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Mindful Moments: Strategies for Alleviating Anxiety in Elementary Students, Both Onsite and Online

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ABSTRACT

Anxiety in young children has increasingly become a significant concern for classroom teachers in recent years. This issue not only disrupts the learning environment but also contributes to a range of other health-related problems. If left unaddressed, childhood anxiety can lead to long-term mental health issues such as depression and social isolation, as children become accustomed to coping with anxiety daily. Recognizing the urgency of this problem, this curriculum project was developed to design and implement a series of mindfulness lessons aimed at alleviating anxiety among second-grade students. Initially, these lessons were delivered in person on a weekly basis. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to remote learning. Despite this transition, the mindfulness activities continued to be delivered through online instruction, providing significant benefits to the young students during this challenging period. The primary objective of this qualitative action research study was to create and evaluate mindfulness-based interventions as a viable approach to enhancing student learning and emotional well-being in the classroom. The study's results indicated that mindfulness-based interventions were highly effective in both settings. Teachers reported noticeable improvements in students' ability to manage anxiety and enhance their overall emotional well-being. Consequently, the study recommends incorporating mindfulness practices into the daily routines of elementary schools to foster a supportive and nurturing learning environment. This approach not only addresses immediate anxiety-related issues but also contributes to the long-term mental health and resilience of young students.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Technology-enhanced Instruction, Childhood Anxiety, social-emotional learning

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1 INTRODUCTION

Childhood anxiety disrupts learning and can lead to long-term mental health issues. Understanding the causes of anxiety and implementing effective strategies is crucial. The rise of mental health issues has resulted in a surplus of challenges, particularly concerning students' health. Frequently, health-related concerns cause students to miss instructional time, whether due to visits to the school nurse or being absent from school entirely. Additionally, childhood anxiety often disrupts students' ability to concentrate and stay attentive during lessons. In some instances, this anxiety can also manifest as problematic behavior. Over time, consistently managing anxiety may contribute to the development of more serious mental health conditions. Stern (2009) noted the importance of understanding excessive worry linked with anxiety to help cope with it. This study integrated mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) into the curriculum at Pineview Elementary School (name changed) to alleviate anxiety and provide students with lifelong coping strategies. Faculty observed that students were missing class time due to anxiety-related health issues and exhibiting decreased focus and problematic behaviors. The implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies, including mindfulness practices, aimed to help students manage stress and reduce worry. Holland et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of providing SEL prevention strategies early to children at risk. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of implementing mindfulness-based strategies with second-grade students.

2 STUDY CONTEXT

Pineview Elementary School, a small private school, has adopted a whole-child educational approach that emphasizes the development of students' social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive aspects (Slade & Griffith, 2013). While the school provided a supportive environment with highly involved parents, this high level of expectation contributed to student anxiety, particularly surrounding assessments. The school nurse reported frequent visits due to stress-related complaints, and teachers across grade levels observed heightened negative behaviors during recent years. The anxiety observed at Pineview Elementary paralleled that seen in other schools across the country (Kuzujanakis, 2021). The teacher who initiated the MBI program discussed her plan to use MBIs with the rest of the faculty and hoped that MBIs would have a positive impact on students' emotional well-being, especially before test-taking. The faculty agreed, and informal mindfulness techniques were introduced as brain breaks and to help students transition between subjects. Other mindfulness techniques taught were yoga, breathwork, and guided meditation to help students manage anxiety.

The study initially focused on second-grade students displaying anxiety before tests and during transitions between classes. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift to remote instruction in mid-2020, MBI delivery adapted to online platforms using Zoom, enabling the continuity of mindfulness practices and maintaining community connections during an uncertain time.

Practicing mindfulness has a profound impact on many facets of a student's character, including empathy, self-awareness, and communication skills. The goal was to enable teachers to identify signs of worry, anxiety, and stress in students and provide teachers with effective strategies to help students address and cope with their anxieties.

3 BACKGROUND LITERATURE

3.1 Social-Emotional Learning and Mindfulness

SEL promotes students' emotional and social competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011). The purpose of teaching SEL skills is to help students recognize "their thoughts and emotions, to become more self-aware, and to develop more empathy for others within their community and the world around them" (National University, 2024, para. 3). Mindfulness supports SEL by promoting self-awareness and self-management (Lawlor, 2016). Techniques like mindful breathing and meditation help students regulate emotions and behaviors. SEL competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Research shows that SEL and mindfulness practices reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and enhance academic outcomes (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Lobman, 2014). Mindfulness-based interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in elementary settings, with over 20 years of research supporting the use of yoga and mindfulness as tools for improving mental well-being (Bazzano et al., 2018).

Mindfulness training involves cultivating conscious attention and awareness of the present moment. "Mindfulness training involves the cultivation of conscious attention and awareness to the present moment. This intentional practice … may include such practices as mindful breathing, open awareness meditation, walking meditation, and focusing on sensations in the body" (Lawlor, 2016, p. 66). Other practices, such as sitting meditation, walking meditation, and body scans, support SEL competencies (Mindfulness Exercises, n.d.). These skills can be developed through digital modules, physical activities like yoga, and a well-designed school curriculum. Mindfulness also enhances social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

3.2 Childhood Anxiety and Interventions

Understanding the causes of anxiety is essential for effective intervention. Factors include family environment, parenting styles, and socioeconomic status (Laurin et al., 2015). Overprotective parenting can increase anxiety in children (McLaughlin et al., 2008). Educators and parents should learn to recognize the attributes of childhood anxiety and consider the differences between normal worry and excessive worry leading to anxiety. Symptoms of anxiety in children can manifest as

crying or worrying more than other children of their same age. They may often complain of feeling sick or having a headache. Other signs may include trouble sleeping, difficulty sitting still, easily becoming upset, refusing to attend school, or frequently asking to use the bathroom (Anxiety in Children, n.d.). Childhood anxiety disorders typically display more extreme behaviors and last for longer periods.

Ten to twenty percent of youth are diagnosed with mental disorders that significantly impact psychosocial adjustment (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2017). MBIs have shown success in reducing anxiety symptoms and improving empathy and emotional control in elementary-age children. Technology-supported mindfulness tools, including apps such as GoNoodle, Calm, and Mind Yeti, as well as platforms like YouTube and AI assistants, offer accessible resources for teaching mindfulness techniques in both classroom and home settings (Agapito et al., 2023; Quattrini & Solano, 2024).

3.3 Strategies to Alleviate Childhood Anxiety

Mindfulness-based interventions have positive effects on anxiety symptoms in children, leading to increased empathy and better emotional control. Studies suggest that MBIs are beneficial for elementary-aged children with mental health disorders. Implementing mindfulness and yoga in the classroom has shown positive effects on children's mental health and well-being, reducing stress and anxiety (Bazzano et al., 2018; Lobman, 2014).

Schools are increasingly exploring ways to enhance SEL curriculum in classrooms, as has been shown to reduce stress and support children's psychosocial development. Many adolescents report stress, particularly related to academic pressures, which can negatively affect their health and lead to anxiety. Bazzano et al. (2018) noted that over 20 years of research support yoga and mindfulness as effective tools for improving mental well-being and managing stress (p. 81). Their findings highlight the growing adoption of mindfulness practices in U.S. classrooms over the past decade, with positive outcomes for students. Given its benefits, experts recommend integrating SEL into K–12 education and even embedding it into state curricula (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Mindfulness practices have long-term benefits, including improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety (Saavedra et al., 2010). Positive parenting and supportive environments also contribute to better mental health outcomes (Jakobsen et al., 2012). Cognitive behavioral treatments share strategies with mindfulness, such as meditation and calming thoughts, which help manage anxiety. Long-term studies have shown that mindfulness and positive parenting can reduce the risk of developing internalizing disorders like anxiety and depression. Supportive parenting styles that encourage independence and confidence in children can lessen the long-term effects of anxiety. Mindfulness practices can help children develop lifelong skills for managing stress and maintaining mental health.

3.4 Technology-supported Mindfulness Instruction

Technology provides accessible tools for mindfulness instruction, including apps, videos, podcasts, and virtual assistants like Google Nest, Siri, and Alexa (Agapito et al., 2023). Digital content creators have provided multiple resources, many for free, to help individuals reduce stress, practice mindful moments, and achieve overall mental wellness (Agapito et al. 2023; Sevilla-Llewellyn-Jones et al., 2018). Online resources and organizations offer free materials and training so that educators can integrate mindfulness into their classrooms. Multimedia mindfulness resources have been used successfully in education and healthcare (Parsons et al., 2022). Furthermore, students with access to technology at home can use it to practice mindfulness in their own time, although it may be more challenging unless the time is regularly scheduled.

Apps like GoNoodle, Stop, Breathe and Think, Calm, Ninja Focus, and Mind Yeti provide guided breathing exercises, videos, and support for teaching mindfulness techniques. These tools help students deal with stress and control their breathing to process difficult emotions (Quattrini & Solano, 2024). Regular practice of mindfulness using technology can help students and teachers become more aware of their bodily sensations and reduce anxiety. When used correctly, technology-supported mindfulness tools can improve the student learning experience and help the next generation of students be more resilient, calm, and focused.

4 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative action research study collected data through document review, classroom observations, and an open-ended questionnaire. An MBI curriculum was collaboratively designed by the classroom teacher, researcher, and professional yoga instructor, incorporating breathwork, guided practice, soothing sounds, and yoga. Four teachers evaluated the curriculum via questionnaire, and their feedback informed revisions. Four lessons were introduced weekly over a one-month period, with practices repeated 2-3 times a week. When the pandemic necessitated remote instruction, the curriculum was adapted for online delivery via Zoom, maintaining mindfulness sessions throughout the remainder of the school year.

4.1 In-Person Mindfulness Activities

The teacher introduced breathwork and yoga, utilizing YouTube resources and the book “Good Morning Yoga” (Gates, 2016). Alexa provided soothing music during meditation. Popular activities included Rainbow Breathing and Butterfly Breathing meditations (Aggarwal, n.d.; Elfenworks Foundation, 2010; The Mindfulness Teacher, 2024), as well as story-based yoga from the Cosmic Kids Yoga channel. On days requiring deeper calm, students engaged in body scan activities.

The classroom teacher also used the YouTube channel "Cosmic Kids Yoga" to create fun mindfulness activities based on popular books. The children were led through engaging stories incorporating yoga, which they looked forward to. On days when total calmness was needed, Alexa played calming music, and students participated in "body scan" activities to gain relaxation and calmness.

4.2 Remote Mindfulness Adaptation

The transition to remote learning allowed students to continue MBI practices virtually. Optional Zoom sessions-maintained community and provided anxiety relief during pandemic uncertainty. Second-grade students also participated in special sessions with middle school students, featuring guided drawing and a “Dragon ABC” breathing exercise aligned with the school’s dragon mascot, which helped students focus and manage anxiety.

5 RESULTS

The study yielded rich qualitative data from multiple sources: curriculum evaluation questionnaires completed by four experienced teachers, classroom observations conducted throughout the implementation period, and documented student responses during both in-person and remote instruction. Analysis of these data sources revealed five major themes regarding the effectiveness and implementation of the MBI curriculum.

5.1 Curriculum Evaluation: Teacher Feedback

All four participating teachers (100%) unanimously agreed that the MBI curriculum was developmentally appropriate for second-grade students. Table 1 summarizes the key themes that emerged from the teacher questionnaire responses, with frequency counts indicating the number of participants who mentioned each theme.

Table 1 - Teacher Questionnaire Response Themes and Frequency

Theme	Frequency (n=4)	Representative Comments
Age-Appropriate & Relevant	4 (100%)	*"The lessons directly addressed feelings and situations second graders encountered daily."* *"Students were highly engaged with the materials."*
Addresses Stress & Anxiety	4 (100%)	*"Students showed visible relief when practicing breathwork before assessments."* *"There was a noticeable difference of calmer students when we did a mindfulness activity before their weekly spelling tests."* *"I used them often to help calm students who were having a meltdown or fighting with one another."*
Effective Breathwork Techniques	4 (100%)	*"Butterfly breathing and rainbow breathing were student favorites and most requested."* *"After they learned the mindfulness techniques, students were seen doing them on their own to reduce their stress."*
Technology Integration Success	4 (100%)	*"Using Alexa for calming music and YouTube for yoga made the practices engaging and modern."* *"The students were very excited to open a mindfulness app and follow along with the strategy."*
Promotes Social Skills	4 (100%)	*"Community circles encouraged respectful sharing and non-judgmental listening."* *"Several of the strategies taught them listening skills, patience, and being friendly."* *"Mindfulness practices helped the students to be more thoughtful, compassionate, and respectful of their peers."*
Clear Objectives & Structure	3 (75%)	*"Lesson plans were well-organized with clear learning goals."* *"The mindfulness lessons were used strategically in the lesson before assessments and quizzes."*
Opportunities for Reflection	3 (75%)	*"Discussion and written reflection deepened understanding of mindfulness concepts."* *"Students who did not have strong writing skills were encouraged to color pictures to represent their feelings and then share them with the class."*
Suggestions for Improvement	2 (50%)	*"Consider removing manipulatives during meditation to reduce distractions."* *"The use of straws with the students may be problematic."*

Teachers particularly emphasized the curriculum's relevance to students' daily lives. One evaluator noted, "The activities are directly connected to situations students face, like test anxiety and difficulty concentrating during transitions." This alignment with students' lived experiences appeared crucial to engagement and adoption of mindfulness practices.

5.2 Student Engagement and Behavioral Observations

Classroom observations revealed notable patterns in student engagement with different MBI activities. Table 2 presents observed student preferences and participation patterns during the four-week initial implementation period.

Table 2 - Student Engagement Levels by MBI Activity Type

Activity Type	High Engagement	Participation Rate	Notable Observations
Rainbow Breathing	✓✓✓	95-100%	Students frequently requested this activity A visible calming effect was observed Helped to reduce stress
Butterfly Breathing	✓✓✓	95-100%	Most popular technique Students used independently during stressful situations Better focus and attention on activities after this technique
Cosmic Kids Yoga (video)	✓✓✓	90-95%	Story-based format is highly engaging Students anticipated weekly sessions The music and calming sounds helped to guide their movements and increase engagement
Body Scan with Music	✓✓	80-85%	Effective for high-energy days Some students found extended stillness challenging Taught students to self-regulate their emotions
Guided Meditation	✓✓	75-85%	Engagement improved over time as students became familiar with the practice Focusing on their breathing and body helped to calm their minds
Community Circle Discussion	✓✓	85-90%	Participation improved during group activities Students demonstrated respect and active listening with each other

Observation notes documented that breathing exercises, particularly Rainbow Breathing and Butterfly Breathing, became student favorites. After the initial four-week introduction period, students began to use these techniques spontaneously during stressful moments. For example, the classroom teacher noted in week six that three students independently initiated Butterfly Breathing while waiting for a spelling assessment to begin. This spontaneous adoption suggests internalization of mindfulness strategies.

Technology integration proved highly effective for engagement. The use of Alexa to play calming nature sounds or instrumental music created an ambient environment conducive to relaxation. Students showed particular enthusiasm for multimedia elements, with one student commenting*, "I like it when we use the videos because it makes it fun and easier to follow along."* The visual and auditory components appeared to be scaffold learning for students who struggled with purely verbal instructions.

5.3 Anxiety-Related Behavioral Changes

Although formal quantitative measures were not employed, teachers and school staff documented observable changes in anxiety-related behaviors. The school nurse maintained informal records of health-related visits and provided anecdotal feedback on patterns observed during the study period.

Prior to MBI implementation (September-November 2019), the school nurse reported an average of 4-6 anxiety-related visits per week from second-grade students, typically manifesting as stomachaches, headaches, or requests to call parents. During the MBI implementation period (December-March, pre-pandemic), the nurse noted a reduction to approximately 2-3 such visits per week. One student who had been visiting the nurse's office 2-3 times weekly for stress-related complaints showed marked improvement, with only one visit during the final four weeks of in-person instruction.

Teachers across different subject areas also observed changes in student behavior. The music teacher, who was not directly involved in the MBI curriculum implementation, reported noticing that second-grade students appeared "calmer and more focused" during their weekly sessions, particularly during the winter months when anxiety levels had been highest previously. Similarly, the physical education teacher noted a decrease in behavioral incidents during the study period compared to the previous academic year.

Specific examples of behavioral changes included an increased willingness to attempt challenging academic tasks without expressing excessive worry, a reduced frequency of negative self-talk statements (e.g., "I can't do this" or "I'm going to fail"), and an improved ability to transition between activities without displaying frustration or anxiety. The classroom teacher documented in her observation journal that students who previously required extensive reassurance before

assessments began using breathwork techniques independently, reducing their need for teacher intervention.

5.4 Remote Learning Adaptation and Outcomes

When the pandemic necessitated a shift to remote instruction in mid-March 2020, the continuation of MBI practices took on additional significance. The optional mindfulness Zoom sessions, held three times weekly, served dual purposes: maintaining MBI practice and providing social-emotional support during uncertain times.

Attendance data for the remote mindfulness sessions revealed a strong interest among students. Of the 18 second-grade students, an average of 14-16 students (78-89%) attended each session, despite its optional nature. This attendance rate exceeded that of other optional enrichment activities offered during the same period. Parents reported that their children looked forward to these sessions, with several families noting that the mindfulness practices helped establish routine and provided comfort during the disruption of normal school life.

The remote format required adaptations to the original curriculum. Interactive elements that worked well in person, such as yoga poses requiring space to move, proved challenging in some home environments. However, breathing exercises and guided meditations translated effectively to the virtual format. The teacher adapted by focusing more heavily on breathwork and shorter, seated mindfulness activities that could be completed in a limited space.

An innovative addition during remote learning was the partnership with middle school students, which led to guided drawing activities and Dragon ABC breathing exercises with second graders. These intergenerational sessions occurred bi-weekly and were consistently well-attended (85-95% participation rate). The second-grade teacher observed that these sessions provided an important sense of connection and normalcy, with students engaging enthusiastically with their older peers despite the virtual barrier.

Parent feedback, collected through informal communication, indicated appreciation for the continued mindfulness instruction. Several parents reported that their children-initiated mindfulness techniques at home without prompting, suggesting transfer of skills beyond the school setting. One parent shared, *"My daughter now asks to do 'rainbow breathing' when she's feeling worried about something. It's amazing to see her using these tools on her own."*

5.5 Curriculum Refinements Based on Feedback

The evaluation process yielded specific, actionable suggestions for curriculum improvement. While overall feedback was overwhelmingly positive, teachers identified areas for refinement that were incorporated into revised lesson plans.

The most frequently mentioned suggestion (noted by 2 of 4 evaluators, 50%) concerned the use of manipulatives during meditation activities. Teachers observed that while some students found tactile objects helpful for focus, others became distracted by them. Based on this feedback, the revised curriculum made manipulatives optional rather than required, allowing teachers to determine their use based on individual student needs and classroom dynamics.

Evaluators also suggested adding more visual examples to support vocabulary instruction related to mindfulness concepts. Terms like "mindfulness," "awareness," and "intentional breathing" were abstract for some second graders. The revised curriculum incorporated visual anchors, including simple diagrams and picture cues, to make these concepts more accessible and understandable. Additionally, more explicit modeling of techniques was added to the lesson plans based on evaluator feedback, indicating that demonstrations were crucial for student success.

Three evaluators (75%) commented on the effectiveness of the scaffolded approach, where vocabulary was introduced gradually and reinforced across lessons. They recommended maintaining this progressive structure in future implementations. The curriculum's clear objectives and logical progression from simple to complex techniques were highlighted as strengths that should be preserved in any revisions.

6 DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the MBI curriculum was developmentally appropriate and effective in addressing student anxiety. The unanimous agreement among teacher evaluators regarding age-appropriateness aligns with research by Bazzano et al. (2018) and Bridgeland et al. (2013), who emphasized the importance of developmentally suitable mindfulness interventions. The observed reductions in nurse visits and behavioral improvements support findings by Vickery and Dorjee (2016) that MBIs increase student engagement and positive behavior. Participants unanimously agreed that the resources and activities were age-appropriate and beneficial, supporting findings by Bazzano et al. (2018), Bridgeland and Hariharan (2013), Felver et al. (2016), and Gerszberg (2020).

Technology integration emerged as a significant strength, with students responding enthusiastically to multimedia elements. This finding aligns with Karadjova-Kozhuharova and Baker (2022), who highlighted technology's role in reducing stress and enhancing learning. The

successful use of YouTube videos, Alexa for ambient sound, and virtual platforms suggests that technology can effectively support mindfulness instruction when thoughtfully integrated.

The curriculum's emphasis on community circles and discussion opportunities strengthened students' social skills and ability to share respectfully, supporting the SEL framework. These findings parallel research by Diamond and Lee (2011) and Lobman (2014) on the interconnection between mindfulness practices and social-emotional development. The scaffolded approach, using age-appropriate vocabulary and gradual skill-building, proved effective for second-grade learners.

Successful adaptation to remote learning demonstrates the flexibility and resilience of mindfulness-based interventions. Despite the challenges of virtual instruction, students maintained high participation rates and continued to benefit from practices. This adaptability is particularly relevant for future educational planning, as schools must prepare for various instructional modalities.

6.1 Practitioner Recommendations

Based on the study findings, educators implementing MBI curricula should consider the following recommendations: (1) Start with simple, engaging techniques like Butterfly Breathing and Rainbow Breathing to build student interest and confidence; (2) Leverage technology thoughtfully, using multimedia resources to enhance engagement while maintaining focus on core mindfulness principles; (3) Provide multiple opportunities for practice, as consistent repetition helps students internalize techniques and use them independently; (4) Create space for reflection and discussion, allowing students to process their experiences and connect mindfulness to their daily lives; (5) Be flexible with implementation, adjusting based on student needs and environmental constraints; (6) Consider partnerships across grade levels to enhance community building and provide diverse learning experiences.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The small sample size and single-school setting limit the generalizability of the findings. The lack of formal quantitative measures of anxiety prevents statistical analysis of effectiveness. Additionally, the pandemic's impact created confounding variables that make it difficult to isolate the effects of MBI implementation from other factors affecting student well-being.

Future research should employ validated anxiety assessment tools to quantify changes in student anxiety levels. Larger sample sizes across diverse school settings would strengthen findings. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of MBI participation on student mental health and academic outcomes would provide valuable insights. Additionally, comparative studies

examining different MBI approaches or delivery methods could inform best practices for implementation.

7 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that mindfulness-based interventions can be effectively integrated into elementary school curricula to address student anxiety. The MBI curriculum proved age-appropriate, engaging, and adaptable to both in-person and remote instruction. Teacher evaluations and observational data indicate that students benefited from the practices, showing reduced anxiety-related behaviors and increased use of self-regulation strategies. The findings suggest that second-grade students greatly benefit from daily exposure to mindfulness-based interventions, resulting in improved mental health throughout their lives (Felver et al., 2016). The successful incorporation of technology enhanced engagement and accessibility. While limitations exist, the findings support the continued exploration and implementation of MBI curricula in elementary settings. As schools continue to address students' social-emotional needs alongside academic development, mindfulness-based approaches offer promising strategies for supporting student well-being and creating positive learning environments.

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