

Mindful Children: Exploring the Conceptualization of  
Mindfulness Practice in Public Elementary School Settings

by:

Jasmine Christine Gaines  
B.A. CYC, Douglas College, 2015

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS  
in the School of Child and Youth Care

© Jasmine Christine Gaines, 2019  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part,  
by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

## **Supervisory Committee**

Re: Mindful Children: Exploring the Conceptualization of  
Mindfulness Practice in Public Elementary School Settings

by

Jasmine Christine Gaines  
B.A. CYC, Douglas College, 2015

## **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Jennifer White  
Primary Supervisor, School of Child and Youth Care

Dr. Daniel Scott  
Departmental Member, School of Child and Youth Care

---

## **Abstract**

### **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Jennifer White  
Primary Supervisor, School of Child and Youth Care

Dr. Daniel Scott  
Departmental Member, School of Child and Youth Care

In recent decades, the practice of mindfulness has spread from its initial Eastern philosophical and spiritual roots and has been adapted in various Western contexts of service provision in attempts to improve the physical and psychological well-being of individuals with a diverse range of conditions. Secularized versions of mindfulness are currently being utilized in elementary schools. Given the rising presence of mindfulness practices in elementary schools, it is important to learn about educators' experiences, perceptions, and beliefs regarding these practices. This study investigates how mindfulness practice is being conceptualized and taught in public elementary school settings with children. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 educators in 3 public elementary schools within the same catchment area. A thematic data analysis approach was utilized to derive central themes from the interviews. The findings contribute to qualitative understandings surrounding the benefits and limitations of current practices. As well, approaches and strategies are proposed that could inform a more comprehensive practice of mindfulness and more consistent implementation in these settings.

## Table of Contents

<b>Supervisory Committee .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Theoretical Orientation.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Thesis Organization.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>A Brief History of Mindfulness.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Mindfulness Practice in School Contexts.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Outcomes of Implementing Mindfulness Practice.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Controversies Around Mindfulness Practice.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<b>Chapter Three: Methodology .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Guiding Research Questions.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Data Collection Methods .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Thematic Data Analysis.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Including a Generic Qualitative Research Approach.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>The Analytic Lens.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Theoretical Positioning.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Establishing Research Relationships with Persons.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Trustworthiness and Rigour.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<b>Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>A Blended Approach to Teaching Mindfulness Practice.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Goals and Intentions.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Secular versus Spiritual Practice.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>A Rejection of Spiritual Connectedness.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Tensions when Implementing Mindfulness Practice.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Inconsistences and Uncertainties .....</i>	<i>47</i>
<b>Chapter Five: Implications for Future Practice and Research.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<i>Supporting and Guiding Teachers .....</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>Working with Secular Approaches to Mindfulness Practice .....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Defining Spirituality in School Contexts.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Directions for Future Research.....</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>Considerations for Child and Youth Care Practice.....</i>	<i>65</i>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<i>Appendix A: Defining Approaches Utilized by Educators .....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>Appendix C: Email Invitation Script.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Appendix D: Participant Consent Form .....</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>Appendix E: Recruitment Poster .....</i>	<i>90</i>

## Acknowledgments

My educational journey has taught me that perseverance, believing in yourself, while also being patient and giving yourself some grace when needed is the ultimate key to success. The topic of mindfulness means a lot to me, as while studying and writing about mindfulness, I have also been growing in terms of my own personal development with mindfulness practice. Mindfulness has become a part of who I am and I have found that my commitment to practising mindfulness has been truly life altering.

I want to first thank my soon-to-be husband, Dylan — you are my rock in life and my biggest supporter. You empower me and believe that I can do anything I set my mind to and this has undoubtedly contributed to many of my life successes and goals reached. Thank you to my amazing parents, my family and friends, and my colleagues for your ongoing love and support throughout my education journey, from beginning to end.

A big and heart-felt thank you to my brilliant and inspiring supervisors Dr. Jennifer White and Dr. Daniel Scott — thank you for always “meeting me where I’m at” and for supporting my process. I am privileged to have had you both in my corner. As well, a special thank you to Dr. Anne Bruce for taking interest in my research study and posing important questions to explore.

Lastly, thank you to the teachers who were all so willing to be involved in this research study. I want to thank you for sharing your experiences with me and for your dedication to supporting the growth and development of young people in public elementary school settings.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This study explores how mindfulness practice is being conceptualized and taught to children in public elementary school settings. Implications for children's learning and education are examined in light of recent approaches to mindfulness principles and practice, such as in the utilization of the MindUp resource (Hawn Foundation, 2011), now common in Western learning contexts. Mindfulness based interventions are considered effective for handling a number of different challenges perceived to be experienced by children attending public schools (Zoogman et al., 2014, as cited in Friedman, 2016). These perceived challenges include mental health challenges, difficulties in learning, and antisocial behaviour within the school context (Hornich-Lisciandro, 2013; Weissberg & Kumpfer, 2003). Mindfulness is a popular approach being utilized in public education at the present time to help students learn how to slow their thoughts, listen, communicate, focus, and become better students overall (Hornich-Lisciandro, 2013).

Understanding how educators conceptualize mindfulness is important because it provides potential for understanding the intentions behind the implementation of mindfulness practice in the public elementary school setting, how the concept of mindfulness is being thought of and utilized within this setting, and the specific outcomes that educators both anticipate and have observed due to practising mindfulness with children within a school context. This study adds to what is already known about mindfulness practice with children. It is unique in that it discusses both secular and non-secular approaches to mindfulness practice and explores the potential implications of both.

Of the variety of debates relating to mindfulness in the scholarly literature, a key one concerns the notion that there has been an appropriation of mindfulness by Western culture and

that mindfulness practice has become estranged from the traditional Buddhist model, creating a variety of implications (Bodhi, 2011; Joiner, 2007; Pyles & Adam, 2016; Van Gordon & Griffiths, 2015). Questions have also been raised about the religious dimensions of the practice and some have suggested it ought to be discontinued, arguing that time in the classroom can be better spent (Azpiri, 2016). Much of the mental health literature on mindfulness focuses on the various mental health benefits of the practice, and the majority of the education literature argues that mindfulness training teaches children to pay attention in the classroom, enhances their impulse control, and reduces teacher stress and problematic classroom behaviours (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

As well, Heckman (2007) argues that children ought to be introduced to mindfulness practice and positive psychology in their education, as schools play a major role in cultivating mental habits and social-emotional dispositions that individuals will need to realize in order to lead productive and meaningful lives. Further, educational outcomes must extend beyond academic learning to include children's social, emotional, and ethical development (Heckman, 2007).

My hope is that this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge surrounding mindfulness practice with children in public elementary schools and offers a better understanding of educators' current conceptualization of mindfulness practice in one very specific setting. By acknowledging and identifying some of the gaps that exist within public elementary school settings when it comes to implementing mindfulness practice into the curriculum, my hope is that this will spark new conversations and initiatives within public elementary schools regarding mindfulness practice and its place within these settings when teaching children, as well as help to initiate movement with regard to the development of new policy and standards.

## Theoretical Orientation

I approach this study utilizing a constructivist lens. Constructivist notions have ancient roots, extending back to ancient Buddhist teachings, which express the fluidity and *annica* [impermanence] of life (Nyanaponika, 2014). Buddhism describes human beings as constructors of their own worlds through a mixture of thoughts and fantasies. Mahoney (2003) describes the five major themes of constructivism: that humans are active agents in their worlds, that we seek to create meaning and order in our lives, that we are continually creating and changing our sense of self, that we relate to ourselves and others through stories and symbols, and that each individual's life is in a state of continuous change that is reflected in patterns and cycles of experiencing. Constructivism suggests that humans construct or create order in their lives and that problems arise most often when the ways we organize and make sense of things are inadequate to our experiencing. However, it is also believed by Mahoney (2003) that human beings possess the ability and inner strength to reorganize and balance themselves when their lives have become disorganized and imbalanced. The practice of mindfulness reflects similar perspectives, such as that each human being possesses an ability to restore balance and inner peace, as well as to access a deeper sense of self and purpose.

Mindfulness is a practice that is carried out differently depending on which individual is practising, and consequently will affect each individual differently. Each person will have his or her own experience of mindfulness and therefore a different story of their experience to share. Though mindfulness has been useful in helping individuals respond to a number of challenges, each individual practising mindfulness will approach the practice with different intentions; mindfulness practice may therefore need to be adapted depending on one's circumstances.

Moreover, as research on mindfulness continues to expand, new information will cause the ideas we have surrounding mindfulness practice and its benefits and limitations to evolve.

I bring Eastern, Buddhist understandings of mindfulness to my research, which align directly with the notions and practices of Thích Nhất Hạnh (1976/1999) and the perspectives of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003). My lens is directly influenced by my own experiences. In my experience working with children and youth within public elementary schools and various child and youth care contexts, I have noticed that medicalized approaches to anxiety, such as medicating or common therapeutic approaches utilized with children (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy), while valuable, are also limiting in some ways, in that they provide psychologized “quick fix” approaches. These approaches tend to separate mind and body, rather than focusing on more complex and interrelated issues about well-being, the meaning of life and connections, one’s place in the world, and so on. I have found that Eastern philosophies and traditions of mindfulness do not subscribe to this separation and provide a more holistic understanding of the relationships between well-being, ethics, body, mind, and spirituality.

I personally choose to practise mindfulness in a manner that aligns with Buddhist principles regarding what it takes to live a “mindful life”; I believe that mindfulness promotes resilience and enhances social and emotional competence; that mindfulness combined with empathy, kindness, and compassion supports constructive action and caring behaviour; and that the more one practises mindfulness, the more benefits one will experience in one’s daily life, work, and relationships (Shoerberlein & Sheth, 2009). I believe mindfulness can be achieved through mindful breathing, concentration, awareness of your body, and releasing tension, as described by Thích Hạnh (1976). As Kabat-Zinn (2005, as cited in Hyland, 2015) suggested, a wholesome mental state can be achieved through generosity, trustworthiness, kindness, empathy,

compassion, gratitude, joy in the good fortune of others, inclusiveness, acceptance, and so on. In Buddhism, these qualities of the mind and heart are thought to form the foundation for a moral and ethical life, a “mindful life”.

As mentioned, the way in which mindfulness is typically practised in the West often overlooks many of the original perspectives and definitions of mindfulness (Monteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015). As such, there is a chance that because of appropriation they are not fully effective in achieving what they hope to.

My theoretical orientation in regard to achieving optimal wellness and mental health is aligned with Eastern understandings of mindfulness that see mind, body, spirit, and relationships with the world as inseparable (Nhất Hạnh, 1976); they must be treated and engaged with holistically rather than separately. Furthermore, the notion of spiritual perspectives in education (London et al., 2004) aligns with my belief and understanding surrounding children’s learning needs and the role of educators. London et al. (2004) stated:

In contemporary Western culture, the word education has been reduced to a narrow focus on developing the intellect. A school consistent with a spiritual perspective would see the intellect in relationship to body, mind, and spirit. Evidence from contemporary research on the human brain and learning suggests that the mind cannot be disconnected from the body and the emotions. We cannot have a thought without involving body and feelings. Even if the emphasis is on the education of the intellect, we must consider the role of the body and emotions in learning and nurture them accordingly. (p. 36)

My academic experience and my practice in the field of Child and Youth Care also strongly inform my understanding of children, mental health, and education, and have inevitably shaped the design and process of this research study. Finally, I believe that research must be congruent with the researcher's values. Due to my own practising of mindfulness and implementation of mindfulness into my professional practice with children and youth, I approach this research with my own ideas about the value of mindfulness practice and about appropriate intervention strategies for young people.

### **Thesis Organization**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. I begin Chapter One with an introduction on the topic of conceptualizing mindfulness practice in public elementary school settings. In Chapter Two, the literature review outlines a brief history of mindfulness practice as it has made its way from the East to the West; this deepens the background and foundation of the study. Chapter Three outlines my methodology, including my research design and approach to analysis, and many of the considerations I had to be mindful of as a researcher throughout the process. Chapter Four includes my findings and discussion, focusing on teachers' approaches to teaching mindfulness practice with children, their goals and intentions of doing so, their observations regarding the benefits of teaching mindfulness practice, as well as the challenges they experience when attempting to implement mindfulness practice. Chapter Five discusses the potential implications of the findings. My hope is that this qualitative study will contribute to existing knowledge regarding mindfulness practice with children and help to inform practice and better define its place within public elementary school settings in the future.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide information on the history of mindfulness to support readers' understanding of the ways in which mindfulness has been adapted as it made its way to the West then was integrated into practice in Western service contexts. I describe how mindfulness has been conceptualized, introduce the main approaches to studying mindfulness, summarize the limits, debates, and controversies that exist within the field, and highlight current unanswered questions.

### A Brief History of Mindfulness

“Mindfulness” is an English rendering of the Pali term *sati*, which is an essential element of Buddhist practice. It originated with the meditation practices rooted in Eastern Buddhist philosophy and practice; these are now more than 2,500 years old. Historically, mindfulness practices were utilized for the purpose of promoting individual awareness. The Buddha, who lived and taught in northeast India in the 5th century BC, offered teachings concerning the principles and practices that support human beings in their quest for happiness and spiritual freedom. Bodhi (2011) explained that at the heart of these teachings lies a system of training that leads to insight and to overcoming suffering, which is why this training, and Buddhism in general, spread in to such a degree throughout Asia. In the 1960s, Eastern meditative practices became increasingly popular in the West through Western travelers studying meditation with Buddhist masters in Asia then returning home to their countries to share what they learned with others. It also became increasingly popular when Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese monk, Buddhist teacher, campaigner for world peace and justice, and now world-renowned Zen master, initiated retreats in the United States.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) also played a large role in popularizing mindfulness practice in the West with his mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program that was introduced in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Since then, mindfulness has been thought of as a therapeutic discipline and MBSR has been adopted by hundreds of medical centers, hospitals, and clinics around the world in attempt to reduce pain and stress. Beyond stress reduction in clinical settings, mindfulness has spread to psychotherapy, where it has become a tool for targeting mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive compulsive disorders (Bodhi, 2011).

Nhất Hạnh (1999) describes mindfulness as being “at the heart of the Buddha’s teachings”. Mindfulness is a practice that cultivates an open and accepting awareness of the present moment and involves bringing purposeful attention to one’s own thoughts, emotions, and bodily states (Meusse, 2011). Some mindfulness literature (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Nhất Hạnh, 1976) suggests that mindfulness is a practice that seeks to liberate individuals from reacting to particular emotions and thoughts as they become mindful observers of themselves. It does not seek to transform challenges as such but instead to start by transforming the relationships one has with one’s challenges. Mindfulness has a lot to do with how one treats oneself and how one treats others in their world; mindfulness helps one adapt Buddhist perspectives and practices into everyday life (Nhất Hạnh, 1976).

### **Mindfulness Practice in School Contexts**

Schools have long been identified as contexts that can play a vital role in fostering positive development in children (Machado & Costa, 2015). Recent empirical evidence has revealed schools to be one of the most effective settings in which to implement prevention initiatives, in

particular those that promote social and emotional learning (SEL; Machado & Costa, 2015). SEL, as defined by Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, and Merrell (2009), is the process by which individuals acquire both knowledge and skills to help navigate life's challenges. SEL programs within schools provide systematic classroom instruction where skills are taught, modeled, practised, and applied to diverse situations (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Payton et al. (2010) believes SEL enhances children's abilities to: recognize and manage their emotions, understand and appreciate others' perspectives, establish prosocial goals and problem-solve, and to use interpersonal skills to effectively and ethically manage developmentally relevant tasks (Payton et al., 2000).

Moreover, SEL programs focus on creating environments that will be able to support, reinforce, and extend this instruction so that children can then transfer and generalize what they learn in the classroom into their personal lives and home environments (Payton et al., 2000). Payton et al. (2000) stated that the main aim of SEL programs is to foster development so that students become responsible and caring towards others, while also being able to contribute positively to their communities.

Historically, schools have focused largely on implementing academic curriculum, and "the high performance demands that color the overall school environment create the risk that students come to equate their own well being with high achievement abilities" (Friedman, 2016, p. 236). With initiatives such as the Hawn Foundation's (2011) MindUp resource, some schools are expanding the focus on mindfulness as it relates to SEL and are integrating mindfulness practice into children's educational learning environments. Currently, mindfulness-based interventions are the focus of movements nationwide (e.g., MindUp). These interventions are considered to be under the umbrella of SEL and are being promoted as effective for managing a variety of

challenges experienced by young people attending public schools (Zoogman et al., 2014, as cited in Friedman, 2016).

### **Outcomes of Implementing Mindfulness Practice**

Research on mindfulness focuses largely on the effects of the practice on health outcomes (Coelho, Canter, & Ernst, 2013). Findings are encouraging, suggesting that mindfulness-based interventions are effective in improving the physical and psychological well-being of individuals with a diverse range of conditions (Baer, 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). Mindfulness practice has been introduced to a variety of target populations in Canada, from medical patients to prison inmates, by researchers who have developed an interest in the various benefits of mindfulness practice. To demonstrate the effectiveness of mindfulness on improving the physical and psychological well-being of individuals, a long-term, randomized controlled treatment study by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in 2010 (Center for Addiction and Mental Health, 2014) in Toronto concluded that mindfulness is as effective as psychopharmaceutical medications in avoiding relapse in cases of major depression. Moreover, brain-scan studies done on adults have shown that regularly practicing mindfulness brings about changes in the brain, positively affecting the regions associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress (Lunau, 2014).

Some studies of secularized contemplative practices, such as mindfulness and meditation, have focused specifically on children and youth in an attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches at those ages. Mendelson et al. (2010, as cited in Rempel, 2012, p. 204) utilized yoga, breathing exercises, and guided mindfulness practices in their study focusing on the impact of mindfulness interventions on stress in fourth grade and fifth grade students. The goal of these

interventions was to improve the participants' capacity for sustained attention and to increase their awareness of and ability to regulate their own cognitive and physiological states. The participants in the study reported a decrease in their symptoms of stress and enjoyment of the mindfulness-based practices.

Singh, Wahler, Adkins, and Myers (2003) developed a simple mindfulness-based intervention called "Meditation on the Soles of the Feet" that they have taught to children, adolescents, and young adults who are presenting with conduct disorder and mild intellectual disabilities. They showed that when their participants refocused their attention away from an anger-producing or anxiety-provoking stimulus to a neutral point (in this case the soles of the feet), they gained increased control over their behaviours (Singh et al., 2003). Singh et al. (2007) went on to suggest that in re-focusing the mind to the soles of their feet, individuals are able to anchor their mind on a neutral point and simply be in the present moment. Moreover, adolescents who utilized the Meditation on the Soles of the Feet approach reported feeling more relaxed, with an increased ability to control their behaviour, greater focus, and improved sleep.

MBSR, which was initially developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, has been adapted for use with children and adolescents and this adaptation has been proven to have some success (Saltzman & Goldin, 2008). According to Saltzman and Goldin (2008), children who participated in a MBSR intervention demonstrated improvements in their attention, self-regulation, social competence, and overall well-being. Changes made to MBSR to ensure it is age and developmentally appropriate for children have included shortening the meditation practices and having a mindful eating practice at each session (Saltzman & Goldin, 2008).

Another clinical approach that has been adapted to meet the needs of children is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT); there is now a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children (MBCT-C). The MBCT-C is a 12-week age- and development-appropriate version of MBCT that was designed to help improve children's self-management of their attention, promote decentering, enhance emotional self-regulation, and develop social-emotional resiliency (Semple & Lee, 2008; Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010). To make MBCT better suited and more appealing to children, the seated breath and body meditations are shortened and mindful movement exercises are added (Semple et al., 2010). Semple & Lee (2008) explained that it was necessary to adapt MBCT to take into account children's attentional capacity and their abstract reasoning abilities.

Greenberg and Harris (2011) highlighted that several studies have examined meditation in children and youth experiencing academic challenges, attention hyperactivity disorder, and learning disabilities. In reviews of these studies (e.g., Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008; Semple, Lee, Rosa & Miller, 2009) there were improvements in the children's and youths' outcomes in relation to their attention, anxiety, internalizing and externalizing behaviour challenges, and academic performance (Black et al., 2009; Burke, 2009). Furthermore, in regard to mindfulness practices as they fit into academic settings, Erickson (2011) outlines an evaluative study conducted at the University of British Columbia by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl and Molly Lawlor who used a randomized controlled trial conducted at three time points over the 2011 to 2012 school year with children aged 9 to 12. The teachers participating in the study were to evaluate the effectiveness of the MindUp program and how it impacted children's social and emotional competence, self-compassion, and mindful awareness. The researchers found:

- 82% of students who participated became more optimistic and thought more positively

- 81% of students learned to make themselves happy
- 87% were more accepting of others' perspectives
- 58% tried to help others more often
- 88% felt they could use at least one thing they learned in MindUp at home or at school

Another study by Flook et al. (2010) found that a mindfulness-based curriculum demonstrated an improvement in the executive functioning of the third- and fourth-grade students involved in their study. They contended that introducing mindfulness-based practices in elementary school settings may be a viable and cost-effective way to improve students' socioemotional, cognitive, and academic development.

Liehr and Diaz (2010) studied mindfulness interventions that focused on targeting depression and anxiety with children from Caribbean and Central American countries. The results of their study indicated that mindfulness-based activities decreased depressive symptoms and were enjoyed by participants. Lau and Hue (2011) also utilized a mindfulness-based intervention in their study with adolescents in Hong Kong secondary schools and reported a significant reduction in depression and a marked increase in participants' overall well-being. These two studies demonstrate similar findings and make it clear that mindfulness-based interventions are showing promise in a variety of contexts throughout the world.

The positive outcomes of mindfulness-based practices have shown that mindfulness techniques can lead to beneficial health effects. At the same time, Machado and Costa (2015) cautioned that the mechanisms and processes through which mindfulness is beneficial are not well understood and require further research. Greenberg and Harris (2011) also contended that, although mindfulness practice may help to improve children's social skills and school-related

functioning, many of the pilot studies that have been carried out that focus on the benefits of mindfulness practices with children and youth are inconclusive and point to a need for larger, better designed trials.

### **Controversies Around Mindfulness Practice**

Mindfulness training is not without concerns or controversy. Pyles and Adam (2016) suggested that there has been a cultural appropriation of mindfulness into Western contexts. Mindfulness has deep Eastern roots, and Eastern spiritual traditions have long maintained that mindfulness can improve well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In recent decades, the practice of mindfulness has spread from its initial Eastern philosophical and spiritual roots and has been adapted in various Western contexts of service provision, such as the medical system, in attempts to improve the physical and psychological well-being of individuals with a diverse range of conditions (Baer, 2003; Grossman et al., 2004). More recently, other fields, including education, have taken up mindfulness practice due to increasing interest in the use of mindfulness practices for children (Zelazo & Lyon, 2012) with the hope of decreasing anxiety; improving attention, learning (Hornich-Liscandro, 2013), and scholastic performance (Hawn Foundation, 2011); fostering intellect and positive behaviour (London et al., 2004); and increasing empathy, optimism, and compassion (Hawn Foundation, 2011). As mentioned, schools can play a major role in cultivating the mental habits and social-emotional dispositions that individuals will need in order to lead productive, meaningful, and satisfying lives in the present century (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The notion of implementing mindfulness practices into various Western contexts of service provision and education settings has become controversial, as these settings tend to implement mindfulness practices in a secular manner

(Hyland, 2015): their approaches have no spiritual or religious basis. There are also legal and social factors that contribute to shaping mindfulness approaches in public elementary school settings. For example, in 2016 a parent in Vancouver, British Columbia campaigned to have mindfulness sessions eliminated from their child's Vancouver school, stating:

I think there's components to the mindfulness program that involve Buddhist meditation and guided meditation so in that regard, legislated mindfulness is actually legislated meditation, and legislated meditation is not lawful in Canada (Azpiri, 2016).

The Vancouver School Board, along with many other school boards, has allowed the implementation of mindfulness practice in their schools, and therefore I intended to explore educators' thoughts and responses to these controversies regarding the place of mindfulness in public elementary schools.

In Canada, MindUp is a common program utilized to train educators on how to implement mindfulness practice with children in their classrooms; the Hawn Foundation (2011) claims MindUp is purely secular in nature. It offers a teaching framework and is available in a large booklet format with specific modules for educators to follow. MindUp's primary goals are to help students develop SEL skills and create positive learning environments, as well as to reduce stress and improve relationships. Eighty-one percent of children using MindUp increased their self-regulation and emotional intelligence and the program is serving nearly one million children in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Serbia, Mexico, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand. The "four strategic pillars" in MindUp include: being grounded in neuroscience, being activated by mindful awareness, being inspired by positive psychology, and being a

catalyst for SEL. The MindUp program teaches children about their brains, implements “brain breaks” (short 3-minute breaks where children are asked to quiet their minds in order to prepare their brain to learn), and encourages mindful action in the world (Hawn Foundation, 2011).

Despite the positive findings regarding the implementation of mindfulness programming such as MindUp with children, there are critiques of the approaches utilized. For example, Friedman (2016) argued that mindfulness interventions may get in the way of allowing children to express and develop their own creative production of self by implying a particular subjectivity as the most intimate form of “going within”. Other authors (Joiner, 2007; Monteiro et al., 2015) have focused largely on the implications of there being differences in orientation and understanding regarding mindfulness, claiming that mindfulness has become estranged from the traditional Buddhist model to such an extent that it can no longer be accurately described as “mindfulness”. There is little question that mindfulness can lead to health benefits; the debate is whether mindfulness, as currently conceptualized in health and education interventions, still resembles the traditional Buddhist practice of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011; Monteiro et al., 2015). It is a question of whether or not the intervention itself is a problematic cultural appropriation. Van Gordon and Griffiths (2015) stated:

Most mindfulness approaches include in their name the term ‘mindfulness-based’. On the surface, this appears to be an entirely acceptable and transparent approach because it implies that such interventions are based on mindfulness, but do not teach mindfulness in a manner that is necessarily in keeping with the Buddhist model. In other words, the term ‘mindfulness-based’ is consistent with what is arguably a common understanding amongst psychologists that these interventions

have adapted a Buddhist (and therefore spiritual) meditative technique in order to develop an attention-based psychological intervention. (p. 514)

Given the rising presence of mindfulness practice in elementary schools, and with there evidently being a variety of interpretations and beliefs regarding appropriate implementation of mindfulness practice, it is important to explore how educators are conceptualizing mindfulness practice in public elementary school settings. I hope the findings of my research offer a better understanding of the intentions behind the implementation of mindfulness practice in public elementary school settings, how the concept of mindfulness is being thought of and utilized within this specific setting, and the specific outcomes that educators have noticed due to practising mindfulness in a school context. Moreover, implications for children's learning and education can be explored in light of the research findings. In this study, I investigate how mindfulness is being conceptualized and taught in public elementary school settings with children.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

In this chapter, I describe my research methodology, which comprises a set of specific guiding research questions, the techniques I utilized for data collection, and the approaches I utilized to analyze the data.

### **Guiding Research Questions**

The following questions guided my study:

1. How is mindfulness practice being conceptualized and taught to public elementary school children?
2. What are the goals and hopes that educators have when implementing mindfulness practice with children in public elementary school settings?
3. Do educators feel that their approach(es) to teaching mindfulness practice are adequate? What might be of assistance to these educators in enriching their understanding and educational approaches?

### **Data Collection Methods**

In order to obtain rich and meaningful data that reflected the nature of my research questions (see Appendix B, Semi-Structured Interview Questions), I carried out semi-structured interviews (Berg & Lune, 2012) with six educators who have had recent experience (at least one year of experience) implementing mindfulness practice (programming such as MindUp, mindfulness based regulation strategies and techniques, etc.) in elementary school settings with children

between the ages of 5 and 12. The educators involved in the study were recruited from public elementary school settings within one particular school district. I recruited my sample after receiving approval for the research from the school district and the Human Research Ethics Board at University of Victoria, then independently exploring through personal contact with the principals which schools within the district were interested in and active in the implementation of mindfulness practice. An email invitation script (see Appendix C) to participate in the research was then sent to prospective participants.

Utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed me to keep some control of the interviews, and also allowed for flexibility in terms of the interviewee's responses. I hoped to explore the interviewee's feelings about the topic being explored, including their experiences and beliefs, and how they themselves had learned and had chosen to implement mindfulness with the students in their classrooms.

### **Thematic Data Analysis**

I carried out a thematic data analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was used to derive central themes from the interviews and discern implications for children's learning and education.

I chose to use thematic analysis as a data analysis method, as it was well suited to my methodology. It is an analytical process that was relevant to helping make sense of the information and to account for patterns. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It is a search for themes that emerge as important to the description of the topic or phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997) being studied: "A theme captures something important

about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The process involves the identification of themes through careful reading and rereading of the material (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258, as cited in Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It is a way to recognize patterns within the data and the emerging themes then become the categories for analysis. Frequently, thematic analyses will also go further and interpret various aspects of the research topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). I believe it was important for me as researcher to look beyond the themes, patterns, or categories and ask what the data are “saying” — asking what is implied and thinking about what meaning can be made of what is reported by participants during interviews — although I acknowledge that interpreting data is very much a fluid process and that there may not be a single “correct” interpretation.

When attempting to interpret various aspects of a research topic, researchers must not “subscribe to a naïve realist view of qualitative research, where the researcher can simply ‘give voice’ to their participants” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). The attempt to give voice can lead to “carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit, and deploy to border our [own] arguments” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). It is important that the theoretical framework and methods in any given study match what the researcher is hoping to learn from the study (what the researcher wants to know), that the researcher acknowledges these decisions, and recognizes them to be decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The concept of data is typically treated as being unproblematic and data are regarded as something we simply collect and analyze in order to gain answers and arrive at conclusions (Koro-Ljungberg & MacLure, 2013), though it was important to consider some of the many issues that can surface when carrying out research and when attempting to make sense of and analyze data. I had to guard against treating the data

as unproblematic, by being mindful of and questioning my own notions and thoughts and the actions I took during each step of the collection and analysis processes. This included being aware of the complex interactions that occur during an interview in the collection of the data, the way in which I was asking questions and probing, the potential desire of the interviewees to please me with their responses, and relational dynamics and personal interests, as well as my hope that the participants would affirm my concerns about the nature of mindfulness and its — for me — vital roots.

Methods for analyzing qualitative research in a systematic way are emerging, developing, and being debated (Thomas & Harden, 2005). Thematic analyses have been utilized widely in research as they are thought to be flexible and to provide theoretical freedom, and they can be utilized as a research tool to provide a rich, detailed, and complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, I have come to understand that in every method there will be trade-offs between its strengths and its limitations. There are specific factors researchers must consider when carrying out thematic analyses to analyze data; these include, but are not limited to: reflexivity and positionality, rigour, and trustworthiness — demonstrating integrity and competence within a study (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

In my analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to the six phases of carrying out thematic analyses: (a) become familiar with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review themes, (e) define and name themes, and (f) produce the report. I began by listening to the recorded audiotapes of the interviews and familiarizing myself with the discussion and content in each, which is always the first step of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). I then transcribed the data into written format and began to code the data. Coding recognizes and “sees” important moments then encodes them

before beginning the process of interpretation. A “good code” is held to be one that captures the richness of the topic or phenomenon being studied (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited in Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). After generating initial codes, I began to search for themes within the data and carefully reviewed each theme before constructing categories, which included themes and overarching patterns in the data.

Constructing categories helped to organize and order the vast amount of data from my study and it was from “these meaning-rich units that [I could] better grasp the particular features of each one, and the categories’ possible interrelationships with one another” (Saldana, 2011, p. 91). As researcher, I believe it is important to acknowledge that I had a great deal of power in my role of determining what was being coded and categorized, as these processes can silence other potentially important data. It was beneficial for me to guide the focus of my study, keeping my overarching research questions in mind and my theoretical orientation to reading the data, though I realize that this approach carried the limitation of potentially overlooking other important, silenced information that could have added value or other perspectives to the topic.

### **Including a Generic Qualitative Research Approach**

Elements of a “generic qualitative approach” (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003) were also helpful to draw from in my research process. Generic qualitative research approaches are those that

epitomize the characteristics of qualitative research but rather than focusing on culture as does ethnography, or the building of theory as does grounded theory, they simply seek to discover and understand a phenomena, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of people involved. (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 2)

Rather than focusing the study through the lens of a known methodology, they seek to do one of two things: they either combine several different methodologies or approaches, or they claim no particular methodological viewpoint at all. The focus of the study is generally on understanding an experience or event. Generic qualitative research is that which is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies (Caelli et al., 2003). This method grew out of constructivist philosophy and within this position, humans construct knowledge out of their somewhat subjective engagement with objects, experiences, or events in their world (Caelli et al., 2003). It is important to note that within this philosophical stance there is a set of guiding assumptions that shape the approach.

Vrasidas (2000) outlines that the major philosophical and epistemological assumptions in constructivism, include: “(1) There is a real world that sets boundaries to what we can experience. However, reality is local and there are multiple realities. (2) The structure of the world is created in the mind through interaction with the world and is based on interpretation. Symbols are products of culture and they are used to construct reality. (3) The mind creates symbols by perceiving and interpreting the world. (4) Human thought is imaginative and develops out of perception, sensory experiences, and social interaction. (5) Meaning is a result of an interpretive process and it depends on the knowers' experiences and understanding” (p. 7).

Throughout the process of carrying out my research, it was important for me to be aware of and transparent about the epistemological, theoretical, and contextual positions that both influenced and guided my approach to this study (Caelli et al., 2008; Carter & Little, 2007). There are also inevitable gaps to this approach; therefore, as researcher I had to consider the many issues related to theoretical positioning, methodology and method, rigour, the analytic lens,

and so on. Qualitative research efforts that are aiming for credibility must address the following four key areas: the theoretical positioning of the researcher, the congruence between methodology and methods, the strategies to establish rigour, and the analytic lens through which the data are examined (Caelli et al., 2003).

### **The Analytic Lens**

Generic qualitative research (Caelli et al., 2003) refers to the “analytic lens” as the methodologic and interpretive assumptions that researchers bring to bear on their data. It is about how the researchers engage with their data and how they are thinking about issues of “truth”, “language”, and “reality”. The analytic lens requires researchers to make explicit their underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and their implicit assumptions about what it means to be human (ontology). My epistemological and ontological beliefs should and did guide every aspect of this study. My own analytic lens includes notions from constructionism and post-modernism. I viewed educators’ responses through a post-modernist framework, which recognizes the inherently social, contextual, and constructed nature of language, with the understanding that theory can change, that experiences are individualistic, and that multiple truths exist.

### **Theoretical Positioning**

Through a commitment to self-inquiry and mindful awareness, researchers have to understand that their own position, their interests, and their values can have an effect on the research process. This includes the questions that are asked, the participants that are chosen, and the process of evaluating data (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2010). In order to maintain reflexivity, I

must locate myself within my study to show how my personal thoughts and experiences shape my research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I am a 27-year-old cisgendered, mixed race (Western European and West-African American), dark-skinned female. I grew up in a middle-class family. My parents amicably separated when I was 3, and lived in a variety of quiet communities in Manitoba before moving to Vancouver when I was 8 years old. Since I was a little girl, I have always shown interest in human behaviour, relationships, and emotions, and have possessed a deep desire to support others in need. In my professional work with young people, I have supported a number of children and youth in a variety of field-related settings, with my current work being on an inpatient adolescent psychiatric unit. I believe that integrating mindfulness practice into one's work with children and youth can effect change on a deeper, more spiritual level, as well as aid in optimal wellness and mental health.

I bring Eastern understandings of mindfulness and my own personal experiences with mindfulness practice into my research. As researcher, my opinion on this topic was not neutral. I began practising mindfulness four years ago while attempting to manage, work through, and better cope with my own anxiety and life circumstances. Since educating myself on mindfulness and committing to practising it in my everyday life, I have noticed many positive changes in myself mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I have developed greater mental clarity, self-love, and overall understanding of life and how I want to walk in the world. I have a healthier relationship with my thoughts, my emotions, and myself, as well as a healthier relationship with Mother Nature and other human beings. My anxiety has greatly subsided and I feel a deep sense of calm and clarity, despite the responsibilities and inevitable life stressors I must endure as a family member, partner, homeowner, full time professional in the helping profession, and Master's student. I have also learned to find value in moments of anxiety because mindfulness

has taught me how to develop a healthier relationship and awareness with those moments. I have become more confident, balanced, happy, and present. Mindfulness has become a way of life for me that has developed, and continues to develop, through education, devotion, continual practice, trial and error, and building self-awareness.

My study was motivated by both my personal and professional interests. As a former Educational Assistant who worked in elementary school settings and as a current Youth Care Counsellor on an inpatient adolescent psychiatric unit, many of the children I work with struggle with self-regulation, focus, depression, anxiety, sociality, and low self-esteem. As a witness to the effects that these challenges have on the lives of the children I support, I felt inspired to devote my research to exploring how mindfulness is being implemented in classroom settings with children, and understanding the effectiveness of doing so.

### **Establishing Research Relationships with Persons**

It was important for me to consider the ethics related to my research study. Understanding the importance of relationships with the persons in a study —not only relationships with “human subjects”, but also those with oneself, members of the supervisory committee, support groups, and so on — I needed to ensure I was interacting with all persons involved in the study in an ethical manner. It was important for me to be sensitive in my approach and honor the educators who participated in the study. I needed to be transparent, systematic, and explicit in the steps I took to conduct my research, and it was crucial that I go through the formal process of informed consent and that I ensure both anonymity and confidentiality for the participants involved in my study.

There are important questions I had to consider related to ethics, including:

- How will I go about obtaining and documenting informed consent from participants?
- How can I assure both confidentiality and anonymity for my participants?
- How can I assure that my research will do no harm?
- How will I ensure that my participants understand their rights to withdraw without consequence?
- How will I ensure absence of coercion?
- How will I guard against conflict of interest

### **Trustworthiness and Rigour**

To ensure my study had rigour and validity, there were a variety of factors that needed to be considered:

- I needed to carry out a thorough analysis and extensive literature review
- I needed to ensure there was transparency when coding the data
- I needed to consider my own reflexivity and positionality in my research
- I needed to be purposive in my sampling (finding educators who currently and consistently implementing and practising mindfulness with their students)

I too acknowledged that my interpretations of the data had to be rigorous; therefore I compared how I had categorized and coded the results into themes with how a colleague would have done it through a separate coding exercise (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003).

I acknowledge that the implications which surface in my findings may have a direct and immediate affect on the educators interviewed and the schools implementing mindfulness practice with children, as I asked educators questions that required them to be reflective of their

own approaches and practices, and this may potentially cause them to question or shift the approaches they utilize. I also anticipate that the findings of this study will contribute to qualitative understandings surrounding the benefits and limitations of current practices in public elementary schools and I propose approaches and strategies that could inform more comprehensive mindfulness practice within these settings and initiate changes.

## **Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter is to present my findings and analysis of how the teacher participants involved in this study understood, conceptualized, and implemented mindfulness practice into Canadian public elementary school settings with children aged 5 to 12. In this chapter, my findings have been organized by theme under the following headings: A Blended Approach to Teaching Mindfulness Practice, Goals and Intentions, Secular versus Spiritual Practice, and Tensions in Implementing Mindfulness Practice. I present the themes and subthemes followed by verbatim quotes from participants, seeking to show patterns that emerged in the interviews to support these larger themes. I did not seek to merely look for definitive answers or conclusive explanations in the analysis process; rather, I explored whether there were any tensions or questions that would be generated in the data. In order to avoid inadvertently forcing any connections in the data, I looked for commonalities and connections as well as contradictions and inconsistencies in participants' responses regarding their understandings, conceptualizations, and approaches to teaching mindfulness practice.

While analyzing the data, I focused on how the structures, norms, and dynamics that exist within the teachers' own practices and work environments have shaped the beliefs they have and the experiences they have had in implementing mindfulness practice with the children in their classrooms. I began to consider how their experiences and their responses to the questions I asked were shaped and influenced by broader political, sociocultural, and ecological contexts, as there are multiple influences on practice, thinking, and everyday life. Lastly, I discuss three questions that I was left with after analyzing the data, which will be the focus of Chapter Five, where I consider the implications of this study.

## **A Blended Approach to Teaching Mindfulness Practice**

After interviewing six public elementary school teachers in an attempt to gain a better understanding of how teachers are conceptualizing “mindfulness” and implementing mindfulness practice into a school-based context with children, it became evident that the participants’ approaches to teaching mindfulness practice were similar, as were most of their understandings and conceptualizations. This was a surprise, as I had expected varied understandings and conceptualizations among the teachers prior to carrying out the interviews due to mindfulness not having a distinct place yet within classroom settings.

In regard to the approaches utilized by teachers, all participants interviewed described utilizing what I will refer to as a “blended approach” to teaching mindfulness practice to children. All six of the participants interviewed denied relying on any single program or approach and instead described drawing from a variety of resources when they attempt to practise mindfulness with the children in their classrooms, adhering to a blended approach. Each participant named the various resources and approaches they utilized, which, all combined, included: MindUp, Zones of Regulation, the Mood Meter, the RULER Approach, The Chime, Exercise Time, Quiet Time, Deep Breathing, Visual Imagery, Conversation and Discussion, Restitution, Yoga, Mindfulness apps, TedTalks, and Friends for Life (see Appendix A for a list of the programs and a summary of their content).

The participants reported learning about or being trained in these various approaches through professional development opportunities offered within their school district (e.g., learning about the MindUp resource in a district-wide professional development workshop) and being self-taught in specific approaches; they also explained how some approaches, such as knowing when

the children may benefit from “quiet time” or having the lights turned off, are merely instinctual. As a researcher, I became curious to know why the participants involved in this study chose to draw from a number of resources, rather than limiting themselves to one. The teachers ascribed this to there being varied needs from classroom to classroom each year, as well as variations in the ways individual teachers approach mindfulness.

As part of a blended approach, Jane explained how her approach to teaching mindfulness practice will vary greatly depending on the needs of her classes each year, as well as on her needs as a teacher:

What I find is that every year you have a different class, and you have to look at the pieces from each program that’s the most helpful for your kids. So some years you pull more from MindUp, some years you pull more from Restitution, it depends where they are at. Is the concern anxiety? Is the concern problem-solving?

Mindfulness appears to be framed by Jane as a practice that is context-dependent and that provides a needs-driven, uniquely tailored solution to specific challenges that students exhibit, such as anxiety and problem-solving. Mindfulness practice being context-dependent was also something that Suzanne spoke to, as she explained that she and the other teachers in the school she works at often utilize components from multiple resources when practising mindfulness with children and that the resources they refer to tend to depend on the needs of the children they are teaching and the teachers’ preferences:

I find a lot of people like elements of each program. There isn’t one program that’s going to suit a whole classroom and a whole classroom teacher either.

Jane and Suzanne indirectly noted the autonomy they possess as teachers in being able to pull from various resources as needed, based on the needs of their classroom and their own personal resource preferences. This autonomy and discretion that teachers possess is also highlighted in Celia's statement as she explained her approach to teaching mindfulness practice with children, how her approach has developed, and the resources she refers to:

I've tried a couple of approaches ... and I actually have a combination of all of them, so with the MindUp program I kind of followed the book, you know, lesson by lesson and it was teaching children about the brain and how it operates and ... the understanding of ... regulation and how we can control our emotions and do something about them when we are aware of them. So I used the MindUp program for a little bit of time, and I still do, with other programs such as the RULER Approach, which is another one that involves the Mood Meter and how we can plot ourselves in terms of our energy and our mood ... and that is how we problem-solve ... any problems that come up. And ... this year, I am trying to use another program called the "Friends for Life" program, so I'm kind of now taking all the best parts of those three programs and using them in my practice.

The fact that Celia takes what she feels is the best part of each program then blends them in a way that creates an approach that is unique to her says a lot about how teaching includes a great deal of trial and error, experimenting, and coming up with creative approaches. I discerned a connection between Celia's unique approach and Nora's approach. Like Celia, Nora described gathering different resources and blending various pieces of mindfulness practice in with school curriculum to create a unique approach:

So much of the mindfulness that I do ties into other curriculum.... I mean, the vocabulary building is hugely part of language arts, the problem-solving is a huge part of social studies, the part about recognizing the physical reactions in your body and the emotions that you're feeling and how you can regulate yourself, that's still part of health.

Based on Jane, Suzanne, Celia, and Nora's responses, it appears these teachers have the autonomy to pick and choose what they are going to teach to children in regards to mindfulness practice and which resources they are going to refer to, as well as how they are going to blend resources together to create an approach that works for them and the children in their classroom each year. This autonomy is of interest to me as a researcher and makes me wonder about the legitimacy of the approaches utilized due to there being no mandate to teach mindfulness in a particular way, nor a provincially sanctioned mindfulness curriculum. This brings me to the following questions: What are teachers' goals and intentions for implementing mindfulness practice into their teaching? Are the approaches teachers are taking to teaching mindfulness practice grounded in any particular set of values or principles? What grounds are teachers using to justify their approaches to teaching mindfulness practice in the ways they do? Who is providing quality control, oversight, and evaluation of these practices?

### **Goals and Intentions**

Each of the participants reported utilizing a selection of the various resources and approaches outlined with the goal of practising mindfulness in their classrooms with children and with the hope that it would have the intended effects on the children and the environment. The reported goals and intentions for utilizing mindfulness practice with children varied amongst the

participants, but included integrating mindfulness into their teachings so children could internalize mindfulness and become independent in their ability to practice, promoting children's abilities to work effectively in a group and classroom environment, and fostering change in the way children interacted with one another.

Celia reported that "integration" was the goal for her when implementing mindfulness practice and teaching mindfulness practice to children by utilizing a blended approach. Integration in this context refers to the teachers' achieving a sense of holism and resisting a reductionistic approach, whereas blending denotes the ways in which the teachers weave different pieces of mindfulness together to create an approach that is unique and comfortable for them and the children they work with. Celia spoke of her desire and efforts to integrate mindfulness into all conversations and course work throughout each school day with the children. This goal can be missed by many in educational contexts due to the appropriation of mindfulness practice and the manner in which it is taught (Joiner, 2007).

My big thing with mindfulness is the idea that it's woven through, it's not isolated, and I admit I struggle with the idea of it being taught in isolation.... The trick is to recognize that it's not one subject that you box and you teach on Tuesday's, but that it's something that is woven through the curriculum and ... you comment on it and you talk to parts about it through the strands.

Celia further explained her intention of integrating mindfulness practice into various lesson topics and subjects, claiming that doing so targets children's learning needs and helps children to "internalize" mindfulness so they can utilize it as a skill to practise on their own, independently. In explaining her feeling that children need to internalize mindfulness so they can utilize it on

their own, Celia cited her perception of an increased prevalence of complex learning needs, as well as social and emotional difficulties, being seen in children at school. Celia shed light on this in her response:

That ability to internalize [mindfulness] so they can do it on their own ... that's our end goal.... There's more students coming to us with potential concerns, more students coming to us with ... learning needs, and while they benefit greatly from [mindfulness], that ability to internalize it so they can do it on their own ... that's our end goal. One of the biggest things that I find works for children the best is learning self-regulation skills and creating a tool box with them. I spend a lot of time on ... vocabulary and expanding the vocabulary for their emotions and their feelings, and being able to recognize it themselves so they can be able to self regulate and see it in others to read their emotions so they know how to interact with them. I think that's a big part of mindfulness, being able to interact with other people in society.

Like Celia, Jane reported that her goal was to integrate mindfulness practice into the conversations she had with her students when they were experiencing difficulties both socially and emotionally while at school. Jane explained what the intended effects were of integrating mindfulness practice into these conversations with children, which aligns with Celia's statement regarding mindfulness teaching children how to interact with others:

The intended effect ... is for kids to be more collaborative ... empathetic toward one another ... and as a result they will be able to interact more cooperatively with one another.

Based on their responses, it appears that Celia and Jane conceptualized mindfulness practice as a potential solution or response to children’s complex learning needs and social emotional difficulties. Schonert-Reichl (2015) argues that practising mindfulness in school contexts has indeed been proven to have benefit for various learning needs and social emotional difficulties, though what is not well studied in these contexts is whether the true contribution is mindfulness practice itself or what the actual mechanism is for the positive changes being noticed, because mindfulness as it is practised in schools, as demonstrated throughout this study, is often composed of a variety of activities and approaches (deep breathing, group discussions of the mind–body connection, chime time, etc.) which are all termed by teachers’ as “mindfulness practice”.

When Holly, Nora, and Trish were asked about their goals and intentions for teaching and practising mindfulness with the children in their classrooms, all three participants spoke to the noticed effects of teaching mindfulness practice to children and how these noticed effects motivated them to continue teaching mindfulness practice each year:

It makes them more settled... It makes them more able and willing to learn, and I think it just sets a better tone in the classroom. For everyone it’s just less crazy.

(Holly)

I find sometimes you’ll hear a conversation in the hallway like, “You need to walk, you’re not being very mindful”, or sometimes you can hear the language, or some of them will notice in a book, “Oh, that character was being mindful”, or [they will give] examples of [being] mindful and not being mindful. (Trish)

They start to recognize when they need it... I think on their own they don't always have that sort of wherewithal to know that "I'm in an elevated state and I need to calm down." ... So when you go through those processes with kids and you're constantly reminding them of "This is something you can do when ...", then pretty soon they start to do it on their own. (Nora)

Celia, Jane, Holly, and Trish's comments are revealing, as they show how some teachers are conceptualizing mindfulness as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. As well, amongst each of these responses, I noticed a pattern: if children have the habit of practising mindfulness, it will make it easier for them to learn in their classrooms and for the classrooms and environments to be settled enough for teachers to do their jobs, all of which alleviates difficulties for the teachers. Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia and Singh (2013) "measured the effects of preschool teachers attending an 8-week mindfulness course on the behaviour of the students in their classroom" and reported decreases in students' challenging behaviours and negative social interactions, showing the course to be effective in "changing teacher-student interactions in desirable ways" (p. 212). The complementary intention for integrating mindfulness practice into their teaching would be the hope that each child would develop a long-term and ingrained ability to be mindful and better themselves as beings in terms of their social, emotional, and spiritual health, in and out of school.

Eastern literature might argue that mindfulness practice should be integrated into every aspect of one's life and not just followed sporadically during school hours or certain times of the day. Zen Master, Buddhist monk, and spiritual leader Thích Nhất Hạnh (1975) stated that we must "be mindful 24 hours a day, not just during the one hour you may allot to formal [practices]" (p. 24). When schools focus on employing mindfulness practice, students can use

mindfulness in all of their learning processes, they can utilize creativity, they are cognitively flexible, and as a result they tend to feel more in control of their lives (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005).

When it comes to teachers integrating mindfulness practice into their teaching, mindfulness was spoken about by participants as a practice that can be influenced by context and adapted to meet the particular needs of teachers and children, if needed. It is not surprising that these participants spoke to mindfulness practice as being context-dependent, given the reported increase in the prevalence of complex needs in children being taught in public elementary school settings, as Celia mentioned. Jane and Nora too spoke to this reported increase in complex needs and how there is now a significant need for children to learn how to be mindful:

In the last 8 years or so, I've noticed that there's more of a need in the practice of teaching children how to be mindful because they are living in a different world right now where they have many other demands and stressors put upon them that I didn't see in my teaching when I first started. So, when I saw this I began to really incorporate it into my practice. I think there's a big need for it because children are different now, society's different, and I feel like our children are growing up so much quicker than they ever used to. (Jane)

I think it is relevant... It's a different generation and they face a lot more than I ever did and they experience feelings that are just ones that I've never really [experienced]. For a seven year old to be angry, I don't want to say it doesn't make sense to me, and not that I've never felt anger as a kid ... but these kids

come with so many more challenges and things they need to decompress from.

(Nora)

Jane and Nora's claims that children were presenting with different challenges than they ever have historically and that children seemed to be growing up faster due to societal changes is supported by literature regarding "the modern day child", (e.g., Sweat, 2004). It is believed that children are under pressure to mature and "grow up" before they have had the chance to develop emotional maturity, and that this trend can be seen not just in Canada, but throughout the industrialized world. Sweat (2004) noted the many unhealthy pressures in our society and changes in our modern world that have led to a "loss of childhood" for many children. It is believed by Sweat (2004) that this is caused by media influences and marketing, the overscheduling of childhood and pressure to compete, access and exposure to world news coverage, and a lack of parental supervision. All of these factors are believed to take away from children's ability to engage in a childhood where they have the time they need to mature, learn critical lessons, and learn developmentally appropriate tasks.

Instead, children now have too many "adult pressures" put on them, leading to stress-related health challenges such as anxiety, nervousness, hyperactivity, conduct disorders, anger and violent behaviour, eating and sleeping disorders, obesity, and headaches (Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Napoli et al., 2005; Sweat, 2004), all of which can significantly disrupt their thinking, affect their performance, and impact their ability to engage and learn during school. Some literature, such as Gulli (2016) and El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal (2010) argue that it is parents' approaches to parenting that can lead to these various challenges.

Two of the participants interviewed believed that the most significant barriers and limits to children being mindful in their daily lives stem from environmental factors and structural inequities, such as poverty, and household and family dynamics:

I have students who come to school without breakfast ... and go home to very challenging home lives.... One thing about practising mindfulness is you have to learn it in the same environment before you can transfer it and internalize it.... For many of our students just getting their basic needs met is so challenging for them that it's hard for them to be focused on self regulation. (Celia)

I think screens are a big, polarizing factor. When we have our students, you know, for the most part pretty regulated in school and then they sit in front of the television or computer for a long time, I think that can really do away with a lot of the good work we're doing. And also, just home life, you can't know or predict what's going on in anyone's home life. (Suzanne)

Celia and Suzanne's responses indicate that there are questions in their minds regarding whether or not mindfulness is an adequate response to children not having their basic needs met, such as being fed or being engaged in activities in the home other than screen time. Can mindfulness practice overcome the problems associated with these environmental factors and structural inequities, such as a lack of access to food and poor housing conditions and dynamics? When I think about transference of knowledge and children's ability to practise mindfulness, I think about the importance for it to be practised in all contexts. These excerpts highlight the importance of teachers and parents being in communication about and having a shared understanding of the individual child's social-emotional development and schooling, and of

parents being appropriately involved, as parent–teacher communication promotes continuity between the school and home environments (El Nokali et al., 2010).

Two other participants, unlike Celia and Suzanne, felt that the most significant barriers to children being mindful in their day-to-day lives were their lack of “buy in” to mindfulness practice and variations in children’s developmental readiness:

The biggest barrier are children who don’t buy in ... who don’t buy into deep breathing, who don’t buy into the chime, who don’t buy into these self regulation strategies.... I feel like they’re not really giving it a chance and therefore they won’t reap these benefits and sometimes it’s these children who need it the most.  
(Jane)

It’s mostly ... readiness. And by that I mean some kids haven’t ever been exposed to these strategies before and so it’s uncomfortable for them, and they giggle and that giggling kind of bothers the other kids, so it’s sort of a not taking it seriously or not understanding its value. That could be developmental, too. (Nora)

It appears Jane and Nora felt that mindfulness practice requires “buy in” and conviction, as well as a certain level of maturity and emotional development before children can engage in it appropriately and effectively. What is interesting to me as researcher, however, is the fact that participants did not disclose evaluation processes, such as ascertaining children’s inherent value of mindfulness or what is working for them and what is not. Children’s resistance was framed as a lack of readiness and “buy in”, though it is important to understand that children are not normally in a position to be providing feedback to teachers in academic environments regarding teachers’ practices and approaches, making the basis of teachers’ framing flimsy.

## **Secular versus Spiritual Practice**

The manner in which mindfulness practice is approached and utilized in Canadian public school contexts varies due to the appropriation of mindfulness in Western culture and our tendency to draw from Eastern philosophical understandings of mindfulness. When implementing versions of Eastern philosophical understandings into various settings, such as Canadian public elementary schools, we tend to implement these practices in a secular manner (Hyland, 2015). Another instance is yoga, with its own integration of mindfulness, meditation groups, mindfulness meditations that can be accessed via the internet (Greenberg & Harris, 2011), and so on. The contrast between secular and non-secular approaches to mindfulness has created controversy in public elementary school settings, due to parents and teachers' preconceived notion that mindfulness practices are spiritually and religiously rooted. I attempted to gauge participants' beliefs about the controversy regarding whether or not mindfulness practice being implemented into schools should be discontinued based on the argument that it has Buddhist religious and spiritual roots. Responses varied, though participants all shared similar views regarding the detachment of mindfulness practice from religion and spirituality.

### ***A Rejection of Spiritual Connectedness***

There were strong responses amongst the participants involved in this study regarding the place of mindfulness in schools, and a significant rejection of the notion that mindfulness may have Buddhist religious and spiritual roots. Interestingly, many of the participants during the interviews interchanged the term “mindfulness” with the terms “social emotional literacy”, “self-regulation”, “decompression”, “metacognition”, and “relaxation”. It was evident that there was a sense of hesitation in participants referring to mindfulness practice as being religious or spiritual.

Some mindfulness teachers such as Thích Nhất Hạnh may argue that mindfulness practice needs to be explicit in spiritual context and content or that the practice is either inherently spiritual or spiritual in a deliberate way; however, all of the participants interviewed reported believing that their mindfulness practice is not rooted in religion or spirituality, and that there is in fact no connection between them. Jane shared her strong feelings and beliefs regarding this controversial conversation:

I don't believe mindfulness is connected to religion whatsoever.... Those who believe it's a spiritual thing or that it's Buddhism may be misinformed, or don't actually see the benefits of what mindfulness is, or are ignorant of what it actually is. When I think of deep breathing, when I think of meditation, I think you are trying to make yourself a better person really, you're trying to find tools and strategies ... that help you be a person who makes good decisions, a person who knows how to interact with others, and treat one another with empathy.... I don't think it has any relationship to religion.... I don't see the controversy as much as I hear about it.

Like Jane, Holly and Celia had strong opinions on the notion of mindfulness having a link with Buddhist religion and spirituality:

I don't believe in that at all ... that's not even on my radar. You know, it could be Buddhist practice. But you know what, it's worked for thousands of years, why wouldn't I try and use it, right? I'm not trying to get people to convert their religion, so ... (Holly)

I find the issue of mindfulness that most people object to is the chime ... and meditation ... and I'm not necessarily teaching meditation, the chime ... I find I use it the same way I use the projector ... as a focal point, it is a tool.... I don't personally see it as religious and I wouldn't have any concerns about talking to a parent about it if they did have concerns. (Celia)

Nora's reponse aligned with those of Jane, Holly, and Celia, though Nora explained how the language utilized plays a role and went on to express some of the worries she experienced when utilizing mindfulness practice with children:

If it's "mindfulness", that's different, I've heard some kids say, "Let's meditate", and then I worry a little bit about the connotations that that could have.

During the interviews, there were strong responses from these four participants regarding the notion of mindfulness practice having Buddhist religious and spiritual roots. Amongst all participants interviewed, there was no reference to mindfulness practice having any relevance to religion or spirituality, as well as a distinct absence of speaking to child spirituality. I found the defensive tone of the answers to questions regarding the controversy interesting, though it was not a surprise that teachers were experiencing anxieties and were cautious about exploring meditative components of mindfulness practice or acknowledging the link between mindfulness practice and its religious and spiritual roots. My lack of surprise was due to the existing culture within public elementary schools and the district in which I carried out the interviews, as there was a prohibition against direct religious teachings due to the diversity and multiple religions individually practised amongst the staff and students within each school.

The focus of the teachers interviewed in this study, and their understanding and conceptualization of mindfulness practice and what it entails, appear to have been practical rather than philosophical. It appears they wanted to achieve immediate results in their efforts to improve children's abilities to self-regulate in the classroom environment, in having children learn how to interact and communicate more thoughtfully and respectfully with others, and also in having children learn how to problem-solve and be socially responsible, as opposed to utilizing a philosophical focus in an attempt to have children learn how to practise mindfulness in a non-secular, traditional manner.

A non-secular, traditional focus to implementing and teaching mindfulness practice to children in school-based settings may support children to better their sense of self and self-awareness, enhance their ability to reflect and respond mindfully, and awaken and empower their spirituality, and may support them in learning to live more mindful lives, long-term. As Weare (2013) stated:

Contemplatives have become increasingly interested in elementary schools' role in developing a deeper awareness of mindfulness, spirituality, and need to live simply and sustainably and the applicability of ancient wisdom in the modern world. (p. 22)

As Roeser and Peck (2009) noted, mindfulness practices require adaptation for use with children; they can include, but are not limited to: nature related activities, arts, physical activities involving sequences of movements (e.g., yoga), imagery, and other forms of sitting meditation. Moreover, the same authors explained that these practices should include a relational context with other children, as well as a teacher who is likely to place focus on values of personal growth

and ethics. Thus, mindfulness practices will often feature a world view that includes social and moral values (Greenberg & Harris, 2011). Although different mindfulness practices have different goals, Greenberg and Harris (2011) explained the primary, shared focus of mindfulness practices:

[Mindfulness practices] share a focus on sharpening concentration or attention, building emotion regulation skills to effectively manage stress, and gaining self-knowledge. Some practices consciously focus on building empathy and compassion. With sustained practice, these skills are hypothesized to become routinized at neural or mental levels and subsequently to regulate behavior in relatively automatic ways. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, the strictly secular attitude taken by the participants in their thinking about and practicing mindfulness with children makes sense in the context of a large and powerful education system that promotes such secular understandings and practices.”(Ozawa de-Silva & Dodson-Lavelle, 2011). Government policies regarding British Columbia’s public school districts currently do not offer specific policy regarding teaching religious content or contemplative practices to students, so it does not provide helpful guidance for teachers.

Moreover, the way in which school systems are set up and managed directly influences teachers in terms of their understanding of mindfulness and the approaches they utilize to teach mindfulness practice to children. Thomas Joiner (2007), in *Mindlessness: The Corruption of Mindfulness in a Culture of Narcissism*, spoke of mindfulness practice as a multifaceted and highly contemplative practice with Buddhist religious and spiritual roots. He noted that mindfulness is an effective adjunct to treating psychological disorders, a useful philosophical

vantage point, and a means to target a variety of life's challenges. However, Joiner (2007) also argued that there has been a significant despiritualization and breakdown of mindfulness practice with negative consequences for multiple sectors of society, including educational settings. Joiner argued there is now "faux mindfulness", which is a misuse of mindfulness practice in various sectors; he stated that authentic mindfulness and what he referred to as "the original version of mindfulness" has lost its way due to the appropriation of mindfulness practice by Western culture and the adaptations that have occurred. Joiner (2007) believed these adaptations to be fuelled by what he referred to as a widespread cultural trend toward narcissism, egocentricity, and self-absorption. Joiner's argument may seem overbold, yet it is literature such as this that highlights the controversy in our society regarding mindfulness practice and its appropriate implementation, leading to contradictory understandings for professionals such as the teachers working with children in Canadian public elementary school contexts. The search for true and authentic mindfulness poses great questions and tensions.

### **Tensions when Implementing Mindfulness Practice**

When asked if there was a widespread acceptance and valuing of mindfulness practice in each of the schools they worked in, the participants spoke to the tensions encountered when implementing mindfulness practice into their classrooms with children, including inconsistent implementation and direction throughout their schools, and uncertainties in regard to implementing mindfulness practice.

#### ***Inconsistencies and Uncertainties***

There was a distinct commonality in participants' responses, as evidenced in the direct quotes below, regarding the inconsistent implementation of mindfulness practice within their schools

and the challenges and difficulties that were experienced because of it. Celia explained why inconsistent implementation and direction created difficulties and tensions within the school she worked at:

Really the concern is not so much, “Is mindfulness valuable?”, it’s the “Where do you find time in your day?”, and it’s ... something that I find I also struggle with even though it’s ... something that I agree with, because, for example, this year with the new curriculum, that’s been a huge focus of learning and growth and experimentation, so some things don’t get done that I might normally do.... So I think that’s where you get pushback at the school level ... people don’t know how to fit it in. I also think you get pushback at the school level because ... you can see I don’t do a strict program and there are lots of people in this building who embrace mindfulness but they also do it their own way and there’s also this idea that I don’t want to have to do MindUp and just MindUp, and so people will push back, not because they disagree with the end goal, but they disagree with the method of “how do we get there”.

It is not surprising that there was “pushback” from teachers in regard to the implementation of mindfulness practice in a classroom setting with children, as it is difficult for teachers to know how to engage in mindfulness practice in an institutional context where factors such as efficiency, results, structured environments, and academic tasks take precedence. Historically, academic subjects and academic success, otherwise known as “academic emphasis” (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006) have been the primary focus and goal in Canadian public elementary school settings. Academic emphasis is:

the extent to which a school is driven by a quest for academic excellence — a press for academic achievement. High but achievable academic goals are set for students; the learning environment is orderly and serious; students are motivated to work hard; and students respect academic achievement. (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 247)

However, there has been a noticeable shift in these settings, where schools are now integrating more and more SEL into their otherwise structured, academic-focused school days. As previously mentioned, SEL programs, including mindfulness programs such as MindUp, have led to promising results and benefits. Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2004) argue that SEL may be the enabling component that fosters academic success, in accordance with other research suggesting that what is missing in schools to promote academic achievement is educational programming that integrates SEL into the school curriculum (Elias & Arnold, 2006).

With regard to inconsistencies, in the majority of the interviews carried out, the participants spoke to the need for there to be a common language throughout their schools and within their classrooms in order for children to benefit from mindfulness practice. They also saw a need for staff members to have a shared understanding and agreement when it comes to implementation, as highlighted in Suzanne, Jane, Celia, and Trish's responses when asked about what changes they would recommend in their school's implementation of mindfulness practice:

I think there needs to be a common language. So my criticism of every school I've worked in, including this one, is that we need to build a common language together for all of our students to be able to speak that and for their parents as well, and all the staff. (Suzanne)

I think the only change is to get more people on board.... We don't all have to be using the same program ... but there are so many different entry points, so many different programs you can use, you can start small, I think the big change is getting people to start. (Jane)

I admit I would be quite happy to have more direction ... to at least say that I would like a certain minimum level, or this is the filter program, you can add it but this is the general expectation, but I also appreciate the fact that we're respected as professionals. (Celia)

I think in order ... for mindfulness to be truly effective, it needs to be very strongly implemented from the very beginning in kindergarten so that it's continuing on in the years. Right now it's very piecemeal, some teachers do it, some teachers don't. You know, I know when I have had kids [come] from classes who do it, they are very engaged and they are ready to participate, you know, but I guess with the last few years more people are doing it, but it definitely has to be school wide. (Trish)

Based on these four responses, I sensed confusion and frustration from the teachers regarding how to best implement mindfulness practice into their classrooms and environments; this appeared to be due to a lack of conversation regarding mindfulness practice within their schools, including a lack of direction and guidance from their superiors. This made me wonder whose responsibility it is within educational contexts to be initiating conversations regarding the implementation of mindfulness practice, and to ensure that all teachers are trained properly and that all children are being taught how to practise mindfulness. Until there is a distinct role

determined within school contexts to be in charge of these important initiatives, these questions will likely remain and the confusion and frustration of these teachers will no doubt continue.

It was important to inquire about the uncertainties that teachers experience around implementing mindfulness practice into their teaching with children. Each of the participants was able to identify some of their own uncertainties regarding implementation. Most of these pertained to timing; specifically, when it is “too early” or “too late” to introduce mindfulness practice to children for it to have positive effects and long term benefits, and whether or not children are transferring what they have learned into their daily, personal lives. These uncertainties were well articulated by Celia, Jane, and Suzanne. Celia spoke to her uncertainty regarding how to effectively implement and teach mindfulness practice to children:

I find it’s always the breadth and the depth, how do you reach all of them?

Because it’s hard when there are 24 [children], and what is the most respect[ful] way of doing that?

Much like Celia, Suzanne also reported uncertainty about how to best reach the children and implement mindfulness practice in the classroom in a way that would have positive, beneficial, and long-term effects:

Do we have to start really young? That’s one of my big questions. Because a lot of people start in kindergarten, is it too late when they hit my classroom, grade 6 and 7? Is it too late to start teaching them [mindfulness]?

Jane explained that her uncertainty regarding the implementation of mindfulness practice with children in the classroom concerned whether children felt that it was beneficial for them and whether they were transferring mindfulness into their daily lives:

Is it actually something they are transferring into their daily lives and do they themselves find it beneficial or are they just doing it because it's another "subject" that we are doing in school? But it's not a subject, I weave it into everything we do and it's a part of our day, but I often feel they feel it's just a "school thing", when my goal is for them to take these skills into their life.

The quotations above imply that these participants believed in instrumental aims and that there is an achievable end to mindfulness, as opposed to children practising mindfulness for its own sake and believing there are immediate benefits of doing so. Such conceptualizations lead to questions regarding when and how in a person's development to nurture such skills and dispositions, at what ages to introduce different mindfulness practices, and how such practices might change with the dramatic changes in cognition and emotion that occur between early childhood and adolescence (Greenberg & Harris, 2011).

Participants reported uncertainties regarding "best practice" and whether or not they are implementing and teaching mindfulness practice to children in the "right" way, as demonstrated in Celia's response below:

I always worry about best practice, am I doing it the best way, is there a better way to be doing this that's clearer for them? But do I have doubts about is it worth the time I take in the classroom? No.

In the interviews carried out in regard to the teachers' uncertainties about teaching mindfulness practice, an added dynamic was that three of the participants described feeling as though they were not "qualified" to be teaching mindfulness practice to children, implying that mindfulness requires more specific training and experience than they had had in their educational work contexts. Jane stated:

I'm always aware ... that I'm not the expert in this and so I need to sort of chill out in certain things and that's why my approach is from three or four different programs.

Suzanne also reported feeling "uncomfortable" at times when teaching mindfulness practice to children:

With the MindUp program in particular, I feel that there's an approach to it that makes me a little bit uncomfortable, and that's the meditation approach that's in there a bit, only because I'm not sure if a teacher who has read a manual is a great practitioner of meditation. So it's something that I'm very aware of if I do go to that place, because I don't want to ... practise something that might be contrary to how it's supposed to be done.

Similar to Jane and Suzanne, Nora described feeling as though she is not competent or qualified to be teaching mindfulness practice to children:

Well, do I need to be teaching it? Like is it something that families should focus on ... because you know, for some people that is an intimate thing... Does it have a place in school? Yes. Should I be teaching it? Perhaps not. I guess that

would be my biggest question ... should I be teaching it? Maybe we need a professional.

In each of the responses above, participants expressed feeling somewhat incompetent or feeling that they were not appropriate individuals to be claiming knowledge and teaching mindfulness practice to children, while other participants (whose responses were not shown here) reported being open to teaching mindfulness practice, though trying to avoid what they labeled to be “meditative components” or “yoga approaches”, reporting they would rather stick to the “brain science”, as found in the MindUp resource (Mindup Curriculum Resources, 2016/2017).

A passage within the MindUp resource states:

The MindUp framework supports students in learning about how their brains work, and how taking brain breaks can help them focus and tune in to their own creativity and thinking. MindUp also encourages students to mindfully engage with the world around them. (p. 3)

Within the MindUp resource, it is clear that there is a significant focus on brain science, which the teachers referred to, and it is evident that the resource includes information around mindfulness practices that claim to be secular in nature. Katherine Weare (2013) stated:

It is axiomatic within the community of mindfulness teachers that those who would teach mindfulness to others need to be experienced practitioners themselves and practice mindfulness on a regular basis. Courses are demonstrably more effective when taught by those who can model and embody the particular qualities mindfulness develops, including within their everyday interactions with children. Qualities include open minded curiosity, kindness, empathy,

compassion, acceptance, trust, patience, and non-striving, and the skills of focusing, and paying and switching attention. (p. 16)

Mindfulness practice in Western school-based contexts is approached in what is believed to be a purely secular fashion, and MindUp, a resource utilized by each participant interviewed, claims to be purely secular in nature (Hawn Foundation, 2011) with a focus on helping students develop SEL skills, creating positive learning environments, reducing stress, and improving relationships (Hawn Foundation, 2011). The varied responses that emerged in the interviews in regard to teachers' approaches in teaching mindfulness practice to children highlight the fact that mindfulness may not always be well understood by teachers, and that this lack of understanding can and does lead to a further lack of understanding regarding how mindfulness practice can be best implemented in Western service provision and educational contexts with children. Moreover, the participants noting uncertainties regarding teaching mindfulness practice to children sparked my curiosity and led me to analyze and attempt to understand what was beneath the participants' questions, their comfort with certain practices and approaches, their uncertainties regarding their own legitimacy in teaching mindfulness practice to children, and their perceived inability to claim knowledge of mindfulness practice.

The findings of this study both support and reflect existing research like that of Joiner (2017), who discussed the appropriation of mindfulness practice and the difficulty of developing a universal definition and practice of mindfulness that can be effectively implemented into all contexts. In reviewing the transcriptions, coding, linking the themes together, and analyzing them, I identified a variety of themes and overarching patterns related to each theme in the data. Though I attempted to approach the research without any preconceived hypotheses or expectations, I had a hunch prior to carrying out the interviews that participants might have

varied understandings and conceptualizations due to mindfulness not yet having a distinct place within classroom settings. O'Connor and Gibson (2003) suggested that once a researcher has developed the overarching themes for his or her study, the next step is to think about the implications. In the present study, there are broader issues that the emerging patterns point to, such as the serious tensions teachers face on a daily basis as they attempt to navigate multiple and at times competing understandings of the aims of mindfulness training when teaching and supporting children. Also, it is evident that this lack of clarity may be due to the appropriation of mindfulness practice and the adapted, secular manner in which mindfulness has been implemented into Canadian public elementary school contexts.

The questions that emerge in the data and that I have focused on in this study are: What are the implications, if any, of there being a distinct separation and disconnect between mindfulness practice as it is taught in schools and spirituality or religion? In what ways is mindfulness benefiting or limiting children in the way they are currently being taught? And, lastly, what changes need to occur, if any, to ensure that teachers are effective in implementing mindfulness practice with children?

## **Chapter Five: Implications for Future Practice and Research**

This study explored how public elementary school teachers are conceptualizing mindfulness practices with children and explored teachers' experiences of implementing such practices into a classroom setting within Western public elementary schools. Through six in-depth qualitative interviews, this research aspired to discover insights from teachers that could provide a better understanding of: (a) how mindfulness practice is approached, (b) teachers goals and intentions of practising mindfulness with their students, (c) the current benefits and struggles teachers are experiencing when teaching mindfulness practice to children in a classroom and school context, and (d) what improvements would be of assistance to teachers and children within these contexts, if any. The main findings of this study include: (a) teachers blended several different strategies to create an integrative approach that worked for both them and the needs of their students, (b) the goals and intentions of teachers implementing mindfulness practice into their classrooms with children included having children become independent in their ability to practise mindfulness, promoting children's abilities to work effectively in a group and classroom environment, and fostering change in the way children interact with one another, (c) teachers' approaches to mindfulness practice were purely secular versus non-secular, with both reported benefits and struggles experienced due to the manner in which teachers currently approach teaching mindfulness practice, and (d) the tensions and uncertainties teachers experienced when implementing mindfulness practice into their classrooms and schools were due to reported inconsistencies, including a lack of guidance and expectations regarding implementation within their workplaces.

In this chapter, I outline my recommendations for future practice regarding implementing mindfulness practice in Western school-based contexts, as well as Child and Youth Care contexts. I also propose future research initiatives that could build on this study and its findings.

### **Supporting and Guiding Teachers**

The findings of this study indicate that teaching mindfulness practice to children in a school-based setting may be best done by teachers who have support and guidance in implementing such practices into their classrooms and are also knowledgeable, with a good understanding of what mindfulness practice entails so they can feel competent and confident when teaching it to children. Participants in this study spoke about their feelings of hesitation around teaching mindfulness practice due to a reported lack of guidance and a feeling that they are often left guessing when approaching mindfulness practice with children, which they attributed to a lack of clarity regarding expectations within their work contexts. Other participants reported discomfort around teaching mindfulness practice to children due to their own lack of experience with and understanding of mindfulness practice. Weare (2013) discusses how teachers who teach mindfulness to others need to be experienced practitioners themselves and practise mindfulness on a regular basis, since there is evidence that courses are demonstrably more effective when taught by those who can model and embody the particular qualities mindfulness develops, including within their everyday interactions with children.

Although there are multiple resources teachers can utilize to approach mindfulness practice with their students, their work contexts have no specific expectations concerning implementing mindfulness in their classrooms. The teachers found this situation frustrating, as they were left to independently cobble together resources and attempt to create an approach that worked both for

them as teachers and for the needs of their students. It is unclear what exactly a teacher should or could do to implementing mindfulness practice in their classrooms. To address these inconsistencies and uncertainties, I would recommend that teachers seek opportunities to come together and talk amongst themselves, both within their individual schools and within their overall school districts. Through supporting one another in their struggle, and discussing and sharing which approaches and resources they are utilizing in mindfulness practice with the children in their classrooms, they could discover best practices and approaches that would work for them in teaching children while collaborating and learning from one another throughout that process.

I further suggest that teachers work to support one another by advocating within their workplaces for increased supervision and guidance to ensure consistency when it comes to implementing mindfulness practice, as well as for enhanced quality control and an on-going evaluation system. Lastly, in order for teachers to take individual responsibility for their learning and teaching of mindfulness practice when implementing it into classroom settings with children, I recommend that they seek opportunities for professional development within their workplaces. Zepeda (2012) speaks to professional development specifically for teachers and how it is important for several people across work sites and district levels to promote, create, and facilitate professional development, which includes efforts to establish and maintain the peer support, ongoing supervision, and guidance that I am recommending are initiated moving forward. Zepeda (2012) refers to professional development as an effort that should include support by peer teachers, principals, team leaders, mentors, and department chairs, as well as instructional and subject-specific coaches.

## **Working with Secular Approaches to Mindfulness Practice**

It became evident throughout this study that there is another layer to the confusion some teachers experience when teaching mindfulness practice to children. This includes teachers' uncertainties around "best practices" and the controversies around the connection of mindfulness practice to spirituality and religion. As articulated by participants, the manner in which mindfulness practice is approached in school settings is purely secular and does not acknowledge the deep roots in religion and spirituality of traditional forms of mindfulness practice. All six participants reported using, or at least initially referring to, the MindUp resource, which claims to be purely secular in nature (Hawn Foundation, 2011). Therefore, the primary focus of these teachers was to help their students develop SEL skills, create positive learning environments, reduce stress, and improve relationships, as these outcomes are the primary focus of the MindUp resource (Hawn Foundation, 2011).

To reiterate, provincial policies for the public school districts included in this study do not outline or offer specific policy or guidance regarding teaching religious content or contemplative practices to students. A non-secular, traditional focus of mindfulness practice would include teachings around ethics and interdependence, bettering one's sense of self and learning how to self-respond mindfully, instilling and empowering spirituality, and learning to live a more mindful life in the long term in keeping with Buddhist teachings (Bodhi, 2011; Nhất Hạnh, 1975; Stratton, 2015). It seems difficult to tease out which approaches are purely secular and purely non-secular given the evident overlap and intertwining of the intentions and expectations around results and outcomes with both approaches.

Despite the many positive effects reported by four of the participants in this study when utilizing secular approaches to teaching mindfulness practice, including programs such as MindUp, it is evident that there must be more guidance and protocol within public elementary school settings when implementing such practices. Further discussion and evaluation comparing Western secular approaches to teaching mindfulness practice in public elementary school settings with non-secular traditional approaches may be warranted in order to provide clarity and deeper insight into how each approach supports or potentially limits teachers and children.

### **Defining Spirituality in School Contexts**

In the attempt to provide clarity regarding what “spirituality” means in the context of teaching mindfulness practice to children in the context of a Western school, it has been important for me to consider the following questions: Is mindfulness an inherently spiritual practice, or is it just a spiritual practice? Is mindfulness a spiritual practice only if done a certain way, or with certain assumptions? Can mindfulness be a spiritual practice even when embedded in a secular context? And, what makes mindfulness *not* a spiritual practice?

Spirituality has been defined in many ways. My current understanding, for the version of spirituality that fits within the context of mindfulness practice being taught to children in Western public elementary school settings, spirituality is tightly connected only to those Eastern teachings and philosophical understandings of mindfulness that align with the beliefs and perspectives of Buddhism on certain matters. These include nature-related activities, arts, physical activities involving sequences of movements (e.g., yoga), imagery, sitting meditation (Roeser & Peck, 2009), relational contexts with others, and values of personal growth and ethics, as well as featuring a world view that includes social and moral values (Greenberg & Harris,

2011). A spiritual, non-secular, traditional approach to teaching mindfulness practice would speak explicitly about the Buddha and the Buddhist path, which includes a deep focus on meditation, the act of observation, bare attention, and memory, as well as finding clarity, comprehension, and a “lucid awareness” in life (Bodhi, 2011). Moreover, an approach to mindfulness practice that is consistent with a spiritual perspective would see the intellect in relationship to body, mind, and spirit (London et al., 2004). Bodhi (2011) included an excellent summary on the differences between secular and non-secular approaches to mindfulness:

Rather than stressing world-renunciation, they [Western teachers] stress engagement with, and freedom within the world. Rather than rejecting the body, these Western teachers embrace the body as part of the wholistic [sic] field of practice. Rather than stressing ultimate spiritual goals such as full enlightenment, ending the cycles of rebirth, or attaining the various stages of sainthood, many Western teachers tend to stress the immediate benefits of mindfulness and untroubled, equanimous presence in the midst of life’s vicissitudes. (p. 31)

Despite the differences in approaches, between true ancient mindfulness and mindfulness as it has been adapted in Western settings, it is important to acknowledge that the manner in which mindfulness practice is currently being taught does create space for positive learning, practice, and discussion for children with regard to SEL, including emotional regulation, attitudes towards self and others, social behaviours, and academic performance (Ozawa de-Silva & Dodson-Lavelle, 2011), all of which has been made evident in the literature outlined throughout this study and by participants’ reported observations, and which greatly benefits children within the classroom setting and overall school context given the expectations of children within these settings. Nevertheless, it is also evident that there needs to be better clarity for teachers regarding

the distinction between secular and non-secular approaches to teaching mindfulness practice, to aid in their own understanding and feelings of competency when implementing such practices with children.

My hope is that this research study will benefit and inspire educators and policy decision-makers within public elementary schools to evaluate their practices and consider the benefits and limitations of current practices, then offer educational training and support for teachers and schools that are working to implement and teach mindfulness practice to children, as needed. Those with a keen interest in mindfulness practice being either implemented or improved within public elementary schools are invited to reflect on the following fundamental questions moving forward:

1. How explicit does the spiritual context/content of mindfulness need to be? Is the practice inherently spiritual, or only spiritual in a deliberate way?
2. What might be of further assistance to educators in enriching their understanding and approaches to teaching mindfulness practice?
3. What resources are needed to make mindfulness practice and implementation effective?
4. How can educators and policy makers create more consistent, widespread implementations of mindfulness practice within public elementary schools?

### **Directions for Future Research**

Mindfulness practice with children in educational settings is growing; there is therefore a significant need for more robust studies to support the growth and understanding of mindfulness

practice and its implementation in public elementary school settings. I offer three recommendations regarding directions for future research. The first is to build on this study with further exploration regarding both the benefits and limitations around mindfulness practice, specifically as it is currently being taught in Western public elementary school settings. Though the teachers included in this study were able to offer their insights and relevant experiences regarding integrating mindfulness practice into their teaching with children, further qualitative studies comprising individual interviews that engage a larger population of teachers of mindfulness practice across a variety of Western public elementary school settings would provide further perspective regarding the experiences of teachers, as well as helping identify gaps and areas for improvement. Moreover, including an observation component to this qualitative research approach would allow researchers to see how teachers approach mindfulness practice and how it unfolds specifically within classroom and school contexts.

My second recommendation is to carry out a qualitative research study that goes beyond the experience of teachers. A qualitative study comprising individual interviews with and observations regarding young students may provide a better understanding of children's personal experiences of learning mindfulness practice in public elementary school settings and the effects mindfulness practice has had on them as individuals. Moreover, a qualitative longitudinal study including two groups of students being taught mindfulness practice in a secular versus non-secular manner, with an observation component and qualitative focus groups, could potentially highlight any distinct differences in children's abilities and overall presentations long term. Based on my literature review, this is not a study that has been explored as yet, though doing so could lead to a better understanding of mindfulness practice and its effects on students in both the short and long term.

Due to significant inconsistencies and an evident lack of guidance at the school level, my third recommendation for future research includes exploring what is needed for mindfulness practice to have consistent implementation within school settings, and attempting to bring more clarity to where mindfulness practice currently fits within public elementary schools. Given the short history of the secular approach to mindfulness that is used in school settings, we need to learn more about the effects of these approaches as they are currently taught, we need to explore the practical needs of the teachers attempting to implement mindfulness practice into their classroom with children, and we need to cultivate a specific culture around mindfulness practice within public elementary school settings. This could be done through a qualitative study that includes individual interviews with school principals, exploring their perceptions and perspectives about the place of mindfulness in classrooms and schools overall, and working to bring more clarity around purpose, resources, and opportunities for learning.

### **Considerations for Child and Youth Care Practice**

Given my personal and professional interest both in mindfulness practice as an intervention strategy and in the field of child and youth care, it would be of interest to me and probably to other child and youth care practitioners — at least, to those who take an interest in mindfulness practice and children and youth's mental health and well-being — to have further research initiatives specifically focused on mindfulness practice being integrated into child and youth care practice and child and youth care contexts. These would include child and youth care practice in community and acute inpatient mental health settings, in group home and residential settings, and in remedial programs or interagency alternative school settings. Incorporating mindfulness practice into child and youth care would align with our philosophy regarding social pedagogy,

which would mean supporting the overall development of the whole child and taking a holistic view of young people and their well-being (Bengtsson, Chamberlin, Crimmens, & Stanley, 2008, as cited in Stuart, Fulton, Kroll, Rapuano, & McMillan, 2008). A focus on social pedagogy in child and youth care practice means taking holistic approaches to education and practice, openness towards others and a new way of learning and being together (Bellefeuille, McGrath, & Jamieson, 2008). Mindfulness practice aligns closely with this philosophy of care and it would be beneficial to children, teachers, principals, and all stakeholders to explore mindfulness practice further, as evidenced by the literature outlined and the observations noted by the participants regarding the benefits of teaching mindfulness practice to children and adolescents.

This study focused on how the teacher participants involved in this study understood, conceptualized, and implemented mindfulness practice in Western public elementary school settings with children aged 5 to 12. I explored the tensions and questions, and commonalities and connections, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies that surfaced throughout the interview and analysis process regarding teachers' understandings, conceptualizations, and approaches to teaching mindfulness practice. I have recommended a number of important questions for teachers and practitioners alike to consider as they move forward in their teaching of mindfulness practice to young people. I have also recommended directions for research that could potentially lead to useful insights and positive adaptations when integrating mindfulness practice into teaching and our work with young people in the long term.

## References

- About: Our organization. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization>
- Azpiri, J. (2016, October 4). Vancouver father hopes to end mindfulness sessions at elementary school. *Global News*. Retrieved from <http://globalnews.ca/news/2983795/vancouver-father-hopes-to-end-mindfulness-classes-at-elementary-school/>
- Bachman, H., El Nokali, N., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2010). Parent involvement and children's academic and social development in elementary school. *Child Development, 81*(3), 988–1005. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01447.x
- Baer, R. A. (2003). Mindfulness training as a clinical intervention: A conceptual and empirical review. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10*(2), 125–143. doi:10.1093/clipsy.bpg015
- Berg, B., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (8<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Bellefeuille, G, McGrath, J., & Jamieson, D., 2008. A pedagogical response to a changing world: Towards a globally-informed pedagogy for child and youth care education and practice. *Child and Youth Services Review, 30*(7), 717–726.
- Bodhi, B. (2011). What does mindfulness really mean? A canonical perspective. *Contemporary Buddhism, 12*(1), 19–39. doi: 10.1080/14639947.2011.564813
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

- Buchanan, R., Gueldner, B. A., Tran, O. K., & Merrell, K. W. (2009). Social and emotional learning in classrooms: A survey of teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and practices. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 25*(2), 187–203. doi:10.1080/15377900802487078
- Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). 'Clear as mud': Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(2), 1–13. doi:10.1177/160940690300200201
- Carter, S. M., & Little, M. (2007). Justifying knowledge, justifying method, taking action: Epistemologies, methodologies, and methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research, 17*(10), 1316–1328. doi:10.1177/1049732307306927
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (August 21, 2014). Mindfulness-based depression therapy reduces health care visits. *Cision*. Retrieved from <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/mindfulness-based-depression-therapy-reduces-health-care-visits-515340401.html>
- Coelho, H. F., Canter, P. H., & Ernst, E. (2013). Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy: Evaluating current evidence and informing future research. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice, 1*(S), 97–107. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.75.6.1000
- Daly, J., Kellehear, A. & Gliksman, M. (1997). *The public health researcher: A methodological approach*. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*, 405-432.
- Elias, M. J., & Arnold, H. (2006). *The educator's guide to emotional intelligence and academic achievement: Social-emotional learning in the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- El Nokali, N., Bachman, H., & Votruba-Drzal. (2010). Parent involvement and children's academic and social development in elementary school. *Child Development, 81*(3), 988-1005. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01447.x
- Erickson, J. (2011). *MindUp: Promotes academic and social and emotional growth*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.ubc.ca/dianachan/files/2015/01/Mind-Up-PPoint.pdf>
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of indicative and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(1), 1-11.
- Flook, L., Smaller, S., Kitil, J., Galla, B., Kaiser-Greenland, S., Locke, J., Ishijima, E., & Kasara, C. (2010). Effects of Mindfulness Awareness Practices on Executive Functions in Elementary School Children. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 26*(0), 70-95. doi: 10.1080/15377900903379125

- Friedman, E. (2016). Problematizing mindfulness with the creative production of self. In H. Skott-Myhre, V. Pacini-Ketchabaw, & K. Skott-Myhre (Eds.), *Youth work, early education, and psychology: Liminal encounters* (pp. 235–251). Critical cultural studies of childhood. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Friends for Life. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.friendsresilience.org/friends-for-life-ages-8-11/>
- Gogerly, D. J. (1845/2007). On Buddhism. *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 7(28), 90–112.
- Greenberg, M., & Harris, A. (2011). Nurturing mindfulness in children and youth: Current state of research. *Child Development Perspectives*, 1–6. doi: 10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00215.x
- Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57(1), 35–43. doi:10.1016/S0022-3999(03)00573-7
- Gulli, C. (2016, January 7). The collapse of parenting: Why it's time for parents to grow up. *Macleans*. Retrieved from <https://www.macleans.ca/society/the-collapse-of-parenting-why-its-time-for-parents-to-grow-up/>
- Hawn Foundation. (2011). *MindUp*. Retrieved from <https://mindup.org/thehawnfoundation/>
- Hornich-Lisciandro, T. (2013). Mindfulness in education. *Education Digest*, 79(2), 66–68.
- Hoy, W., Tarter, CJ, & Hoy, A. (2006). Academic optimism of schools: A force for student

achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(3), 425–446. doi:

10.3102/00028312043003425

Hyland, T. (2015). On the contemporary applications of mindfulness: Some implications for education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49(2), 171–186. doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12135

Imagery. (2019). Retrieved from <https://literarydevices.net/imagery/>

Joiner, T. (2007). *Mindlessness: The corruption of mindfulness in a culture of narcissism* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156. doi:10.1093/clipsy.bpg016

Kirby, S. L., Greaves, L., & Reid, C. (2010). *Experience research social change* (2nd Ed.). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Koro-Ljungberg, M., & MacLure, M. (2013). Provocations, re-un-visions, death, and other possibilities of “data”. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, 13(4), 219–222. doi: 10.1177/1532708613487861

Kubitz, M. (2016, February 5). The Mood Meter: A tool for developing greater self-awareness and awareness of others. Retrieved from <https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/the-mood-meter-a-tool-for-developing-greater-self-awareness-and-awareness-of-others/>

- Liehr, P., and Diaz, N. (2010). A pilot study examining the effect of mindfulness on depression and anxiety for minority children. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 24(1), 69–71. doi: 10.1016/j.apnu.2009.10.001
- London, R., Johnson, A., Arguelles, L., Brown, R., Crowell, S., & Donnelly, J. (2004). Teaching from a spiritual perspective. *Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 17(2), 29–37
- Lunau, K. (2014, June 15). Bringing mindfulness to the school curriculum. *Macleans*. Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/society/health/bringing-mindfulness-to-the-school-curriculum/>
- Machado, S. M., & Costa, M. E. (2015). Mindfulness practice outcomes explained through the discourse of experienced practitioners. *Mindfulness*, 6(6), 1437–1447. doi:10.1007/s12671-015-0417-4
- Mahoney, M. (2003). *Constructive psychotherapy: A practical guide*. New York: NY: Guildford Press.
- Mindup curriculum resources (2016/2017). *LSS Pathfinder*, Retrieved from <https://www.winnipeg.ca/About%20WSD/deptservices/lss/staffresourceslss/pathfinders/Documents/MindUp%20Curriculum%20Resources.pdf>
- Napoli, M., Krech, P., & Holley, L. (2005). Mindfulness training for elementary school students: The attention academy. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 21(1), 99–125. doi: 10.1300/j370v21n01\_05
- Nhất Hạnh, T. (1975/1976/1987). *The miracle of mindfulness: An introduction to the practice of meditation* (Ho, M., Trans.). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Nhất Hạnh, T. (1999). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching* (Laity, A., Trans., Kotler, A., Ed.). New York, NY: Broadway Books.
- Nyanaponika, T. (2014). *The heart of Buddhist meditation: The Buddha's way of mindfulness*. San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books.
- O'Connor, H., & Gibson, N. (2003). A step-by-step guide to qualitative data analysis. *Pimatizwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 1(1), 63–90.
- Ozawa De-Silva, B. & Dodson-Lavelle, B. (2011). An education of the heart of mind: Practical and theoretical issues in teaching cognitive-based compassion training to children. *Practical Matters*, 4(0), 1–28.
- Payton, J., Wardlaw, D., Graczyk, P., Bloodworth, M., Tompsett, C., & Weissberg, R. (2000). Social and emotional learning: A framework for promoting mental health and reducing risk behavior in children and youth. *Journal of School Health*, 70(5), 179–85.
- Pyles, L., & Adam, G. (2016). *Holistic engagement: Transformative social work education in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rempel, K. (2012). Mindfulness for children and youth: A review of the literature with an argument for school-based implementation. *Canadian Journal of Counselling Psychotherapy*, 46(3), 201-220.
- Roeser, R., & Peck, S. (2009). An education in awareness: Self, motivation, and self-regulated learning in contemplative perspective. *Educational Psychology*, 44(2), 119–146. doi: 10.1080/00461520902832376

- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: Understanding qualitative research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Saltzman, A. & Goldin, P. (2008). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for school-age children. *Acceptance and Mindfulness Treatments for Children and Adolescents*, 140–161.
- Schonert-Reichl, K.A, Oberle, E., Lawlor, M.S., Abbot, D., Thomson, K., Oberlander, T.F., & Diamond, A. (2015). Enhancing cognitive and social-emotional development through a simple-to-administer mindfulness-based school program for elementary school children: A randomized controlled trial. *Developmental Psychology*, 51(1), 52–66. doi: 10.1037/a0038454
- Seligman, M. E. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35(3), 293–311. doi:10.1080/03054980902934563
- Semple, R. J., & Lee, J. (2008). Treating anxiety with mindfulness: Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children. In L. A. Greco & S. C. Hayes (Eds.), *Acceptance and mindfulness interventions for children, adolescents, and families* (p. 94–34). Oakland, CA: Context Press/New Harbinger Publications.
- Semple, R.J, Lee, J., Rosa, D., & Miller, L. (2010). A randomized trial of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children: Promoting mindful attention to enhance social-emotional resiliency in children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 19(2), 218–229. doi: 10.1007/s10826-009-9301-y

- Shoeberlein, D., & Sheth, S. (2009). *Mindful teaching and teaching mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Singh, N., Lancioni, G., Winton, A., & Karazsia, B. (2013). Mindfulness training for teachers changes the behavior of their preschool students. *Research in Human Development, 10*(3), 211–233. doi: 10.1080/15427609.2013.818484
- Singh, N., Wahler, R., Adkins, A., & Myers, R. (2003). Soles of the feet: A mindfulness-based self control intervention by an individual with mild mental retardation and mental illness. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 24*(3), 158–69. doi: 10.1016/S0891-4222(03)00026-X
- Stratton, S. (2015). Mindfulness and contemplation: Secular and religious traditions in Western context. *Counseling Values, 60*(1), 100–18. doi: org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2015.00063.x
- Stuart, C., Fulton, R., Kroll, T., Rapuano, J., & McMillan, C. (2008). Child and youth care practitioners contributions to evidence-based practice in group care: Final report. *Final Report, 3*(4), 1–94
- Sweat, R. (2004). Whatever Happened to Childhood? *Society and Culture* (Spring). Retrieved from <https://www.vision.org/whatever-happened-childhood-1137>
- The Ruler approach. (2019). New Haven, CT: Yale University. Retrieved from <https://www.rulerapproach.org/about-us/contributorscollaborators/>

- Thomas, J. & Harden, A. (2005). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8(45), 1–10. doi: 10.1186/1471-2288-8-45
- Van Gordon, W., & Griffiths, M. D. (2015). For mindful teaching of mindfulness. *The Psychologist*, 28(7), 514–515.
- Weare, K. (2013). Developing mindfulness with children and young people: A review of the evidence and policy context. *Journal of Children's Services*, 1–30.
- Weissberg, P. J., & Kumpfer, P. (2003). The positive impact of social and emotional learning. *American Psychologist*, 58(6-7), 425–432.
- Zelazo, P. D., & Lyons, K. E. (2012). The potential benefits of mindfulness training in early childhood: A developmental social cognitive neuroscience perspective. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 154–160. doi:10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00241.x
- Zepeda, S. (2012). *Professional Development: What Works* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Zins, J., Bloodworth, M., Weissberg, R., & Walberg, H. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17(2–3), 191–210. doi: 10.1080/10474410701413145
- Zones of regulation - Overview. (n.d.). Midhurst, ON: Simcoe County Early Intervention Services. Retrieved from <https://www.simcoe.ca/ChildrenandCommunityServices/Documents/EarlyIntervention/ZonesofRegulation.pdf>

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Defining Approaches Utilized by Educators

*MindUp*: It offers a teaching framework and comes in a large booklet format with specific modules for educators to follow. MindUp’s primary goals are to help students develop social and emotional learning (SEL) skills and to create positive learning environments, as well as to reduce stress and improve relationships (Hawn Foundation, 2011).

*Zones of Regulation*: An approach used to support the development of self regulation in children. “All the different ways children feel and the states of alertness they experience are categorized into four colored zones. Children who are well regulated are able to be in the appropriate zone at the appropriate time” (Retrieved from <https://www.simcoe.ca/ChildrenandCommunityServices/Documents/Early%20Intervention/Zones%20of%20Regulation.pdf>)

*Mood Meter*: Designed to help us learn to recognize emotions in ourselves and others with increasing subtlety, and to develop strategies for regulating (or managing) those emotions. It provides us with a “language” to talk about our feelings. It is a square divided into four quadrants — red, blue, green, and yellow — each representing a different set of feelings. Different feelings are grouped together on the Mood Meter based on their pleasantness and energy level. (Retrieved from <https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/the-mood-meter-a-tool-for-developing-greater-self-awareness-and-awareness-of-others/>)

*The RULER Approach*: RULER is an evidence-based approach to SEL developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. RULER supports the entire school community in:

understanding the value of emotions, building the skills of emotional intelligence, and creating and maintaining a positive school climate (Retrieved from <https://www.rulerapproach.org/>)

*The Chime:* A bell or bar which when struck sets off a ringing sound which is meant to signal a moment of silence before coming back to awareness after a meditation. Often used during mindfulness practices.

*Exercise Time:* Taking breaks from academic tasks in a classroom setting to run outside or engage in physical activity as an attempt to regulate and better prepare the children to learn.

*Quiet Time/Brain Break:* An approach utilized in the MindUp program. This approach includes short 3-minute breaks where a child or a group of children are asked to quiet their minds in order to prepare their brain to learn.

*Deep Breathing:* The act of intentionally taking deep and long breaths in attempts to promote relaxation. Deep breathing and paying attention to the breath is often a focus in mindfulness practices.

*Visual Imagery:* To use figurative language to represent objects, actions, and ideas in such a way that it appeals to our physical senses. Usually it is thought that imagery makes use of particular words that create visual representation of ideas in our minds. The word “imagery” is associated with mental pictures (Retrieved from <https://literarydevices.net/imagery/>)

*Conversation and Discussion:* Engaging children in conversations regarding mindfulness practice and what it means to be mindful. Incorporating the topic of mindfulness into daily academic tasks (e.g., group story time).

*Restitution:* The process in which children and youth learn self discipline. A constructivist approach to behaviour management.

*Yoga:* A practice which is historically a Hindu spiritual practice, which includes breath control, meditation, as well as specific postures and movements. Often practiced for health and relaxation purposes. Commonly practiced in ‘yoga studios’.

*Mindfulness apps:* Applications that can be downloaded onto smart phones or laptops, many of which offer guided mindfulness meditation, as well as some guided and unguided meditation sessions. (e.g., CALM, Headspace, Breethe)

*TedTalks:* TED is a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less) (Retrieved from <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization>).

*Friends for Life:* A social skills and resilience building program that has been recognized by the World Health Organization as an effective means to prevent anxiety for children aged 8-11 (Retrieved from <https://www.friendsresilience.org/friends-for-life-ages-8-11/>)

## **Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

[Q1]: How did you come to be teaching mindfulness to public elementary school students?

[Q2]: Tell me about your approach to teaching mindfulness to children? Where did you learn about this approach? Why do you use this approach and not others?

[Q3]: What resources do you typically use or refer to for implementing mindfulness into your classroom with children?

[Q4]: What are some of the effects you have noticed mindfulness has had on the children you have taught? What have been some of the unexpected effects?

[Q5]: Have you ever encountered challenges or barriers to teaching mindfulness in a classroom setting? If so, please tell me about them.

[Q6]: Do you have any uncertainties or doubts about teaching mindfulness practice to children?

[Q7]: Do you believe mindfulness is relevant in a school environment? Why or why not?

[Q8]: There has been some controversy regarding whether or not mindfulness being implemented into schools should be discontinued due to the argument of it having Buddhist, religious roots. Please share with me your thoughts about these controversies regarding the place of mindfulness in schools.

[Q9]: Do you feel there is a widespread acceptance and valuing of mindfulness practice in your school? Why or why not?

[Q10]: Would you recommend any changes to the mindfulness approaches your school utilizes – either in content or implementation?

[Q11]: Do you believe there are any barriers or limits for children being mindful in their day-to-day lives?

[Q12]: How has your understanding of mindfulness changed over time? What do you make of the shift in your understanding?

[Q13]: What are some of the biggest questions you have about teaching mindfulness practice to elementary students?

[Q14]: Is there anything more you would like to say or any opinions you would like to share about the inclusion of mindfulness practice with children in school settings before we end our interview?

## **Appendix C: Email Invitation Script**

Dear, \_\_\_\_\_:

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Mindful Children: Exploring the Conceptualization of Mindfulness Practice in Elementary School Settings”, conducted by myself, Jasmine Gaines, a Master of Arts candidate at the University of Victoria. This research is part of a Master of Arts Thesis conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer White and Dr. Daniel Scott. Dr. Jennifer White can be contacted at (250) 721-7986, or by email at [jhwhite@uvic.ca](mailto:jhwhite@uvic.ca). Dr. Daniel Scott can be contacted at [dgscott@uvic.ca](mailto:dgscott@uvic.ca).

The objective of this research is to explore how mindfulness is being conceptualized and taught in elementary classroom settings with children, ages 5-12. I am looking for professionals who are willing to engage in conversation about their experiences and ideas related to mindfulness practice in educational settings, and whose work involves educating children in a school environment. Participants must have at least one year of experience implementing mindfulness practice into their classrooms with children. I was provided with your contact information through your school principal, upon your approval, and I have attached a Participant Consent Form which will provide you with more detailed information about this research project and what would be required of you should you choose to participate. Your role would consist of one hour long interview, conducted in person and in a private room at your workplace, any time after 3:00 p.m. on instructional days.

Information you may provide would be of great value to this study. Please take the time to review the information enclosed in the attached Participant Consent Form and do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or comments, or would like further information about

participating in this research project. Should you choose to participate, we will review and complete the Participant Consent Form prior to the first research interview. I can be reached at [jcgaines@uvic.ca](mailto:jcgaines@uvic.ca), or by phone at 604-724-9706.

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Jasmine Gaines

MA Candidate

Child and Youth Care

University of Victoria

## **Appendix D: Participant Consent Form**

### “Mindful Children”: Exploring the Conceptualization of Mindfulness Practice in Public Elementary School Settings

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Mindful Children”: Exploring the Conceptualization of Mindfulness Practice in Public Elementary School Settings.

Jasmine Gaines is a Master of Arts candidate in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions via e-mail at [e-mail] or [phone number].

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Child and Youth Care. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer White and Dr. Daniel Scott. You may contact my supervisor Jennifer via e-mail at [e-mail] or [phone number].

#### ***Purpose and Objectives***

The objective of the proposed study is to explore how mindfulness is being conceptualized and taught in public elementary school settings with children. Implications for children’s learning and education will then be examined in light of recent approaches to mindfulness principles and practice.

#### ***Importance of this Research***

Understanding how educators conceptualize mindfulness is important because it provides potential for understanding the intentions behind the implementation of mindfulness practice in

public elementary school settings, how the concept of mindfulness is being thought of and utilized within this specific setting, and the specific outcomes that educators have noticed due to practicing mindfulness within a school context. Moreover, implications for children's learning can be explored in light of the research findings. This study will contribute to existing knowledge and literature surrounding the utilization of mindfulness practice with children.

### ***Participants Selection***

You are being asked to participate in this study because mindfulness is a popular approach being implemented into public elementary school settings to combat a variety of challenges that children face and it is educators, like yourself, who are being trained to and/or are taking the initiative to implement mindfulness into classroom settings with children.

### ***What is involved***

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a one hour long (timed), semi-structured, in-person interview. The interview will take place in private area at your workplace, after instructional hours, at a time convenient to you.

The interview will be audiotaped and a transcription of the interview will be completed by myself, the researcher.

### ***Inconvenience***

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, as it may potentially be inconvenient to set aside one hour to engage in an interview after instructional hours. It may also be taxing for you to engage in a one hour-long interview after a full day of work.

### ***Risks***

There is a very remote chance that due to my exploring your personal conceptualizations, views, and beliefs surrounding mindfulness practice and my later analysis, which will be put into writing for the purpose of my thesis, if you read my thesis you may possibly feel emotional or psychological discomfort (i.e. feeling demeaned or embarrassed) due to the findings of my research. You may also experience fatigue or stress from participating in the one-hour long research interviews, as they will be scheduled at the end of a workday.

To mitigate the risk of you feeling emotional or psychological discomfort, I will ensure that my research portrays an exploratory approach and I will be sensitive in the way in which I analyze and deconstruct your responses and the results of my study.

To mitigate the risk for you experiencing fatigue or stress before, during, and after the interview, I will ask if you need to go to the washroom or get water prior to engaging in the interview, I will refine my questions to ensure there are not too many questions for you to answer, I will track time to ensure I stay within exactly one hour for the interview, and you can stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence.

### ***Benefits***

The participant may benefit from interview discussion surrounding the topic of mindfulness practice with children, as it may aid in the approaches they currently utilize and their conceptualization of mindfulness practice. This study may also contribute to the state of knowledge surrounding mindfulness practice and its conceptualization in public elementary school settings, as well as contribute to literature surrounding mindfulness practice with children.

### ***Voluntary Participation***

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be used, unless you deny my permission to do so in this consent form (See below). Should you deny me permission to utilize your data after withdrawing from the study, your data will be permanently destroyed, immediately after withdrawing.

*\*Should you choose to withdraw from this study, do you grant me permission to use your data for the purpose of my thesis? Please check the box beside the response that applies.*

YES, you may use my data even after I choose to withdraw from the study.

NO, you may not use my data after I choose to withdraw from the study.

### ***Researcher's Relationship with Participants***

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as I am a current employee (Casual Education Assistant) with the Burnaby School District and may have potentially worked directly/non-directly with you in the past, and may also in the future. Should you feel uncomfortable about this dynamic, please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

### ***Anonymity***

In terms of protecting your anonymity, you will not be anonymous in the data gathering phase of the research, as I will be able to associate your responses. Though, you will be anonymous in the dissemination of results in my final thesis.

### ***Confidentiality***

The only foreseeable limit to confidentiality in this study is the fact that third party elementary school principals will be assisting me in the recruitment process, though they will not know which individuals agree to participate in the study, and therefore the limitation is not one of issue. Your name will not be associated with your responses in my finalized thesis paper. Instead, a pseudonym (i.e. fictitious name) or a participant label (i.e. “Participant One”) will be utilized and I will eliminate your identifying information (i.e. where you work and which grade you teach) to ensure anonymity and for preserving the confidentiality of your data.

### ***Dissemination of Results***

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways; my final thesis, oral thesis presentation, at scholarly meetings, and on the internet on “UVicSpace”, which can be accessed by the public.

### ***Disposal of Data***

Duration of data storage will be one year from the date of the interviews. This duration is necessary, as it will take approximately five months, post interviews, to transcribe and analyze data, as well as complete the other components of my thesis study. My thesis study may also

require a number of revisions, which requires time and I will need to have access to the data. All paper documents (i.e. consent forms) will be destroyed via a paper shredder in my workplace and all files including raw data will be deleted from my desktop.

### ***Contacts***

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include myself (the researcher) or my thesis supervisor Dr. Jennifer White. Please refer to our contact information at the beginning of this consent form.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

---

*Name of Participant*                      *Signature*                      *Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

Appendix E: Recruitment Poster

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED**



**Title of Thesis Study:** “Mindful Children: Exploring the Implementation of Mindfulness Practice in Public Elementary School Settings” is a thesis study being conducted by myself, Jasmine Gaines, a Master of Arts candidate at the University of Victoria.

**Participants:** Seeking teacher participants who are currently working in public elementary schools and have at least one year of experience implementing mindfulness practice into their classrooms with children. Participants must be willing to engage in conversation about their experiences and ideas related to mindfulness practice in educational settings.

**Purpose:** This study seeks to explore how mindfulness is being conceptualized and taught to children in public elementary school settings. It is my hope that this study will contribute to the state of knowledge surrounding mindfulness practice in public primary education, as well as existing literature surrounding mindfulness practice with children.

**Expectations for Participation:** If interested in participating, one must be willing to volunteer their time to participate in a one-hour long interview, conducted in person and in a private room at their workplace, anytime after 3:00 p.m. on instructional days. Please note that all participants will be thoroughly informed about consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw.

**Contact Information:** Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. If you are interested in participating in this study, please allow your school principal to forward your contact information to me and I will contact you. Please also feel free to contact me via the e-mail address or number below for more information.  
**[e-mail] or [phone number]**