

Fall 12-17-2021

## Mindfulness in Early Childhood Education

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### Repository Citation

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Mindfulness in Early Childhood Education

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Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College

At Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for graduation with University Honors

December 14, 2021

Dr. Collen Boff, University Libraries, Advisor

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## **Introduction**

As human beings, we have many emotions. It is important that we learn how to manage these emotions so that they do not interfere with our daily lives. When it comes to negative emotions like stress and anger, it can be hard to find a positive way to release these feelings. Mindfulness is an increasingly popular strategy used to deal with a variety of emotions. This is a very broad term so exactly, what is mindfulness? Medical professionals, Coleman and Coleman (2019) define mindfulness in their book as “a way to bring the mind into your own control and return perspective, balance, insight, awareness, equanimity, and clarity” (p. vii). Mindfulness includes a variety of strategies such as meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, and gratitude practices. It encourages users to manage their feelings in their mind rather than to act on them with behaviors that could potentially make a situation worse. In the following paper, I will be exploring the concept of mindfulness, the benefits of it, and how it can be used in early childhood classrooms.

As a teacher candidate in 2021, after a global pandemic that caused children and families everywhere to stay in their homes for almost a year, I am seeing a need for mindfulness now more than ever. Due to spending a year at home, most children are an entire year behind in their social and emotional learning (SEL). Teachers were able to send academic work to students virtually, but SEL lessons can only be taught face-to-face. I believe that we need to provide children with proper SEL lessons during the early childhood years so that they can learn how to manage their own emotions and work with others. The best way to do this is by teaching mindfulness to young children at school. Mindfulness should be incorporated into the early childhood classroom in order to obtain this goal and give children those necessary skills to succeed in life.

## **Literature Review**

The need for mindfulness in daily life is quite large and it is a strategy that is only being found to be more and more beneficial. Mindfulness is a practice that can benefit all who use it but if it is implemented at a young age, it has proven to have even more benefits. When using these strategies with children, researchers have found that it improves social and emotional learning, self-regulation, prosocial behavior, and even grades in school (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018; Viglas & Perlman, 2018; Flook et al., 2015).

Mindfulness is often related to the idea of self-awareness. In a 2002 meta-analysis done by Paul J. Silvia, he states that “humans can direct their attention toward the self and thus be aware of their existence. The human capacity for self-awareness creates fundamental personal, social, and cultural consequences”. Silvia’s analysis takes a deep dive into the idea that becoming more self-aware can reduce an individual’s emotional intensity. A few of the theories identified in the analysis assume that “self-awareness dampens emotional experience” (Silvia, 2002). However, this is contrary to his own studies. Four of Silvia’s personal studies are included in his article and found that “experiencing self as subject, creates rich affective feelings and an experience of self-determination” (Silvia, 2002). This idea that self-awareness creates rich feelings and self-determination is referred to by Silvia as “the salience hypothesis.” The salience hypothesis is congruent to many of the other studies that I have found during my research. This analysis reiterates the findings that becoming self-aware can increase a person’s confidence, motivation, and determination.

A group of researchers at the University of New Mexico conducted a study of mindfulness using three- and four-year-old children. The 23 students were divided into two groups and one group received social and emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness-based interventions while the other group did not. The researchers found that “students who received high-quality SEL interventions experienced increases in multiple social–emotional skills,

constructive beliefs and behaviors, and academic performance” (Lemberger-Truelove, 2018, p. 290).

Other researchers have found similar results. One hundred and twenty-seven kindergartners in Canada were selected to participate in a similar study in which 72 students received mindfulness interventions and 55 students did not (Viglas & Perlman, 2018). The children who received mindfulness interventions took part in 20-minute lessons, three times a week, for six weeks. At the end of the study, children in the mindfulness group showed improved self-regulation and less hyperactivity than the children who did not receive the interventions.

### **Proposed Activity**

Mindfulness is a strategy that some may not believe in. However, since there are valid and positive research results on the subject, shouldn't we utilize it more? With the results of these studies, I feel as though mindfulness should be taught to children from a young age and what better place to teach them this skill than at school? For my honors project, I propose a podcast that delves deeply into the concept of mindfulness and provides resources for elementary school teachers to use within their classrooms.

Podcasts are generally a series of audio file episodes that audiences can listen to for educational, training, or entertaining purposes. I plan on creating a scholarly podcast that combines education and technology to inspire teachers.

I anticipate producing three episodes of my podcast but, since I have never produced a podcast before, there may only be time for two. For the first episode, I need to introduce my audience to the topic of mindfulness and why it is beneficial and should be used in elementary classrooms. I have researched this topic because of my interest in it. My interest sparked from information I have learned in my education courses and personal experiences that I have had

with children and mindfulness. I want to give my personal opinions and speak on the research that I have found within this episode.

Along with the benefits of mindfulness for students, I will briefly talk about the benefits of mindfulness for educators. Teaching can be an overwhelming job and it can be hard to see the good in what you are doing at times. Mindfulness can help with these adult feelings. DiCarlo (2020) documented a study that followed three early childhood care teachers over a course of four months. The participants were assessed before and after the experiment using a Perceived Stress Scale. Over the four-month period, the teachers were given Mindfulness Practice Interventions throughout everyday which included yoga, breathing exercises, and guided meditations. After the test period, two out of the three teachers showed lower scores on the Perceived Stress Scale and all of the teachers demonstrated an increased positive classroom climate. These results could make more educators interested in practicing mindfulness. I would like to discuss these benefits for educators in my first episode.

For episode number two, I intend to have a special guest who has experience in working with mindfulness. Monclova Elementary School in Monclova, Ohio currently implements mindfulness strategies into their standard school days. I am looking into interviewing someone from this school to get a better understanding of how well these ideas actually work with students. My guest and I will talk about how mindfulness can be used in classrooms and their personal experiences with the topic. This will provide my listeners with realistic information from educators who have experienced mindfulness with students first-hand. It can be hard to fully accept research results without any personal connections. Episode number two will allow listeners to find these connections.

This podcast is important for educators because it will not only inform them of a subject that they might not be aware of, but it will also provide some useful resources. Mindfulness is a mindset of calmness that needs to be taught but, mindsets are definitely not an easy lesson to teach. Luckily, there are many resources available that can begin the conversation. In the third episode of my podcast, I will introduce many resources that could be used in classrooms to teach mindfulness. One medium that is frequently used in classrooms is children's books. Children's books are a way to introduce kids to easy topics, harder topics, and everything in between. *I am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness* by Susan Verde is a good book to introduce the idea of mindfulness to students. The #1 *New York Times* Bestselling author, Verde, tells the story of a child going through an overwhelming moment and then demonstrates how they are able to find peace and stay calm. This is a moment that most children can relate to. If a teacher reads this book aloud and includes mindfulness strategies in their classroom more and more, students will start to use these strategies for themselves. In this episode of my podcast, I will discuss books, videos, physical resources, and even more tools that can be used within classrooms.

I plan on creating a website platform to accompany my podcast. This will be a simple platform where I can house information, details, resources, and potentially the podcast itself. This will provide a place for my listeners to learn more and see some visuals on the subject. The website is just an additional resource for my project whereas the podcast will really be the main focus.

This podcast seeks to inform educators about mindfulness and inspire them to use it in their own classrooms. It will provide research, personal opinions, known facts, and helpful resources. Teachers can use this information as they please to help their students. Children need a sense of calm in their lives, especially this day in age. Mindfulness strategies can help children find calmness in a world that is anything but.

## Methods

In the spring of 2021, I decided that I wanted to follow the plan that is stated in the above section. However, once beginning the research for my honors project, I found myself in an entirely new direction. I started reaching out to people in the field and each conversation sparked a new curiosity inside of me. I wanted to talk to as many different people, in the field of education, as possible. I found the research to be extremely interesting and it consumed the majority of my fall semester. I also did not realize how much time and work went into creating a podcast. Instead of releasing the three episodes that I was planning on, I focused on my research and summed up my findings in just one, very detailed, podcast episode.

As a freshman at Bowling Green State University, I had the opportunity to visit a variety of schools in my Introduction to Education course. One school that we visited was Monclova Elementary school, and Monclova left a lasting impression on me because of their work with mindfulness. I remembered the principal telling us about their mindfulness program and how they even had an in-house mindfulness coach that worked closely with the students and staff. The principal of this school was the first person that I contacted during my research process. She responded via email and told me that they have been implementing these practices for five years now. (B. Murry, personal communication, October 6, 2021). The mindfulness coach is no longer needed because teachers understand how to use and teach these practices themselves now. Students learn and practice mindfulness strategies each year and they carry them with them throughout their time at Monclova. The guidance counselor also teaches a lesson on stress with a pre and post-test. This lesson has been found to be beneficial especially around the time that the third graders are taking their first standardized assessment.

The next person that I talked to was Dr. Joel Sutton. One of my advisors, Christopher Cavera, is familiar with Dr. Sutton's work and directed me toward him. Dr. Sutton got his bachelor's degree at BGSU and began working as a school psychologist. After that he got his master's, and then his PhD in counseling education at the University of Toledo and helped to start the Independence of Education Center (IEC) in Northwest Ohio. Currently, Dr. Sutton works for the Perrysburg Counseling Center, continuing to help individuals better their lives. I had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Sutton over the phone for a little over an hour (J. Sutton, personal communication, October 15, 2021). He is very well-versed in the area of mindfulness. Mindfulness played a large part in his role at the IEC. The IEC is a self-contained building for students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade that need intensive behavior support in order to reach their educational goals. Dr. Sutton believes that mindfulness can be defined as "taking somebody in a panic state and getting them into a calmer state so they can figure out what they need to do to relieve the panic." He was often working with students during these panic states at the IEC and so he had to provide them with mental tools to use during these difficult periods.

Dr. Sutton has used a wide variety of mindfulness strategies throughout his time as a counselor and school psychologist. His overall goal with these techniques is to build up children's internal resources so that eventually they can figure out what they need on their own. He likes to use grounding techniques, breathing exercises, relaxation stations, coping phrases, sensory objects, and drumming circles. All these strategies help ground children and focus them on the present moment. He has developed these techniques over time and has seen significant results. Dr. Sutton is a strong believer in teaching mindfulness skills to children to "decrease symptoms of ADHD, improve behavior during school transitions, self-calm, self-soothe, and

self-regulate their emotions, [and] learn to work together to create a non-verbal shared experience.” These are just a few of the benefits that he has seen come from teaching mindfulness to young children. Dr. Sutton was a very great resource for my research, and he has also provided me with many other places to find more information on this topic. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to connect with him.

At my elementary school, there was a third-grade teacher that would dress up in silly costumes and read us stories in character. This is a memory that has stood out in my head for many years so when I saw that teacher on Twitter giving a lesson about mindful breathing, I had to reach out to her! Her name is Kristen Johnson, and she is the current guidance counselor at Grindstone Elementary school in northeast Ohio. Mrs. Johnson was kind enough to talk with me via Zoom and we had an amazing conversation that lasted for one hour (K. Johnson, personal communication, November 16, 2021). She told me about her role as the guidance counselor and all of the initiatives that she has taken on. She has begun doing lunch groups with students who need a little bit more help but would not quite benefit from a one-on-one session. Specific students are nominated for these lunch groups by their teachers, their families, or even themselves and they get to eat lunch with Mrs. Johnson and some friends. During these lunch periods, the students are usually taught a lesson about some form of mindfulness. They generally talk about their zones of regulation, maybe complete an activity related to the topic of the lesson and learn a new coping technique to keep in their self-regulation toolbox. The students that participate in lunch groups are generally excited to see Mrs. Johnson and participate in her lesson. Most students view this opportunity as a special thing that they are lucky enough to get to do, and so they want to engage and learn something new. Mrs. Johnson has seen numerous benefits from her work with mindfulness. She believes that students are more able to identify

their emotions and know that however they are feeling, it's okay to feel that way. She also teaches appropriate clean-up of actions such as apologizing and resolving disagreements between peers. Once these vital skills are taught to students, she is able to see them using the skills properly on their own. The teachers at Grindstone Elementary have also noticed positive impacts of Mrs. Johnson's work with students and mindfulness. Grindstone is very lucky to have a guidance counselor that puts so much care and effort into everything that she does.

The final person with whom I spoke was Nicole Picciano. Nicole is a current senior in Bowling Green State University's Inclusive Early Childhood (IEC) education program. As a senior in IEC, she has already completed a full year of student teaching in preschool, and is onto her second placement, this year, in a kindergarten setting. I interviewed Nicole in person, and we talked for about 30 minutes (N. Picciano, personal communication, December 3, 2021). Nicole and I discussed how she defines mindfulness, how she has seen it used in elementary classrooms, and how it has affected her students. At her placement, Nicole's students do calming yoga every morning and are also given time for it after recess. She has noticed that students are much calmer and more focused after they do these exercises. She believes that it makes them more ready to learn, and easier to teach. Being able to see these skills used in the classroom today, will definitely make student teachers more likely to use mindfulness in their own future classrooms.

Once all of my research was completed, I compiled my findings and developed an outline for the podcast episode. I divided the outline into three parts, that would each be divided into smaller topics, and separated with differentiating audio clips. Then, I went to BGSU's recording studio and started recording. I did not realize how hard it is to talk for a long time, and how much time goes into creating a podcast. My advisor and I spent over four hours on recording and editing a 17-minute-long episode. I feel that the final product is well-developed and packed full

of useful information for early childhood educators. I am extremely excited to share my cumulative results with the world, via this podcast episode.

### **Expected Results**

When I first developed this project idea, I expected there to already be a good amount of research on the topic. I wanted to find research that supports the idea that mindfulness can and should be used in early childhood classrooms. I believe that mindfulness can help children identify their emotions sooner, self-regulate better, and be more focused during the school day. I expected to find a great deal of research on this topic, with similar results. Especially at the rate at which mindfulness is growing, I thought many people would have already investigated its benefits on children. I thought that I would be able to do a deep dive into the literature and compare it to what people in the field are actually seeing. I always wanted to talk to educators and hear what they are witnessing, firsthand.

As previously mentioned, I intended on creating multiple podcast episodes. I wanted to produce an episode for each topic that I was going to cover. I enjoy talking and thought that I would be able to go on and on about my subject and the research that I had done. The expected result was a podcast trio that would be beneficial for people who are interested in mindfulness and involved in early childhood education. This production would have made my research more accessible for classroom teachers, my intended audience, because they could listen to it during almost any part of their busy day-to-day lives.

### **Actual Results**

When trying to find research that was done on my topic, I found quite the opposite of my expectations. There were few articles written on mindfulness in education, and even fewer on its impacts in early childhood education. I was looking for articles that focused on mindfulness and

self-regulation and prosocial behaviors. However, most of what I found discussed mindfulness in terms of anxiety and stress reduction. The research that I found, also, was primarily related to older children and my interest is in early childhood. After filtering through many more studies, I found a few articles that were related to my topic and provided some really good information. I found studies related to young children, and the benefits of mindfulness. This research can be found in the above *Literature Review* section of this research paper.

I was very excited to speak with people that work in the field of education, using mindfulness. I got the chance to hear about mindfulness from multiple viewpoints and their findings lined up with my expectations somewhat. Those that use mindfulness in early childhood classrooms have seen numerous benefits. The benefits vary but each educator has seen mindfulness affect their students in many positive ways. These results are based on pre- and post- data, teacher observations, and their personal opinions. While talking with teachers, I was also able to find new mindfulness resources for classroom teachers to try. This was helpful when creating the podcast episode and it provided me with new ideas for my own future classroom.

As for the podcast, I did not realize how much time and effort went into a podcast. I thought that I would be able to talk for a while on my topic, but it ended up not being that way. I had a detailed outline, with key talking points and after recording for two hours, I only had 15 minutes of audio. We edited the production and added some additional audio to enhance the listening experience. After this, I really commend podcast creators because it can be difficult to talk for so long on a single topic. However, I feel that my podcast is well-developed and very informative. Here is the link to listen to the podcast episode *Mindfulness in Early Childhood Education*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g06I4fEdCuU&t=8s>. I am very proud of it and think that it will be a great professional development tool for early childhood educators.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This research is a great baseline idea for the topic of mindfulness in early childhood education. It provides a great idea that needs to be developed further. I hope that after listening to my discussions with teachers, researchers will turn to them more. Educators are with their students every day and they can witness the real changes of mindfulness inside their classrooms. I think that there should be some form of testing done with the students to see the actual results of mindfulness lessons, but the teachers can also be a great asset to turn to for more information. I hope that my research can open more minds to the benefits of mindfulness in early childhood education and make others want to look into it for themselves. I also think that the podcast I created would be a great professional development opportunity for educators. It is a great introductory lesson for individuals who may not be familiar with mindfulness, and it provides implementation ideas for classroom teachers. Hopefully, this project will impact the future of mindfulness in early childhood education, in a positive way.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, mindfulness is a strategy that can benefit people of all ages. However, the research for children in early childhood is minimal. I was able to find some studies on the subject and I analyzed them to assess the information. Then, I took these studies and my personal opinions and compared them to the views of educators. Early childhood educators that practice mindfulness with their students are seeing significant benefits because of it. All of this research was compiled into a well-developed podcast episode that can be found on YouTube. This podcast episode will impact the research on mindfulness and how early childhood educators use it in their classrooms.

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