementary school affects our youth by asking the question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* The research analyzed has provided a foundation for implementing mindfulness practices in early elementary classrooms to support students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills development (Wrathall, 2021).

This chapter began by defining social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and self-regulation by examining multiple definitions and identifying similarities. It then explored the benefits and challenges of mindfulness practices identified in the research, specifically focusing on mental health concerns and students' self-regulating abilities. Next, this chapter explored the many different varieties of mindfulness practices. Finally, it examined the purpose of implantation and the steps to follow when implementing mindfulness in public schools.

Chapter Three uses the research from this literature review to create a five-week mindfulness curriculum that educators can implement in their kindergarten through second-grade classrooms. The curriculum incorporates mindful breathing, movement, and listening activities. It includes a project description, a definition of the setting and audience, an overview of activities and assessments, and an explanation of the frameworks that informed my decisions.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The literature review in the previous chapter provided a robust understanding of the existing research surrounding the research question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* In Chapter Three, I present a detailed description of my capstone project, guided by the research analyzed in the previous chapter.

This chapter is organized into four main sections. In the first section, I provide a detailed description of the project, including the main components related to curriculum design. Next, I describe the intended setting and audience in which the curriculum is designed to benefit and be implemented. The third section details the timeline to complete this project and outlines the proposed implementation timeline. Finally, in section four, I describe the assessments I designed to collect data to evaluate the effectiveness of the project.

#### Project Description and Frameworks

My curriculum project focuses on the design step in the curriculum development process. Students learn techniques for active listening, problem-solving, and breathing techniques to soothe themselves. The activities developed in my curriculum can support students in navigating feelings of stress and anxiety and, in return, have academic benefits as well. I created a five-week mindfulness curriculum that includes mindful breathing, movement, and listening activities that can be implemented in kindergarten through second-grade classroom settings. Each week consists of five lessons, for a total



of 25 lessons. Three lessons are written as 15-20 minutes long, and two lessons are 5-10 minutes long. Students will build upon the skills and techniques taught in previous lessons each week.

The curriculum begins by briefly introducing students to the concept of mindfulness and various mindful breathing techniques. Then, students will be introduced to mindful movement and listening activities. In the final two weeks of the unit, students are introduced to activities that integrate mindful breathing, movement, and listening. Upon completing the five-week unit, students have learned various techniques and activities they can utilize independently when needed throughout their day-to-day lives to support relaxation, emotional regulation, and develop focus. For students to benefit the most from the curriculum, it should be implemented in the fall shortly after the start of the school year. During the first six weeks of school, it is essential to take time to establish classroom norms and expectations and develop community. Often, at the start of a school year, emotions are high, and it can be a time of high stress and anxiety. The curriculum I developed can be a valuable teaching tool to assist students and teachers in developing supportive relationships.

The Understanding by Design Framework is the first framework that guides the curriculum design stage (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The Understanding by Design Framework utilizes a backward planning process. In this process, you begin designing a unit by determining what your final outcome or learning goals are for your students and what evidence students will present to demonstrate learning occurred (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Then, you work backward from there. There are three main stages to the Understanding by Design Framework (see Appendix A). Stage one involves identifying

your designed learning goal. In stage two, you will determine how your students will demonstrate evidence of learning and meeting those goals. Finally, stage three is where you plan the learning experiences that your students will engage in (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Wiggins and McTighe (2011) developed a template for teachers to use to assist in the backward planning process (see Appendix B). This template is meant to be used as a guide to support teachers in planning and can be used when developing their lesson plans.

Another source that supports my curriculum comes from Caral Tanitllo Philibert (2021). Philibert (2021) is the author of *Everyday SEL in Elementary School: Integrating Social Emotional Learning and Mindfulness into Your Classroom*. The work from Philibert (2021) has directly impacted the development of my curriculum as I incorporated specific activities from *Everyday SEL in Elementary School: Integrating Social Emotional Learning and Mindfulness into Your Classroom* into my lessons.

A third source that has influenced my project is the text *Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom* by Jeanie M. Iberlin and Mike Ruyle (2017). This text provides extensive research on the topic of mindfulness and an extensive curriculum model to use as a guide for implementing mindfulness programs. I utilized this work to inform my work in curriculum development, parent resources, and assessment. I also incorporated specific activities into my lessons.

I created a five-week curriculum based on the evidence provided in the research from my literature review. From the research, I concluded that participants of mindfulness practices experience the most significant increase in social-emotional learning and self-regulation skills within the first five weeks of practice. As participation continued beyond five weeks, researchers discovered that the impact remained positive,

but the level of growth was minimal compared to the first five weeks (Black & Fernando, 2014). This curriculum is influenced by several researchers and studies that support implementing mindfulness practices in classroom settings.

### **Intended Setting and Audience**

For this project, the intended setting for implementation is a general education kindergarten through second-grade classroom in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The lessons are designed to be implemented by the general education classroom teacher and performed as large group learning activities. I plan to implement these lessons in my classroom and share them professionally with other educators I am connected with. These lessons could be stand-alone lessons or implemented alongside an existing social-emotional learning curriculum.

The target audience for my capstone project is general education teachers of elementary students in the early primary grades of kindergarten through second-grade. I work in a school setting in a large urban city in the upper Midwest. While my current school is situated within a large urban city, the demographics of the school are not very diverse. According to the Minnesota Report Card (2024), the student population comprises 323 students, with 78.6% identifying as White, 2.5% identifying as English Learners, and 14.6% qualifying for free/reduced lunch.

While these numbers provide an important snapshot into the makeup of my school, they do not tell the whole story of my students' struggles. While it is true that many of my school's students are not economically disadvantaged, that does not mean they are not facing social-emotional and self-regulation struggles. This curriculum was developed with my current students and their social-emotional and self-regulation needs

in mind. I chose to focus on kindergarten through second-grade because it is within the scope of early childhood education, where students rapidly develop social-emotional and self-regulation skills. The students are the main focus of this curriculum, as the goal is to provide students with skills to assist them in developing self-regulation and social-emotional learning skills they can utilize for the rest of their lives.

### **Timeline**

When considering the timeline for developing and implementing this project, it is vital to start from the beginning. I started researching and brainstorming ideas for a potential project in January 2024. The next step involved researching the topic and educating myself on the existing research. I then identified the learning goals and national standards related to mindfulness that I wanted my students to focus on. From there, I designed the curriculum and developed the lessons, assessments, and supplemental materials needed to support its implementation. The project was completed in August 2024 and is ready for implementation in the 2024-2025 school year.

When considering the implementation process, For optimal results, it is recommended that educators start implementing the curriculum at the beginning of the school year, when the primary focus is building relationships and community and developing routines. This early start will allow students to benefit from and apply the learned skills throughout the remainder of the year. Educators should aim to teach one lesson daily, following the five-week guide. Each lesson has been designed to be taught whole group. After completing the five-week curriculum, educators should continue to incorporate and practice the skills learned throughout the remainder of the school year.

If educators have not previously participated in mindfulness practices, it is recommended that they complete the five-week mindfulness curriculum independently before beginning to teach the lessons to students. While I envision the curriculum to be implemented near the beginning of the year, ultimately, it could be implemented at any point during the school year.

### **Assessment**

It is crucial to evaluate the curriculum's effectiveness in assisting students with developing skills they can use daily to support relaxation, emotional regulation, and focus. I have created three different assessments, all of which should be completed before the start of the unit and again after the five-week unit is completed. The behavior assessment (see Appendix C) is intended for the teacher to complete. The teacher records the behaviors observed in each student, allowing the teacher to identify any observable changes in student behavior over the course of the five weeks.

Students should complete the mindfulness strategy assessment (see Appendix D) and feelings assessment (see Appendix E). Both the mindfulness strategy and feelings assessment should be administered once before starting the mindfulness curriculum and again after the five-week unit is completed. It is best to administer these assessments at different times. For younger students, it is recommended that the teacher reads the strategies and feeling statements for students. With the mindfulness strategy assessment, students identify what strategies they use to help them calm their emotions, support relaxation, and develop focus. For the feelings assessment, students will read or be read eight statements. They should color the image to represent best how the statement relates to them.

In addition to the provided pre-/post-assessments, students have multiple opportunities to engage in reflective discussions and written responses throughout the unit. Collecting pre/post-assessment data from teachers and students allows for a full evaluation of the effectiveness of the project created. The more data collected, the more comprehensive the results will be.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a context to explore the details of my capstone project. My purpose for creating this mindfulness curriculum for general education classrooms in kindergarten through second-grade settings is to provide teachers with engaging, low-preparation, and high-reward lessons focused on positively supporting the development of students' social-emotional and self-regulation skills through mindfulness practices. This chapter is divided into four main sections that outline my project. The chapter began by providing a detailed project description. Next, the audience and setting have been identified. It then thoroughly explained the timeline for completing the project through implementation. Finally, I provided assessment details for data collection.

Chapter Four provides an elaborate self-reflection on the process of creating a mindfulness curriculum. I highlight some of my significant learning throughout this process and from the existing literature. I examine any challenges and successes of the curriculum that has been developed and discuss some potential limitations to the implementation of my project. I conclude the chapter by discussing my project's benefits to the teaching profession.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

This research project was developed to answer the question: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* Both my capstone paper and project have centered around answering this question. Chapter Four synthesizes the insights gained during my research process and project development. This chapter is divided into five main sections. I begin by highlighting the major learnings I experienced as a writer, researcher, and learner throughout this process. Next, I revisit chapter two's literature and discuss what research was most valuable throughout my capstone project. Then, I discuss the possible implications and potential limitations of my project's implementation. This chapter concludes with an in-depth examination of possible future research and my project's benefits to the teaching profession.

#### Major Learning

Throughout this process, I have experienced many opportunities to develop as a writer, researcher, and learner. I was challenged to develop a research question, learn about my research topic, and design a project that would benefit my students and the teaching profession. I learned it is crucial to be thorough when researching and include all possible voices in the conversation. It is essential to include both sides of the research. I was continually pushed to deepen my knowledge and skills related to academic writing. Throughout my academic career, I have written numerous papers. However, the literature

review section consistently proved to be the most challenging, requiring me to set aside my personal opinions and concentrate solely on existing research.

I also learned that developing a research question that ignites curiosity is crucial. Your enthusiasm for the subject will sustain you through challenging periods, providing motivation when energy dwindles. Throughout this process, I discovered the importance of dedicating daily attention to my project and following a structured outline to support my goals. This approach kept information and ideas fresh in my mind, helping me stay focused and on task. While having an outline is essential, I learned that flexibility within that outline is just as important. When it comes to curriculum development, I learned the importance of backward planning and allowing your learning goals to guide you through the development of learning activities.

Perhaps most significantly, I came to understand the value of showing myself compassion and patience throughout the journey. While these insights were gained throughout the development of my capstone paper and project, they extend far beyond academic work. They are valuable life lessons I can apply directly to my teaching practice. I intend to keep these life lessons at the forefront of my mind as I guide and instruct my students, enhancing both my effectiveness as an educator and my students' learning experiences.

Despite my prior experience with mindfulness in early childhood education, this project has deepened my understanding of the topic. I now recognize how beneficial mindfulness can be for everyone's social-emotional learning and self-regulation skills. The benefits provided extend beyond what I initially understood and have experienced. I learned that when students engage in mindfulness practices, they develop skills to assist



them in managing heightened emotions, persevere on challenging tasks, and problem-solve independently. I also developed an understanding of how these skills directly relate to students' ability to take in and process new academic knowledge, which can directly correlate to academic performance later in life. I have a deeper appreciation for the historical context of mindfulness and how to ensure the secular implementation of mindfulness practices in public educational settings. I learned about the importance of the origins of mindfulness and ways to ensure my practice and approach do not disrespect its historical significance.

### **Revisiting the Literature**

Throughout this process, I gained valuable insights about myself as a writer, researcher, and learner, as well as a deeper understanding of how mindfulness relates to my research question. While all the literature I reviewed was useful, the sections that proved to be the most valuable to my capstone were Mindfulness Benefits and Challenges and Mindfulness Practices. These two sections guided and grounded my work while designing my capstone project.

The research repeatedly found that students who participated in mindfulness practices improved attention, self-regulation, mental processing, cognition, academic performance, and behavior (Meyer & Eklund, 2020; Ritter & Álvarez, 2020). Kenwright et al. (2021) reported that “many children are coming to school without any coping techniques or resilience. Mindfulness may help to address these needs” (p. 743). The research from Kenwright et al. (2021) influenced the development of the behavior assessment tool for teachers, which helps educators record observable student behaviors. This project aimed to create a curriculum that equips teachers with resources to foster

coping techniques and resilience in their students while developing their social-emotional and self-regulation skills. Participants of mindfulness practices within school settings have reported decreased levels of anger, aggression, and anxiety (Fuchs et al., 2017; Fung et al., 2018; Jones & Lee, 2022; Van De Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012). When students participate in mindfulness practices, they learn how to manage their emotions and increase their focus, which directly impacts their behavior and their relationships with peers, teachers, and other trusted adults (D'Alessandro et al., 2022; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017; Jennings, 2015). This research was crucial for my project as it accentuates mindfulness's positive impact on students' social-emotional and self-regulation skills.

While reviewing existing research, I identified three main categories of mindfulness practices: breathing techniques, movement, and listening (Devcich et al., 2017; Fuchs et al., 2017; Iberlin & Ruyle, 2017). These three core areas formed the foundation for the overall structure of my curriculum. Activity suggestions found throughout the research were directly implemented throughout the five-week curriculum.

I created a five-week curriculum based on the evidence from existing research. From the research, I concluded that participants of mindfulness practices experience the most significant increase in social-emotional learning and self-regulation skills within the first five weeks of practice. As participation continued beyond five weeks, researchers discovered that the impact remained positive, but the level of growth was minimal compared to the first five weeks (Black & Fernando, 2014).

### **Implications**

There are certainly some implications that come along with creating my capstone project. I designed a mindfulness curriculum called Mindful Children, which is free for

educators to use in their general education kindergarten through second-grade classrooms. The curriculum includes lesson plans, writing, discussion prompts, a parent letter, and assessments to assist teachers in guiding their students through intentional, mindful activities to develop their social-emotional and self-regulation skills. I designed the curriculum for kindergarten through second-grade students because they are within the scope of early childhood education, where students rapidly develop social-emotional and self-regulation skills.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), in 2022, society has seen a drastic rise in the number of children dealing with mental health concerns (Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health). As a result of these rising numbers, schools have started implementing social-emotional learning curriculums into their routines to educate the whole child. However, while many schools have adopted social-emotional curriculums, many have not provided the necessary time allocations into their school day for proper implementation. As a result of these limited time constraints, curriculums only partially get implemented, or teachers overlook them altogether because it feels overwhelming.

The mindfulness curriculum I designed allows teachers to implement one aspect of a social-emotional learning curriculum to assist students in developing their social-emotional learning and self-regulation skills. Teachers could individually choose to begin implementing the Mindful Children curriculum during their morning meeting time or any other time within their day. The lessons have been designed to require little to no technology and require little preparation from teachers. The longest lessons are 20 minutes long and can be taught indoors or outdoors. This allows individual teachers to

implement mindfulness, an essential aspect of social-emotional learning, without feeling overwhelmed or burdened by trying to implement an entirely new, complete social-emotional learning curriculum.

As more individual teachers begin to implement mindfulness curriculums into their classrooms and the benefits are documented, administrators could have the opportunity to implement something school- or district-wide. It is more important to offer teachers curriculums that are practical to their situations rather than something that will be purchased but never implemented.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this project is that it was written for kindergarten through second-grade students. However, many lessons would work for older students if minor modifications were made. Another limitation is that the Mindful Children curriculum requires individuals to train themselves in mindfulness by engaging in their own practices before implementing mindfulness in their classrooms. I have not developed any professional development training to support this curriculum. However, teachers can engage in their own practice of mindfulness by going through the written curriculum independently. This curriculum provides users with many different resources but only includes some things. While the five-week Mindful Children curriculum is a great starting point for teachers, they should be encouraged to continue their education on mindfulness. One way for teachers to continue their education or learn of additional activities would be to review the resources I used throughout the development of this curriculum.

### **Future Research and Benefits to the Profession**

This project could be a starting point for future research. One way would be for researchers to implement the curriculum across multiple classrooms and schools with kindergarten through second-grade students and collect and document data. The data collected could inform future curriculum development or support district-wide initiatives to adopt a mindfulness curriculum. Another way to extend this project would be to adapt it for third through sixth-grade students since the original curriculum was written for kindergarten through second-grade students. Also, it would be interesting to compare data from students who began mindfulness practices in kindergarten and continued throughout their elementary experience to those who began mindfulness practices later in their elementary journey. It would be valuable to compare the data and see if there is a positive correlation between students' self-regulation skills and the implementation time. A potential research question could be, "To what extent does early introduction of mindfulness practices in elementary school affect the development of self-regulation skills compared to later introduction?"

This project provides benefits to the profession. One way is that it provides teachers with a low prep, high rewards mindfulness curriculum to implement in their classrooms with minimal time commitments. The lessons are designed to guide the teacher step by step, allowing for easy implementation. The curriculum can be used as a starting point for teachers interested in practicing mindfulness in educational settings; however, it is strongly advised that teachers further their education beyond the five-week unit. One way would be to utilize the references used to develop the curriculum. Another benefit is that the curriculum provides students and teachers opportunities to learn

different techniques and tools they can use in the classroom and in their everyday lives to assist with managing and handling various emotions, including stress, worry, excitement, and anger.

## **Conclusion**

As I have traveled through this journey of developing my capstone paper and project, I have expanded my knowledge of mindfulness. I have also learned valuable academic research and writing skills, which I can carry throughout my career. Each step of this journey brought me closer to answering the guiding question of my research: *What are the effects of mindfulness practices on students' self-regulation and social-emotional skills in early elementary grades?* This chapter has allowed me to reflect on my learning throughout this process. I have revisited and discussed the most influential literature from chapter two that helped guide and shape my project. Additionally, I outlined some implications and limitations of the mindfulness curriculum I designed. Finally, I discuss potential future research that could stem from this project and highlight its contributions to the field. I look forward to continuing my research on the benefits of mindfulness through the process of implementing the Mindful Children curriculum in my own professional practices. I will continue seeking ways to improve balance in the lives of my students in an unbalanced world.

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## **APPENDIX A**

A brief summary of the three stages of Understanding by Design Framework

### Stage 1—Identify Desired Results

- What long-term transfer goals are targeted?
- What meanings should students make to arrive at important understandings?
- What essential questions will students keep considering?
- What knowledge and skill will students acquire?
- What established goals/standards are targeted?

### Stage 2—Determine Acceptable Evidence

- What performances and products will reveal evidence of meaning-making and transfer?
- By what criteria will performance be assessed, in light of Stage 1 desired results?
- What additional evidence will be collected for all Stage 1 desired results?
- Are the assessments aligned to all Stage 1 elements?

### Stage 3—Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction Accordingly

- What activities, experiences, and lessons will lead to achievement of the desired results and success at the assessments?
- How will the learning plan help students achieve transfer, and meaning and acquisition, with increasing independence?
- How will progress be monitored?
- How will the unit be sequenced and differentiated to optimize achievement for all learners?
- Are the learning events in Stage 3 aligned with Stage 1 goals and Stage 2 assessments?

## **APPENDIX B**

### Template for Understanding by Design Framework

Stage 1—Desired Results		
<b>Established Goals</b>  What content standards and program- or mission-related goal(s) will this unit address?  What habits of mind and cross-disciplinary goal(s)—for example, 21st century skills, core competencies—will this unit address?	<b>Transfer</b>	
	<i>Students will be able to independently use their learning to ...</i>  What kinds of long-term independent accomplishments are desired?	
	<b>Meaning</b>	
	<b>UNDERSTANDINGS</b> <i>Students will understand that ...</i>  What specifically do you want students to understand? What inferences should they make?	<b>ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS</b> <i>Students will keep considering ...</i>  What thought-provoking questions will foster inquiry, meaning-making, and transfer?
	<b>Acquisition</b>	
	<i>Students will know ...</i>  What facts and basic concepts should students know and be able to recall?	<i>Students will be skilled at ...</i>  What discrete skills and processes should students be able to use?

Stage 2—Evidence		
<b>Code</b>	<b>Evaluative Criteria</b>	
Are all desired results being appropriately assessed?	What criteria will be used in each assessment to evaluate attainment of the desired results?  Regardless of the format of the assessment, what qualities are most important?	<b>PERFORMANCE TASK(S):</b> <i>Students will show that they really understand by evidence of ...</i>  How will students demonstrate their understanding (meaning-making and transfer) through complex performance?  <hr/> <b>OTHER EVIDENCE:</b> <i>Students will show they have achieved Stage 1 goals by ...</i>  What other evidence will you collect to determine whether Stage 1 goals were achieved?
Stage 3—Learning Plan		
<b>Code</b>	What pre-assessments will you use to check student's prior knowledge, skill levels, and potential misconceptions?  <b>Learning Events</b> <i>Student success at transfer, meaning, and acquisition depends upon ...</i>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are all three types of goals (acquisition, meaning, and transfer) addressed in the learning plan?</li> <li>Does the learning plan reflect principles of learning and best practices?</li> <li>Is there tight alignment with Stages 1 and 2?</li> <li>Is the plan likely to be engaging and effective for all students?</li> </ul>	<b>Pre-Assessment</b>  <b>Progress Monitoring</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will you monitor students' progress toward acquisition, meaning, and transfer, during lesson events?</li> <li>What are potential rough spots and student misunderstandings?</li> <li>How will students get the feedback they need?</li> </ul>



## **APPENDIX C**

### Behavior Assessment

### Behavior Assessment

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place an "X" in the column if you observe the stated behavior from the student.

[illegible]

**APPENDIX D**

## Mindfulness Strategy Assessment

### Mindfulness Strategy Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place an "X" in the column if you use this strategy to help you calm your emotions, support relaxation, and develop focus.

Strategy Used:	Place an "X" in this column if you use this strategy
Take deep breaths	
Focus on your movements	
Take a nature walk or walks in general	
Lay down and do nothing	
Do a yoga pose or multiple poses	
Body scan	

**Do you have another strategy? If so, please tell me about it.**

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**APPENDIX E**

## Feelings Assessment




### Feelings Assessment






















Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Color in the image that best represents how the statement relates to you.

Key:

		
<b>Thumb up:</b> This statement is true most of the time.	<b>Thumb sideways:</b> This statement is true sometimes, but not always.	<b>Thumb down:</b> This statement is false (not true) most of the time.

1. I get angry easily.	  
2. I follow directions.	  
3. I worry a lot.	  
4. I feel happy most of the time.	  
5. I am easily distracted.	  
6. I enjoy being by myself.	  
7. When I am upset, it is difficult to calm down.	  
8. I enjoy being around people.	