

Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Mindfulness Practices With Young Children

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Abstract

Recent research into mindfulness in education supports introduction of this practice into the classroom. This qualitative descriptive study explored mindfulness with young children, as perceived by their teachers. Four primary teachers were interviewed using open-ended and semi-structured questions, allowing them to share their experiences of implementing mindfulness in their classrooms. Using thematic analysis, we learned that teachers found benefits of including mindfulness into daily classroom routines. However, they felt that more holistic approaches, such as guided breathing, yoga, and loving-kindness meditation, could more fully support childhood well-being.

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In Canada, it is estimated that one in seven children aged four to 17 are experiencing symptoms related to mental health disorders, such as stress and anxiety, which affect their livelihood at home and in the school environment (Waddell, 2007). It has been noted by Schwartz and colleagues (2009), that 50-74% of adult mental health disorders originated in childhood. Further research has found that children who feel stressed often display anger and depression, which can result in lowered self-esteem and self-confidence (Rempel, 2012). These mental health issues affect children's overall well-being and their ability to flourish in the classroom environment, as they may not be able to focus on the task at hand and they are unable to foster positive social-emotional relationships with themselves and their peers (Rempel, 2012; Waddell, 2007). Since children spend a significant amount of their day in the classroom, teachers have been encouraged to find ways to nurture well-being in the learning environment (Rempel, 2012).

There has been a growing interest in mindfulness practices in classrooms at all levels of education (Capel, 2012; Hassed & Chambers, 2014; Reid & Miller, 2009; Schwind et al., 2017; Smalley & Winston, 2010). Research suggests that the implementation and practice of a mindfulness program in the classroom can help to reduce stress, anxiety, and improve executive functioning, which are the processes needed for working memory, response inhibition, and the ability to plan and carry out an activity with a purpose (Anand & Sharma, 2014; Benn, Akiva, Arel, & Roeser, 2012; Flook et al., 2010; Morone, Lynch, Lossaso, Liebe, & Greco, 2012; Van Dam, Hobkirk, Sheppard, Aviles-Andrews, & Earlywine, 2014). In this article, we present a qualitative-descriptive study on how four primary teachers experienced implementing mindfulness with young children in their respective classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by a holistic approach to education where the whole child is attended to through exploring the connection between mind, body, and spirit (J. P. Miller, 2006; 2007; 2014) and the significance of creating a learning environment that is creative, experiential, and based on active engagement (R. Miller, 2000). Mindfulness is deeply rooted in the Buddhist philosophy that encompasses the person as a whole being (Hanh, 1987; Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

Mindfulness

For the purpose of this article, we define mindfulness as “the energy that brings us back to the present moment” (Hanh, 1998, p. 64). The anchor of mindfulness is in the breath (Hanh, 1998; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; J. Miller, 2014; Salzberg, 2011). The “breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body and your thoughts,” it is “the means to take hold of your mind again” (Hanh, 1987, p. 15). The breath is an essential component of mindfulness, as it allows for the strengthening of the lungs, blood, and each organ in the body, which positively affects the nervous system (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). This positive effect on the nervous system soothes the body and allows for inner calm of the mental, physical, and emotional aspects of the body (Rotne & Rotne, 2013).

Mindfulness practices have been commonly implemented through the use of a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), as well as through loving-kindness meditation (Salzberg, 2011). MBSR is an eight-week program, focused on mindful movements, awareness activities, body scan, hatha yoga, deep breathing, along with suggestions for integration in everyday life (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Loving-kindness meditation is the recognition that all humans are connected and wish to be happy and healthy (Salzberg, 2011). This type of meditation involves focusing on the breath, while positive thoughts of love, kindness, and acceptance are sent to self and to all the people in the world (Salzberg, 2011).

Mindfulness and Education

Student Learning

A quantitative study by Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, and Davidson (2015), examined how executive functioning could be affected through 68 pre-school children’s participation in the Kindness Curriculum. Some of the strategies used were: reading books, integrating music and movement to teach children about emotion regulation, attention span, empathy, gratitude, and ways to share. Upon conclusion of the study, teachers reported that the children who took part in the Kindness Curriculum displayed gains in their social competence and improved levels of executive functioning, whereas those who did not participate displayed more instances of selfish behaviour (Flook et al., 2015). Additional studies with a focus on mindfulness meditation noted increased self-control and calmness (Black & Fernando, 2014), increased focus when learning (Felver, Frank, & McEachern, 2014; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2015) and an

improved attention span (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005). Other studies have found that students displayed lower levels of anxiety, as well as increased ability to relax and concentrate (Britton et al., 2014). Weijer-Bergsma, Langenberg, Brandsma, Oort, and Bogels (2014) implemented a “MindfulKids” curriculum for children ages eight to 12 that focused on an awareness of sounds, bodily sensations, the breath, thoughts, and emotion regulation, which demonstrated that it was easy to integrate low intensity mindfulness programs into elementary and middle school classrooms.

Teacher Personal Practice

Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell, and Williams (2010) stressed the importance of teachers becoming familiar with mindfulness practices and incorporating them into their daily lives. As teachers are being mindful and engaging in methods such as deep breathing and yoga, they are acquiring the skills and personal experiences needed to teach children about mindfulness (Crane et al., 2010). Crane and colleagues described the mindfulness teaching process that incorporated personal experience as being “in vivo” (p. 78). When an experience is in vivo it involves a teacher bringing in their personal reflections to their practice. As teachers continue to incorporate mindfulness into their own personal lives, there is an increase in their confidence and an ability to initiate and facilitate these experiences with their students (Burrows, 2015; Crane et al., 2010; Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

Capel (2012) used personal narratives to explore the topic of mindfulness and mindlessness in the classroom. Mindlessness is described as “habit, functional fixedness, over learning, and automatic processing” (Langer, 1992 as cited in Capel, 2012, p. 668). Capel (2012) found that often teachers resort to using mindlessness practices due to trying to meet curriculum needs, as opposed to looking at the needs of each individual child. However, teachers engaged in mindful practices were more sensitive and responsive to individual and group needs in the classroom. This awareness of student needs would often lead to more creative learning opportunities for children, where they are able to demonstrate their prior knowledge and emerging understanding of new concepts. By making connections between personal experiences and mindful practices within the classroom, teachers would continue to act as role models for their students and help nurture quality learning experiences and improved well-being of the whole classroom community.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore four primary teachers’ perceptions of mindfulness practices with young children in their classrooms. A qualitative descriptive research design was used (Sandelowski, 2000). Data collection included both individual open-ended and semi-structured interviews (Hennick, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Interviews were conducted over a four-week period in a location outside of the participant’s place of employment in Southern Ontario. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using a thematic qualitative content analysis approach (Sandelowski, 2000), which offered insight into the teachers’ perceptions of implementing mindfulness practices with young children in the

classroom. Furthermore, it allowed for flexibility and for the descriptive data to be represented in a way that was connected to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling based on similar traits or characteristics (Creswell, 2008), through membership in either a holistic network or mindfulness list serve in Southern Ontario. The sample size was kept to four participants in order to collect a large amount of descriptive information from the experiences of each individual. Participants were all teachers who had experience using mindfulness practices with students in kindergarten to grade three classrooms. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality and Research Ethics Board approval was obtained.

Ashley was a certified teacher for 10 years, and had been practicing mindfulness for seven years. At the time of the data collection, she was a music teacher for kindergarten to grade five. Patricia was a registered early childhood educator and certified teacher for four years in kindergarten. She had experience with mindfulness in the classroom, and in her graduate research. She is currently an instructor in postsecondary education. Leslie was a certified teacher who had been teaching children from kindergarten to grade five for 10 years. Lastly, Michael was a certified teacher with seven years of teaching experience. At the time of the interview, he was teaching grade one children.

Study Findings

Three significant themes emerged from the interviews: motivating factors for the inclusion of mindfulness practices in the classroom, perceived classroom benefits of mindfulness and challenges participants faced initiating and applying mindfulness practices.

Motivating Factors for the Inclusion of Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom

Reasons for personal practice and integration of mindfulness practices into the classroom were discussed by the participants. Ashley and Patricia had similar motivating factors, as they were both interested in using mindfulness as a way to cope with personal hardships and teacher-related stress. Michael and Leslie started to integrate mindfulness practices into their classroom after being introduced to the practice during their graduate studies. Both teachers had an interest in finding a tool that would allow children to find ways to reduce and cope with stress.

Working in an inner-city school with a challenging group of children, Ashley was interested in finding ways to manage her job-related stress. Some of the teachers at her school were interested in Buddhism, meditation, and yoga. This prompted her to research about Mindfulness and find ways to integrate the practice into her daily routines. As she continued to practice on a regular basis, she found it very experiential and described the importance of engaging in mindfulness in order to facilitate with young children. She explained, "It is a different thing to have experienced something personally versus learning

about it... Mindfulness is an experience, it is an experiential tool, and it is very rooted in personal experience.”

Teacher-related stress was a motivator for the inclusion of mindfulness practices in Patricia’s classroom. In her first year of teaching, she taught a kindergarten classroom with 27 students in the morning and 27 students in the afternoon. She discussed the difficulty of implementing an enriched curriculum with such large class sizes and having children with different needs. The difficulties faced in the classroom prompted her to find a way to avoid burnout. As she started to integrate mindfulness in her own life, she found that she was more self-regulated and began to realize that being more mindful of her reactions in the classroom helped to change the classroom dynamics in a more positive way.

Patricia described the importance of teacher practice in the classroom, especially for early childhood education students beginning their careers.

Patricia: A lot of students are coming with their own wellness issues of anxiety and depression... and the idea [is] that if you can't take care of [yourself], you are not going to be able to take care of young children and you are not going to be fostering the healthy development of young children - so kind of teaching those students to attend to their own wellness just to be better educators.

Michael described the importance of including mindfulness practices into his daily classroom routine as a way for children to relax and escape from stress in their lives. He stated that mindfulness practices acted as an “activity” that young children could participate in to be calm.

Leslie was first introduced to mindfulness practices when completing her Master’s degree. She took a course where the professor spoke about mindfulness practices and how they were a valuable tool to incorporate into the classroom environment. This sparked her interest in finding ways in which she could adapt them for young children with varying needs and integrate them into her classroom.

There were different ways each teacher incorporated mindfulness into their classroom. Ashley developed a yoga routine for children with physical disabilities to engage them in the classroom. She had also worked with kindergarten students using breathing exercises such as blowing a balloon and “Take 5” at the beginning of every class. “Take 5” is an exercise that required students to breathe in for five seconds, hold the breath for five seconds, and breathe out for five seconds. Ashley also encouraged her students to become more aware of sound by incorporating the use of a Tibetan singing bowl and First Nations buffalo drum in practice.

Patricia used similar mindfulness practices in her classroom, as she would typically start the day with mindful breathing followed by a Tibetan singing bowl awareness activity.

Patricia also used other methods such as mindful listening, mindful movement, mindful walking, and mindful seeing. In each of these practices, she would ask students to “put their mindful bodies on.”

Patricia: I get them to put their mindful bodies on. That's sitting with your back straight, and still body, and I just have them look around the room and notice things that they hadn't noticed

before... At home or at school, [I would] say when you're out on the playground today, I want you to practice mindful seeing and see if you can notice anything that you haven't noticed before or hear sounds that you haven't heard before.

Patricia often used a loving-kindness meditation to encourage students to send loving thoughts out into the universe.

Similar to Ashley and Patricia, Michael used breathing and meditation as the main focus of mindfulness practice in the classroom. He used different child-friendly strategies such as smelling a flower or blowing out a candle to facilitate breathing. Other ways in which mindfulness was facilitated in the classroom was through the use of a thank you, kindness, and a thought circle.

Michael: We do a practice when we do circle [time], we will do a thank you circle where they will all go around and have turns to say thank you to someone whether they are in the classroom or not. Or we do a kindness circle, where they say something they did that was kind or something that someone else did that was kind. We also have a thought circle where they go around and one at a time, just say one word or phrase about what they're thinking about...Throughout all of these circles we have a big quartz crystal that's big enough for them to hold and they pass it around. That's their speaking stone. They are not allowed to speak unless they are holding the speaking stone.

In addition to these activities, Michael's students had the opportunity to learn how to behave more mindfully and become aware of other students in the classroom. This awareness extended to a focused portraiture activity where students had the opportunity to create a portrait of themselves at the beginning and end of the year.

Similar to the other participants, Leslie used various mindfulness practices with her kindergarten classroom that focused on deep breathing. Concrete associations, such as smelling a flower or blowing out a candle, were used to encourage the deep breathing process. Activities using the five senses provided a tactile connection, for example, playing music and asking the children to close their eyes, listen, and think about how it made them feel enhanced an awareness of sound. Another example was the use of "fuzzy buddies."

Leslie: We call them our fuzzy buddies, and they're just these little cards of these fuzzy buddies and one looks really angry, and one's really happy, and they kind of go in a spectrum. I put them all up and colour them in different colours. Each day they go up and choose how they're feeling that day and they put it under whatever one it is. Most of the kids will be in the semi-happy, some might be really excited, so they'll be under the excited ones."

Leslie also set up a corner in her classroom for students who felt a need for private and quiet time. This relaxing corner had pictures posted of things to do to calm down, such as counting to ten or taking a deep breath. By integrating different approaches, teachers in each of these four classrooms were afforded the opportunity to observe whether or not mindfulness practices resulted in any perceived benefits.

Perceived Classroom Benefits of Mindfulness

Each teacher described the benefits they observed by integrating mindfulness practices into the classroom setting. Ashley described one of the main benefits was how the children reconnected to themselves and others. She discussed children making connections to the body and mind over time.

Ashley: Mindfulness is connecting them with their body, with their mind, and giving them a tool later on that can help them calm down the things that they're dealing with that may be bigger than kindergarten problems.

In her classroom, she noticed that the children responded well to practices such as singing positive songs, chanting "Om" (sacred mantra), and breathing. The children were very responsive to the songs and "when they came in they really wanted to sing those songs right away." When her students participated in these breathing exercises, Ashley noticed an overall sense of calmness in the classroom. With regard to the classroom energy, "if it went from [a] ten high, it might go down to five [after practice]." The lowering of energy to a calm "5," is a great achievement as she stated that, "they may not calm down to a zero because these kids may never get down to a zero."

Patricia stated that practicing mindfulness was an effective tool for addressing the social-emotional aspects of children and allowed them to learn about their emotions and how to deal with them in order to minimize stress and conflict. Engaging in loving-kindness meditation on a regular basis had positive effects on the relationships between her students. One notable experience happened with two young girls who often did not get along:

Patricia: I had done a kind of a loving-kindness meditation and I had purposely and strategically paired them up with a kid, but not all of them, but some of the kids that I knew were having a hard time with each other and I would pair them up. I would go through this loving-kindness meditation where they had to recognize that they aren't friends with someone who is just like them, who feels sadness, just like they do and I went through this whole adult-type and adapted for them and at the end they all hugged each other. It was beautiful and then later on that day, two of the girls that I had put together on purpose because they were fighting all the time, and they were just playing so nicely together and they were telling me how they love each other now. [I thought to myself], "They get it." They were like, "Oh right, this is just another person like me." I really thought that was powerful so those meditations are good for that age. It's a little more concrete for them because they are learning about emotions in so many different ways that this just kind of ties it together for them.

Patricia felt her students were starting to understand what it meant to be mindful and to notice things about their environment and classmates that they had never noticed before. The children were very responsive to mindfulness practices. When given the choice to sing a song, read a book, or meditate they would choose to meditate. She also stated that parents noticed the effects of the practice at home where one of her students said that during a tense moment, he asked his family to sit down and "put their mindful bodies on."

Leslie also saw some positive effects of implementing different mindfulness awareness activities with her kindergarten students. Children were more sensitive to their emotions and developing a sense of empathy

for others themselves. She also noticed a difference in her students' awareness of the different senses. For example, her students could distinguish different sounds and were able to describe how the sounds made them feel. She noticed that mindfulness practices benefitted some students more than others. One of her students often had difficulty paying attention in class and redirecting his behaviour for more productive learning. She noticed a subtle difference in his behaviour and that he was starting to calm down.

Leslie: My early childhood educator does the same thing, she'll say let's slow down, you're not in trouble, we just need to calm down a little bit. Let's take a few breaths, You're knocking things down, you're running, you're jumping on top of him, let's find something else, let's redirect. So having those moments where we kind of let him be mindful of where he's at and how he's responding to the other kids. He responds well, he's a very smart boy. So I'm finding the short-term effects with him are positive. Subtle, but positive.

Lastly, Michael described his perceptions of the benefits of the mindfulness practices in his classroom. He noticed that children were more detail oriented when completing coursework and that they were becoming more aware of their behaviour. Children were using more mindfulness-based terminology, such as awareness, and would talk about their feelings. He also noticed the difference between student behaviour in his class and other classrooms in his school.

Michael: I can see it in comparison to other classes with teachers who don't practice mindfulness and sometimes those classes aren't as well adjusted in some ways - they're just wild or the teacher just can't seem to manage their behaviour.

The teachers found that integrating mindfulness practices into their daily routine resulted in noticeable changes in student behaviour and overall classroom dynamics. There was a sense of calmness in the room and they felt that the children were more accepting, aware of their classmates, and more empathetic. Children paid more attention during the day and were more detail oriented in their play and work. However, even with the various benefits noted by the participants, there were often some issues initiating and implementing the practices into the classroom environment.

Challenges Participants Faced Initiating and Applying Mindfulness Practices

Ashley described the issues she faced implementing mindfulness into her classroom. She felt that the school board was not constructed to facilitate the arts or different types of holistic practices. With an increase in cutbacks and increase in the number of students in her classroom, she found it difficult to manage safety and behaviour aside from trying to implement this practice. She described some of the challenges that she had working in a demanding job such as teaching.

Ashley: You're so exhausted because it's such a demanding job, sometimes you're just so tired that you yell. It's like [when] parents [are] having a bad day. When you're teaching thirty kids at a time that are so complex. So [it is important] to be able to find a peaceful way to calm them down that feels better for me, and ultimately feels better for them. It might take a bit longer, but that's okay.

When asked if she noticed any issues using mindfulness in the classroom, she responded, "The only negative thing would be... how it doesn't fit with the current system". Ashley found it very difficult to try

and implement something new in the classroom with the hierarchies of decision-makers above her. She further explained another challenge she had trying to incorporate mindfulness in her role as a specialty teacher.

Ashley: There needs to be more teamwork, there needs to be more time for reflection, talk, and collaboration, and more positive attitudes from the leadership. [There] might not be a safe environment for you to take risks, try something so new, and pioneer. If you're not being supported to do that, it'll be a draining experience. That's been my experience.

Like Ashley, Patricia felt the stress associated with trying to implement a mindfulness routine with her increasing class size. In her first year of teaching, she had approximately 31 students in her classroom. The large class size made it difficult for her to teach lessons or try to integrate mindfulness practices.

Patricia: I tell stories about it like I would have, a fly in the room, and it was like my whole lesson is out the window because there's a fly in the room and all the kids are freaking out. There are 31 of them and it's like, there goes that lesson. (laughing) It's like you have no control, I mean it's like that with any size, but when there's more kids it's more of a problem.

Leslie experienced similar challenges when implementing mindfulness practices in her kindergarten classroom. With a large class of 28 children, she found it very difficult to have large group sessions due to too many distractions. This prompted her to work with small groups of children at a time. However, even when working with a small group of children, she found it hard to set aside time for mindfulness due to inattentiveness, at times. Some children in her class had anxiety, as well as high needs, and required personal attention for the majority of the day. Even with the different needs of all of her students, she still tried to use different practices with them and acknowledged the fact that they were still very young children.

Leslie: [You have to] be mindful of the fact that this is just their innate natural drive for some of them to make noise and throw things and roll around, and that's just how they roll, quite literally.

Various parameters have to be set in order for the children to engage in the mindfulness practices. She stated that a struggle with implementing mindfulness was around the timing of day, distractions in the nearby classrooms, and her own ability to be mindful. She expressed, "I find as long as I set it up so that it is as conducive as possible, then usually I notice they get something out of it. There's always the kid who's not going to be into it." At times, she noted that if her mind wandered or she was feeling stressed out, the children did not respond as well, "I have to be present with them too for it to work. If I'm not present with them, then they're not going to be present with me."

Michael did not note any issues trying to implement a mindfulness program into his classroom, but described his wishes for more collaborative practice.

Michael: I really wish that more teachers practiced it because then we could scaffold it. So starting with that in grade one, and then in grade two they actually build up to thinking about it and just seeing how it would progress throughout the years... It would be interesting to see how kindergarteners approach it and how in grade three they approach it.

Three out of four participants described some of the challenges they have had trying to implement mindfulness practices into their classroom. It was found that increasingly large class sizes, scheduling, and lack of decision-making powers, made it difficult to facilitate holistic practices such as mindfulness. The current education system is not set up in such a way that provides the teacher the opportunity to take risks and receive the funding required to develop and introduce new practices. Michael encouraged more teachers to practice mindfulness with children, especially from a young age. He felt that, by implementing it into their classroom, they could allow for an opportunity to increase understanding and more awareness of the benefits of this practice.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore primary teachers' perceptions of implementing mindfulness practices with young children in their classrooms. The findings provided insights into the types of practices being used with children, as well as the perceived benefits and challenges encountered. Other themes that emerged included motivators for including mindfulness practices and challenges surrounding successful implementation of practices in kindergarten to grade three classrooms. The teachers described common practices, which included mindful breathing, mindful movement, awareness of the senses, loving kindness meditation, and activities done during circle time that focused on positive thoughts. The teachers observed that the children became calmer, more open to expressing their emotions, and developed more friendships. The children were more aware of their actions and there were fewer instances of anxiety-related behaviours. The teachers expressed their motivation for including mindfulness in their teaching practices as a result of trying to avoid burnout in the classroom and address childhood issues such as anxiety. Mindfulness practices allowed for teachers to feel more connected with their students and be more responsive to their needs (Irwin & Miller, 2016). However, due to large class sizes and lack of resources and funds, often participants found it difficult to more fully implement mindfulness practices with their students.

All four participants focused on breath work during mindfulness practices. Each participant included elements of what would be found in a typical MBSR program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003). Patricia, Michael, and Leslie guided mindful breathing using concrete associations, such as smelling a flower or blowing out a candle, while Ashley expanded this to make connections to how animals would breathe.

While the MBSR program would not be feasible to include into the school curriculum, nor would be suitable for young children in the primary grades due to the length of each session, the teachers incorporated some elements, such as mindful movements and awareness activities, throughout the day. Mindful movements were represented through yoga and walking. Awareness activities were implemented through the use of acknowledging sounds from a Tibetan singing bowl, awareness of the senses from listening, seeing, and the use of a "feely box." A loving-kindness meditation was used in some classrooms, which allowed for the children to nurture feelings towards themselves, loved ones, and all beings in the universe (Salzberg, 2011). Leslie and Michael adapted this type of loving-kindness

meditation to include a “Thank You,” “Kindness,” and “Thought” Circle, as well as a group discussion surrounding words such as “peace” and “friendship.”

Each teacher was able to make accommodations to their mindfulness practices according to class size and the varying needs of their students. Despite some of the differences and adaptations made in each of the classrooms, it was apparent that each teacher noticed their students to be accepting of mindfulness and were able to observe benefits due to the implementation of these practices.

The findings from this study were supported by the literature about the benefits of participating in a mindfulness-based intervention program for young children. In particular for children between the grades of kindergarten to grade three, there have been many positive effects of mindfulness, which include an improved ability to handle classroom demands, increased attention span, and less anxiety (Black & Fernando, 2014; Napoli et al., 2005).

Flook et al.’s (2015) study describing an improvement in executive functioning were similar to the findings that were reported here. Teachers observed their students to be more self-regulated and better able to solve conflict in the classroom. They also noted decreased instances of behaviours that were associated with anxiety. Other perceived benefits of mindfulness practices for children in the primary grades that were not discussed in the literature were an overall sense of calmness in the classroom, an increased awareness of the different senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste), and the children were more detail oriented in their classroom work.

Despite the benefits noted by the teachers, the findings uncovered challenges, such as the inability to implement mindfulness practices due to large class sizes, especially when approaching 30 students. Quite often it would take a very long time to initiate one practice, which could be an issue for a prep-teacher, such as Ashley, who has each group for 40 minutes at a time. While Patricia and Leslie spoke about the issue of large class sizes, Leslie was fortunate to have an Early Childhood Educator working with her who would allow her to create smaller mindfulness groups.

Ashley described other issues with implementation that were not found in the literature. She observed that the school board was not being configured to facilitate holistic practices. She was not working in an environment where she felt safe to take risks and implement new strategies with her students. Furthermore, Ashley stressed the need for more financial support and opportunity for collaboration with other teachers, support staff, and principals in her school board. She also felt that the leadership did not have positive attitudes towards these new ideas and needed an opportunity to experience mindfulness practices firsthand. Some of these barriers could be demotivating, especially for new teachers who may be apprehensive about trying new ideas into their classroom. It is critical that teachers have the support from administration in order to feel comfortable trying new approaches in their teaching practices.

Although the integration of mindfulness practices has displayed various positive effects, in this study, it must be noted that both experienced and inexperienced educators need to be aware of the possible adverse effects that may be associated with this type of practice. For some young participants, mindfulness practices could trigger earlier experiences of trauma, anxiety, anger, and nightmares for

example (Farias & Wikholm, 2015; Lustk, Chawla, Nolan, & Marlatt, 2009; Sobczak & West, 2013). Consequently, it is important to discuss with children prior to engaging in practice, that if any feelings of discomfort were to occur, they should stop the practice and to let the teacher know. The teachers, in turn, must be alert to this possibility, and if needed, to acknowledge the student's feelings and if deemed necessary, consult with support professionals. It is important to acknowledge the needs of all children and the many ways they may respond.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study contribute to a growing body of mindfulness research in the classroom environment. This study demonstrates that embedding a low-intensity mindfulness program was feasible in a classroom setting through the integration of practices during circle time or small group activities. There are some recommendations for teachers to consider when implementing a mindfulness program within their classroom setting. First, it is important to become knowledgeable about the origins of mindfulness found in Buddhism and the importance of self-practice. In order to integrate this type of program throughout the day, teachers must have experience with personal practice in order to be role models for the students. Since students within the classroom have different abilities and experiences, teachers should take the time to experiment with different ways to incorporate mindfulness and determine whether or not certain practices work well. Children may or may not be as responsive depending on their age, interests, and life experiences. By trying different mindfulness practices, which may include mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful eating, or a loving-kindness meditation, teachers can reflect upon their students' participation and active engagement in practice.

Teachers can also explore different ways for children to engage in mindfulness experiences by integrating an artistic element. Incorporating an arts-based element into mindfulness practices allows young children to participate in exercises that are engaging and adapted for their needs (Caholic, 2011). For example, during circle time, instead of discussing thoughts or participating in a loving-kindness meditation, children can still be mindful through artistic ways such as drawing or through dramatic play. Integrating this artistic element is especially useful for young children who may find it difficult to concentrate or feel apprehensive about participating in small or large group activities (Caholic, 2011). Mindfulness can be successfully implemented into the classroom, by taking calculated risks, being open to uncertainty, and embracing the journey.

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