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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Present: A Case Study on Youth Perspectives Surrounding Mindfulness Practices

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of  
Education

in

Education Leadership

by

McKenzie Campbell

Committee in charge:

California State University, San Marcos

Professor Erika Daniels, chair  
Professor Annette M. Daoud

University of California San Diego

Professor Mica Pollock

2023

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University of California San Diego  
California State University, San Marcos

2023



## DEDICATION

To my mother, father, and family. To my mom who first introduced me to mindfulness in the 90s by rubbing my back when I couldn't sleep and teaching me how to regulate my breath through "going down the escalator." To my dad who may not have always understood my educational path but has unwaveringly supported my quest toward further education. Not only are you two of the kindest and most genuine people, but you have both demonstrated love and support in innumerable ways through modeling how to be effective teachers. To my brother, Eric, thank you for being my best friend and supporter. Lastly, to my brothers, sister-in-law, niece, and nephew: thank you for contributing to our family. This dissertation is for the Campbells.

To Dr, Daniels, thank you for your guidance and patience with me; you were the perfect balance of support, empathy and urgency. Thank you.

To the professors and staff who allow for the JDP to exist, function, and work toward dismantling oppressive forces, thank you.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Present: A Case Study on Youth Perspectives Surrounding Mindfulness Practices

by

McKenzie Campbell

Doctor of Education

University of California San Diego, 2023  
California State university, San Marcos, 2023

Professor Erika Daniels, chair

Stress levels in adolescents are high. Managing increased demands in the modern world can elevate stress levels. Youth spend much of their week attending school, where the visible effects of stress can be evident. In urban schools, youth are faced with violence, multigenerational poverty, and other factors that lead to added stress levels. Stress interferes with learning in that it



blocks central areas of the brain responsible for cognition. Mindfulness-based practices are an intervention that may help youth mitigate negative impacts of chronic stress. The purpose of this study was to investigate student experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum in the areas of stress, decision making, present-moment awareness, and emotional regulation. Although the study did not solely focus on adverse childhood experiences, an understanding of the interplay among factors such as stress, low socioeconomic status, and experiences of students of color informed data analysis. Empirical studies have shown mindfulness-based interventions are effective with adults, but fewer studies are available on the effectiveness of mindfulness in youth. Evidence supports the benefits of mindfulness in adults, which include stress reduction, emotional regulation, an increase in gray matter in the brain, and mental health benefits. This study demonstrated how youth believed mindfulness practices assisted them in managing their stress, de-escalating their anger, bringing more awareness to their life, and helping them make decisions that were more thoughtful.

*Keywords:* mindfulness, mindfulness-based interventions, mindfulness-based practices, stress, urban, youth

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The type of stress facing teenagers and children is severe (Barnes et al., 2003; Fisher, 2006; Mendelson et al., 2010; Rempel, 2012). Adolescents experience accelerated physical growth during this developmental period, and they must simultaneously contend with rapidly changing neurological and psychological adjustments (Yurgelun-Todd, 2007). With increasing competition for college admittance, technology addiction, mental health struggles, and an overall inundation with news and media, students face high levels of stress. More than 30% of youth named stress as the main reason for being overwhelmed, sad, or depressed (Johnstone et al., 2016). Compounding the stress of modern-day adolescence, some youth also grow up in impoverished communities, which creates a different set of stressors. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.) reported 25% of school-aged children have had some exposure to a traumatic event, which can affect their behavior and learning. Additionally, when students are continually subjected to the effects of poverty, such as trauma, stress, domestic violence, and financial strains, they are more likely to remain in a condition of fight, flight, or freeze. The ability to survive and preserve oneself takes precedence over learning, critical thinking, and behaving (Perry, 2007; Plumb et al., 2016).

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) found severe stress has a profound effect on brain development, causing problems that can be seen throughout life in such areas as learning, behavior, and health (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). If students do not have proper tools to cope with challenges, they may be poorly equipped to reach their full potential.

Adding to existing adolescent stressors, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted how society had previously functioned. The COVID-19 pandemic can be categorized as a natural disaster, given the still-unfolding mental health ramifications on children, youth, and adults (Walters,

2020). For an entity to earn the classification of a natural disaster, the interruption to life needs to be so great that it outweighs the coping abilities of those affected (Walters, 2020). Over 140,000 children lost a parent or primary caregiver to a death related to COVID-19, between April 1, 2020, and June 30th, 2021 (Hillis et al., 2021). Additionally, over 22,007 lost a secondary caregiver, who provided either housing or financial support to the child (Hillis et al., 2021). COVID-19 also exacerbated family financial struggles, parental job loss, isolation leaving adolescents with stress beyond which many can cope. Furthermore, research has shown that after the COVID-19 shutdown was lifted, the adolescent brain appeared older in age and had matured faster, when compared to prepandemic adolescent brain development and when accounting for all other variables (Gotlib et al., 2022).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood and can include environmental factors that can undermine a child's sense of safety and stability (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). Adverse childhood experiences include "being subjected to or witnessing violence or abuse, accidents, and natural disasters, bullying, having close relatives incarcerated, witnessing police activity or community violence, and living in chronically chaotic environments where housing and financial resources are not consistently available" (Peeples, 2019, p. 21). As poverty, ACEs, and other stressors cannot be fully eradicated from the lives of youth, educators and researchers have asked whether mindfulness practices could serve as one tool to help students learn to self-regulate their emotions and cope with the struggles they face. Mindfulness-based instruction for adults has been shown to be beneficial (Raes et al., 2013), and this study added to the less researched topic of the effects of mindfulness on youth (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Burke, 2009; Johnstone et al., 2016).

## Statement of the Problem

Teachers and K-12 school staff make concerted efforts to inspire all students and provide hope of a better future, regardless of socioeconomic (SES), racial, or ethnic backgrounds; however, if students do not have proper tools to cope with challenges, educators' efforts are not as impactful. Youth spend much of their days in learning environments; therefore, it is paramount for schools to implement strategies that have the potential to help them manage stress and challenging circumstances.

Students come to school overwhelmed, with problems that range from changes in hormones to societal issues, such as racism and poverty, which negatively affect mental and emotional health (Gutowski et al., 2018). Not all youth have learned coping skills to combat the stressors they face (Mendelson et al., 2010). Stress inhibits learning by activating the amygdala, the area of the brain responsible for the fight-or-flight response and blocks the hippocampus, the memory center of the brain. Additionally, the heart reacts negatively to stress. Elevated blood pressure, heart rate, and levels of cortisol—the stress hormone—are linked to stress (Clark et al., 1999; Levy et al., 2016). Further, adolescent brains studied both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, “showed signs of advanced cortical thinning and had larger bilateral hippocampal and amygdala volumes” (Gotlib et al., 2022, 10).

Adolescents face stressors in their everyday lives, including racism, poverty, and living in unsafe communities, allowing stress to seep into their formative years. For this study, *unsafe* was categorized as communities that have high levels of lead poisoning, depression, teenage pregnancy, and premature death (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2019). According to the BBC (2019), 14 million Americans live below the poverty line. Children raised in underserved communities have higher crime rates and unsafe environments (Mendelson et al.,

2010). Educators expect students to flourish and reach their full potential academically yet may not have practices in place to explicitly teach stress management techniques and healthy coping skills. Teachers may not recognize the toll that stress takes on the developing brain, which does a disservice to their students who have faced ACEs or who are experiencing typical challenges of adolescent life. Students may not be able to compartmentalize their issues when they reach school and sometimes have a hard time being successful (Condly, 2006). While youth are inherently resilient and the onus is not on marginalized people to combat the stressors of society, it is worth exploring how mindfulness practices could act as another instrument in adolescents' arsenal. Furthermore, the present study did not focus specifically on youth of color but rather more generally on freshmen youth; the prior information is used to showcase the wide gamut of stressors that adolescents face .

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate student experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum in the areas of stress, decision making, present-moment awareness, and emotional regulation. An understanding of the impact of mindfulness practices on how adolescents experience stress was illuminated.

### **Research Questions**

Research Question 1 is How do freshman students who have practiced and continue to practice mindfulness in the classroom describe their perceived present-moment awareness, decision-making, and emotional regulation? Research Question 2 is In what ways, does mindfulness practice affect perceived levels of stress in freshmen?

## **Significance**

Each day, children and adolescents are exposed to a variety of traumas and/or live in poverty. Youth who experience persistent poverty or other chronic environmental stressors face serious challenges to healthy development (Mendelson et al., 2010). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) found severe stress has a profound effect on the formation of children's brains, causing problems that can be seen throughout life, in such areas as learning, behavior, and health (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Without intentional interventions for youth development, students may find less-than-ideal ways to cope, which can lead to adverse effects throughout a lifetime. Mindfulness practices appear to help people who have experienced trauma and may also be helpful to the wider population in managing daily stresses and challenges (Brown et al., 2007).

Mindfulness practices are one approach that can potentially mediate stress and increase emotional management among low-income students, students of color, and students who have faced ACEs (Sibinga et al., 2015). While study described here is not solely focused on the subgroups previously described, mindfulness practices may mediate stress in groups that have historically been faced with additional stressors and could provide more widespread implementation. Depending on the age at which students experience adverse childhood conditions, children's lives can become altered. Bolstering support services and directly instructing adolescents on appropriate coping skills may be one way to decrease negative outcomes. Mindfulness in educational settings has the potential to be implemented as a coping skill and a preventative measure for all youth (Felver et al., 2015).

Students should be given tools at school to help them handle the stressors of adolescence including any ACES and the aftermath from the COVID-19 pandemic that may have occurred.

Mindfulness practices reduce stress and increase focus on present-moment awareness, emotional regulation, and decision making. Toxic stress disrupts all of the aforementioned ideas. Therefore, youth mindfulness practice may provide one antidote in dismantling toxic stress. Students in this study described how they experienced mindfulness practices. Giving students opportunities to self-reflect and have their input valued can lead to insight on how to support students.

### **Conceptual Framework**

While there are several approaches researchers might take to investigate the effects mindfulness practices have on youth, this study was framed by resilience theory. Youth voices, including their experiences with a mindfulness curriculum, were paramount. Resilience theory helped the researcher explore the impact of the implementation of a mindfulness curriculum, namely whether students reported feeling equipped to deal with perceived stressors, present-moment awareness, decision making, and emotional regulation during and after the curriculum. Resilience theory spans multiple disciplines and can be defined as an ability to recuperate from and withstand hardships by mending oneself (Higgins, 1994; Ledesma, 2014; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Although there are many theories as to what makes a child resilient, genetic makeup and the type of support they have are two widely accepted factors (Condly, 2006).

Several theories and definitions of resilience assert that resilience is adaptable and can be learned. Resilience has also been described as a person's ability to combat traumatic events and to mitigate environments that cause trauma and to leave the negative setting, causing severe stress for a more positive environment (Condly, 2006; Quinton et al., 1993; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Stress and resilience are intricately related: Stress can positively affect the growing brain if the stress is moderate and predictable. If the stress a child endures is controlled, the child can develop resilience (Perry, 2007). When stress is severe and unpredictable or traumatic, it can

lead to a series of lifelong problems (Condly, 2006). Trauma does not affect people in the same way. What might be detrimental to one person, another can handle. Per Katz (1997):

The key to developing resilience in children is opportunities, both plentiful and meaningful. Opportunities to rest from resisting a hostile environment, opportunities to explore in safety and security, opportunities to believe and to dream; all these need to be given to at-risk children if they are to have any chance at all of making it out of their dire circumstances successfully. (p. 228)

A major focus of resilience theory is the development of skills that disrupt developmental effects that exposure to risk poses (Zimmerman, 2013). Positive factors responsible for redirecting and rebounding are known as *promotive factors* (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Promotive factors work as opposing forces to risk factors and aid in redirecting paths of people who may have been exposed to risk factors (Zimmerman, 2013).

Researchers have named two types of promotive factors: (a) assets and (b) resources. *Assets* live inside someone, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem (Zimmerman, 2013). *Resources* are external and include supportive programs, people, and opportunities that allow for a person to practice specific skill sets (Zimmerman, 2013). The mindfulness curriculum that was taught to the youth appears to be a resource, but an argument could be made that this curriculum blurs the line between asset and resource, given the intentional targeting of building positive self-esteem throughout the curriculum. Resilience theory was an appropriate conceptual framework for this study because data analysis focused on understanding whether and how students develop assets that allow them to combat stress.

Mindfulness has the potential to be implemented in the school setting as an opportunity for students to mitigate stress, develop coping skills, and calm their central nervous systems. Equipping students with a way to pay attention to the present moment, while practicing acceptance, may give students tools for self-management. Investing in meaningful opportunities



for students to use during the school day, as promotive factors that are described in resiliency theory may be a critical link to effective schooling.

## **Overview of Methods**

Qualitative case study was the method of inquiry for this study. At Cascade High, eight out of 105 students from two wellness classes and a teacher Mr. Smith (a pseudonym) participated in this case study. Given the data collection method was in-depth interviews and journals, four students from each class seemed representative between the classes and would lead to a manageable amount of data. Semistructured interviews, which included episodic interview questions and biweekly student mindfulness journals, were the data collection instruments. Students recorded biweekly journal entries with focused prompts.

One semistructured interview, with episodic questions asking participants to recall specific memories of past events—was conducted with each of the eight participants. Episodic-type interview questions allowed participants to access concrete experiences versus idealized accounts of what they “should” say (Maxwell, 2013). Interviews were conducted to explore students’ feelings and experiences surrounding mindfulness practice with four students from each class period (totaling 8). Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Then, transcriptions were coded. An initial round of open coding was conducted, which consisted of recording all ideas and topics that emerged from reading through transcripts, line by line. Then, a round of focused coding took place, in which the researcher reviewed the transcript again for categories that have been identified as important (Fretz et al., 2011). The same process of open and then focused coding took place with the mindfulness journals. A memo was constructed after each interview, detailing information that the students reported and any thoughts that arose for the researcher.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Present-moment awareness:* Paying attention on purpose to the here and now without trying to alter it.

*Episodic interviewing:* A form of interviewing where the interviewer asks the interviewee to recall specific events, rather than vague generalizations, to activate specific parts of the memory center (Maxwell, 2013)

*Emotional regulation:* The ability to identify and then flexibly control one's emotions, including the ability to label feelings and awareness of intensity, tolerate discomfort, and to be able to express emotions (Broderick & Metz, 2009)

*Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):* Traumatic experiences that happen to minors, including witnessing violence; being a victim of violence, such as sexual abuse, neglect, or abuse; and growing up in a family where mental health problems, substance abuse, or parental separation was present (CDC, 2019)

*Mindfulness practices:* Intentional, nonjudgmental activities in meditation or present-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

## **Conclusion**

Students have experienced increased levels of stress due to a variety of societal factors. While a normal level of stress builds resilience in adolescents, too much can lead to negative health effects on the body (Costello et al., 2011; Gutowski et al., 2018; Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013; Kessler et al., 2001; Masten & Tellegen, 2012). Stress due to racism, low-SES status, and ACES exacerbates an already tumultuous adolescent experience. Implementing a mindfulness curriculum at the school-wide level may give students tools to combat stress and build resilience. Based on past studies conducted with adults, mindfulness meditation can have wide-reaching

benefits (Black et al., 2009). This study was an investigation into student experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum in the areas of stress, decision making, present-moment awareness, and emotional regulation. Although previous mentions of stress exacerbated by racism and poverty served as a backdrop to issues youth face, stress as a more generic idea will be referenced moving forward. An understanding of the impact of mindfulness practices on how adolescents experience stress was explored.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Although societal problems cannot be eradicated at the school level, exploring whether mindfulness practices affect students' emotional regulation, present-moment awareness, decision making, and abilities to cope with stress is vital. Researchers have viewed emotions as a two-way street, where the emotion from a single person pours out into society and emotions from the outside seep into the individual (Ahmed, 2014; Kezar & Fries-Brit, 2018). Shared experiences affect group units and the whole community. Without creating spaces for students to process their experiences through trauma-informed practices, true learning and healing may not properly take place. Mindfulness-based instruction for adults has evidence of clear benefits (Raes et al., 2013). Less research has been done on the effects of mindfulness on youth (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Burke, 2009; Johnstone et al., 2016).

### **Life Stressors**

#### **Adverse Childhood Experiences**

When children and youth are faced with negative life circumstances that have a lasting effect on their lives, the associated stress can interfere with healthy development. The literature review first examines general stressors in the lives of youth as a way to ground the study in the multitude of possible situations that the adolescents may be facing. Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic experiences that happen to individuals under the age of 18 (CDC, 2019). When a child has an ACE, critical brain functions can become negatively impacted, such as self-regulation, decision making, and learning (Plumb et al., 2016; Wolpow et al., 2009). Resilience theory looks at promotive factors that can counterbalance risk factors (Zimmerman, 2013). Adverse childhood experiences fall under the realm of risk factors. In the CDC's (2019) landmark study in conjunction with Kaiser Permanente, with data collection from 1995 to 1997,

more than two thirds of over 17,0000 members surveyed in Southern California indicated they had at least one ACE. Having experienced ACES puts people at greater risk for negative health conditions later in life. The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is the “nation’s premier system of health-related telephone surveys that collect state data about U.S. residents about their health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions, and use of preventive services” (CDC, 2022, p. 1). Evidence from the BRFSS, which included questions about ACEs, showed a statistically significant association between the increase in ACE score and binge drinking, smoking status, heavy drinking, high HIV-risk behavior, and disability caused by poor health (Campbell et al., 2016). More than half of participants from both studies were exposed to at least one ACE in their lifetime. An attempt to mitigate these experiences and equip youth with additional tools to combat the stress could be made more widely available. The CDC (2019) detailed how “ACES and associated conditions, such as living in under-resourced or racially segregated neighborhoods, frequently moving, and experiencing food insecurity, can cause toxic stress (extended or prolonged stress)” (p. 1). Toxic stress can change the development of the brain and impact learning, decision-making abilities, and responses to stress (CDC, 2019).

### **Impact of Poverty, Racism, and Bias on Students of Color**

Historically, schools have underserved students of color. The achievement gap, more appropriately known as the opportunity gap—the phenomenon stating the existence of discrepancies between racial groups in academic performance—has widened between racial minority students and their White counterparts (Hilbert, 2017). Although *Brown v. Board of Education* took a major step in halting racial division and inequality in the school system, it did not eradicate conditions leaving the door open to future resegregation (Zamudio et al., 2011).

White flight from schools, relocation to homogeneous neighborhoods, budgetary cuts in education, and the semi privatization of secondary education have led to impoverished schools in communities of color (Zamudio et al., 2011). If schools are one means by which interventions for students take place, school climate and culture should be examined.

School climate and how teachers perceive students can help or hinder student achievement. Davis and Warner (2018) found school climate has a positive effect on school culture when evaluated on the following categories: (a) safety and respect, (b) teaching and learning, (c) relationships, and (d) environment. Parents' and teachers' perceptions of school culture have affected student success, yet teachers' perceptions of the climate affected student performance most out of all factors measured. Teachers' perceptions of the climate dictate the standards to which they hold students, leaving room for personal bias and subjectivity. School climate and how teachers perceive the climate can therefore create or eliminate additional stressors. Equipping teachers with the knowledge and educational materials to teach mindfulness to their students may increase interconnectedness between teacher and student and allow students to potentially benefit from the mindfulness practice personally. Valenzuela (2010) brought to light the idea of *subtractive schooling*, where second and third generation students perform worse than their first-generation counterparts; this occurrence is mostly attributed to the students' perceived lack of care from their teachers and their forced assimilation. School climate is multilayered; students and staff influence the atmosphere, and societal problems will materialize at the surface.

Latinx and African American students disproportionately attend schools that lack appropriate resources and are secluded from their White counterparts (Elias et al., 2014). Green and Gooden (2014) described the community barriers and stressors of a low-income community

of color in the Midwest. The study focused on factors out of school, such as systemic oppression, racial discrimination and disproportionate access to goods and services that led to the creation of a community school . Students need opportunities in schools to have promotive factors that will continue to bolster their (many times already developed) skill of resilience. Skill sets that help students cope with many of the barriers in which they face may be helpful.

Public education has successfully shifted the blame for the failure of schools to meet the needs of minority students onto the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime, for they can never be held accountable because the reason for failure in schools is said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods. Because schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, White, middle-class clients is not questioned. (Arciniega, 1977)

The opportunity gap between African American and Latinx youth and their White counterparts is pervasive in urban schools. Vega et al.'s (2015) study focused on an urban Midwest setting, where ideas about the level of care and support student participants received from parents and school programs highlighted the direct and indirect effects of poverty. Poverty, racism, and bias influence everything from access to health care to positive role models (Vega et al., 2015).

Educational systems perpetuating the status quo result in the same unequal access to education and the same marginalized groups remaining on the outskirts. “Critical Race Theory in educational research unapologetically centers how race, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of People of Color” (Huber, 2010, p. 78). Schooling is an important factor in determining which students do well. Furthermore, students who do well are more likely to earn a high school diploma and continue to college (Gordon & Cui, 2018). There is still a disparity, 64 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, between the achievement of White and Black students (Ferguson, 2002; Gordon & Cui, 2018).

Critical race theory asserts race has deep-seeded components in our society; a hierarchy between racial groups exists; and minority groups are systemically oppressed. When controlling for all other factors, critical race theory carries the belief that the dominant racial group receives power (Gordon & Cui, 2018). Given the damage that racism and oppression have contributed in educational and societal settings, youth of color have an additional set of stressors with which to contend. Exposure to trauma and stress has been widely considered a public health problem (Breslau et al., 2004; Buka et al., 2001; Evans, 2004; Mendelson et al., 2016). Mindfulness could provide one possible way for students to help deal with the stress created by poverty, bias, and racism.

### **How Stress Impedes Well-Being and Learning**

Stress plays a significant role in the development of children and adolescents (Barnes et al., 2003; Fisher, 2006; Mendelson et al., 2010; Rempel, 2012; Smith & Womack, 1987). Often, stress goes unresolved, which may lead to behavior disorders. Given the amount of stress children and adolescents face, they are also prone to depression, anxiety, and a decreased sense of self-worth (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Johnstone et al., 2016; Rempel, 2012). The negative effects of stress on children and adolescents transfer to school, where low self-worth, anxiety, and depression can hijack students' thinking and counteract their abilities to learn (Barnes et al., 2003; Fisher, 2006; Mendelson et al., 2010; Rempel, 2012). Furthermore, the U.S. Surgeon General "explicitly recognized the need to consider mental health as a critical component of overall child health, and advocated the active promotion of social, emotional and behavioral well-being" (Broderick & Metz, 2009, p. 36). While stress levels for adolescents are on the rise, additional stressors for students of color were examined.



Students of color face multiple stressors, such as perceived discrimination, stereotype threat, and cognitive stress. *Perceived discrimination* can be defined as the idea that due to their skin color, a person assumes someone has treated them unjustly or will in the future. *Stereotype threat* is where a member of a certain ethnic or racial group feels pressure to exceed the expectations or stereotypes placed on the group or groups with which they belong (Levy et al., 2016). *Cognitive stress* occurs naturally in members identifying with certain racial and ethnic groups (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and the biological response that a student of color might experience in response to these stressors of identifying with the oppressed group has been shown to add to the gap in achievement between students of color and White students (Levy et al., 2016). In conclusion, the achievement gap has a direct correlation with these stressors that are exacerbated by being a person of color (Levy et al., 2016).

There are physical ramifications of stress that affect youth of color. Youth navigate puberty and adolescence with the compounding effect of racial stressors, which have been shown to cause a change in sleep patterns and variations in stress hormones (Levy et al., 2016). With sleep processes affected and an increase in levels of cortisol, functioning in teenagers of color can be affected. Physiological and cognitive responses to stressors are correlated with drive, motivation, attention, and memory. Academic achievement relies on brain functioning such as attention and memory for success (Levy et al., 2016).

Youth have cited many factors of stress impeding their sense of purpose, yet simultaneously propelling them toward success (Gutowski et al., 2018). Gutowski et al. (2018) used a grounded theory approach in understanding youth who were living in low-income, urban settings and their feelings of purpose. Participants were provided opportunities to articulate their personal narratives surrounding the following topics: (a) purpose, (b) stress, (c) coping, (d)

important relationships, and (e) future goals. Stress negatively affected students' senses of purpose, and purpose was correlated with higher achievement in school. Therefore, the link between stress and achievement is worth further investigation.

Being a student living in poverty can have severe ramifications on stress and achievement levels. Low SES—making an annual income below the designated poverty level—comes with a multitude of stressors, especially for children and adolescents. The achievement gap is evident between minority groups and is magnified between high and low SES groups (the top 10% earning families and the bottom 10%). The SES achievement gap has widened since the 1970s and is now twice as broad as the achievement gap between Black and White students (Levy et al., 2016). The National Commission on Children (1991) expressed three rationales as to the intersection between racial groups and low SES status in that, statistically, minorities live more often in impoverished households, are more likely to be raised in single-parent families, are more likely to have parents who have received less education and are more likely to attend schools not properly funded (Sirin, 2005). Therefore, members in low-SES groups and minority groups have exposure to stressors and when combined, stressors have confounding effects.

Chronic childhood exposure to stress has long-lasting implications into adulthood. Child poverty and chronic stress have inextricable connections such that vulnerability to ongoing stress and low SES status yields many changes in one's brain chemistry (Kim et al., 2013). According to research with animals and humans, researchers concluded exposure to stress over a long period of time is correlated with regions of the brain associated with emotional regulation, namely the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex (Kim et al., 2013). The amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for emotional regulation and the prefrontal cortex is associated with decision making. A longitudinal study with 49 participants was done to test whether a correlation existed

between those who had been exposed to childhood poverty and brain circuitry arousal as adults (Kim et al., 2013). Participants were exposed to adverse situations at the age of 24, and their emotional management abilities were recorded. The results demonstrated adults exposed to lower family income at the age of nine showed diminished activity in ventrolateral and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex activation. The same adults exhibited inabilities to repress activity in the amygdala, despite their best attempts, during negative emotion regulation (Kim et al., 2013). The significance of this study demonstrates exposure to stress at young ages in children can have lasting effects on abilities to regulate emotions later in life. Given causes of stress for adolescents who have experienced childhood poverty, exploring whether mindfulness could be used as a school-issued intervention (in addition to poverty remediation itself) is worthy of further research.

Emotional regulation skills and fostering the welfare of students could be accomplished using mindfulness practices (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Hayes et al., 1999; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2002). Researchers have found emotional regulation difficulties and the absence of adults whom students trust (in and out of school) contributed to an elevated risk for suicide attempts far beyond the symptoms of depression (Pisani et al., 2012). One qualitative study of homeless youth, who continued to attend high school despite no longer living with a guardian, had a focus on understanding and support by school personnel. Participants were asked to explain their life stories from birth until the time they acquired services (Mendez et al., 2018). One implication from the nine themes that emerged from the study was the importance of creating trauma-informed learning environments, such as providing safe environments, transparency, and peer support; normalizing trauma; and empowering students through student voice (Mendez et al., 2018).

The need for trauma-informed learning environments leads to a case for mindfulness as an intervention. Given that 90% of students are served by public education and spend 13 years of their developmental lives in the school setting, school is an ideal place to facilitate and enforce trauma-informed education (Plumb et al., 2016). Schonert-Reichl and Lawler (2010) described how the creation of trauma-informed practices in schools can include a focus on the development of skills used for coping (Plumb et al., 2016). Durlak et al. (2011) studied social-emotional learning (SEL) programs targeted for schools and showed SEL programs can be intertwined in pre-existing school-day curriculum, using solely school-site faculty. Mindfulness-based interventions under the umbrella of SEL programs should be explored. Students practice mindfulness together which encourages peer support, and one type of mindfulness meditation is loving-kindness meditations, which foster empathy toward others.

### **Trauma-Informed Practices**

While stress and the residual effects of ACES are prevalent, “trauma confronts schools with a serious dilemma: how to balance their primary mission of education with the reality that many students need help in dealing with traumatic stress to attend regularly and engage in the learning process” (Ko et al., 2008, p. 398). For schools to be trauma sensitive or trauma informed, staff need to be trained in the pervasiveness of trauma and how it affects the brain. Staff need to see negative student behaviors as possible attempts for students to get their needs met, instead of assuming the student is being disobedient. Additionally, staff and teachers must focus on building trust and relationships with students and one another, so students can feel safe. Next, schools need to have environments in which many supports are in place and where a team approach is fostered. Lastly, for schools to become trauma sensitive, staff need to empower

students, foster resiliency skills, and teach students to advocate for themselves (Plumb et al., 2016).

Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic. Adverse childhood experiences create trauma such that when left unsupported, a student experiencing complex trauma may have difficulty in school, be more likely to drop out, and may show altered behaviors. Adverse childhood experiences have a causal relationship with negative behaviors demonstrated in the classroom (Plumb et al., 2016). For schools to be proactive instead of reactive toward behavioral problems, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) was added to the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) to specifically target emotional and behavioral disabilities (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2015). Positive behavioral interventions and supports are based on a multitiered system of support that indirectly promotes classroom management for the teacher and does little to support the underlying cause of the negative behavior (Plumb et al., 2016). Therefore, students have been encouraged to become compliant in the classroom (to obtain praise/rewards), with few supports in place to address causes of negative behaviors. Trauma-informed practices unearth root causes of many behaviors that students might mask with PBIS.

One researcher examined teachers' levels of knowledge about children's emotional development using a lens of trauma-informed practices (Coffey et al., 2018). A mindfulness curriculum was introduced to the teachers, and they met often to learn mindfulness practices. The findings showed a significant correlation between mindfulness and teachers' trauma-informed viewpoints (Coffey et al., 2018). Given the positive correlation between teachers experiencing a mindfulness curriculum and the increase in understanding around trauma-informed practices (Coffey et al., 2018); those same correlations may be true for youth.

## Mindfulness

*Mindfulness* has several widely accepted definitions and meanings, originating in Buddhist religion and Eastern traditions (Rosenberg, 1998; Thera, 1962; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Mindfulness can be used without a religious component and as a tool or a strategy and is defined as present-moment awareness without judgment (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Creswell, 2016; Hölzel et al., 2011b; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Mindfulness practice has positive benefits, including stress reduction, an increase in interpersonal relationships, and a greater sense of self-esteem (Fisher, 2006; Rempel, 2012; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Mindfulness can be deconstructed into three main *axioms*, or *essentials*: (a) intention, (b) attention, and (c) attitude (S. L. Shapiro et al., 2006).

*Intentions* are the reason for which one does something: “Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practicing in the first place” (Kabat-Zinn, 2000, p. 32). Western mindfulness has stripped mindfulness of its religious affiliation to Buddhism and in doing so, lost the tenet of intention, which is an important piece (S. L. Shapiro et al., 2006). Going into mindfulness with a targeted intention yields a correlation to self-created, intended outcomes (D. H. Shapiro, 1992; S. L. Shapiro et al., 2006). Intention includes the idea that as people practice mindfulness, there is a shift in their intentions on a spectrum, beginning with the intention to self-regulate, followed by self-exploration and lastly, self-liberation (S. L. Shapiro et al., 2006).

The second axiom is *attention*. Noticing and observing oneself in the body and the circumstances by which one is surrounded is a focus of mindfulness. The moment-to-moment awareness brought about by the present moment and the focus on attention leads to healing, in the field of psychology (S. L. Shapiro et al., 2006).

*Attitude* is the last axiom. While attitude can have many meanings, in mindfulness it is described as the disposition or behavior that someone brings to the practice of purposefully paying attention. The type of attitude and demeanor that one brings to the practice of mindfulness affects the practice. Attitude can be sterile and critical or can be warm and kind-hearted (S. L. Shapiro et al., 2006). S. L. Shapiro et al. (2006) wrote,

We posit that persons can learn to attend to their own internal and external experiences, without evaluation or interpretation, and practice acceptance, kindness and openness even if what is occurring in the field of experience is contrary to deeply held wishes or expectations. (p. 377)

### **Benefits of Mindfulness**

#### **Stress Reduction**

Researchers have found mindfulness meditation has benefits for health and well-being, including the ability to yield positive cognitive feelings in healthy people and people who suffer from a clinical diagnosis (Hölzel, Lazar et al., 2011). The benefits of mindfulness on stress reduction and present-moment awareness may lead to an increase in coping skills (Johnstone et al., 2016). One study concluded 47% of the time, one's mind is spent wandering (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Mind wandering—the act of thinking about something other than what one is currently doing—has been shown in studies to be linked to levels of unhappiness (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Stress reduction and emotional regulation are thought to be enhanced by the mind staying focused (Gundel et al., 2018; Simon & Engström, 2015). Mindfulness allows for a focus on the present moment and to reduce mind wandering.

Kabat-Zinn (1982) found a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course (an 8-week course focused on mindfulness and meditation training) was effective in treating stress and chronic pain. The MBSR course consisted of 2.5-hour weekly mindfulness sessions, daily 45-minute mindfulness audio recordings, and a 1-day retreat, all facilitated by a teacher trained in

MBSR (Creswell, 2016; Kabat-Zinn 1982). Although the MBSR course was developed to alleviate chronic pain, over the last 30 years, its use has been extended to include adults from other population groups, and the general structure of MBSR has been adapted to treat depression, drug addiction, eating disorders, and relationship problems (Creswell, 2016).

Stress affects the immune system, which has a critical role in protecting against foreign invaders to the body (Creswell, 2016). Chronic stress weakens the immune system's ability to create an antibody response and "has been linked to increases in C-reactive protein and interleukin 6, which are circulating markers of inflammation linked with morbidity and accelerated mortality" (Creswell, 2016, p. 498). Mindfulness may serve as a protective barrier to chronic stress and may help to shield the immune system to several of the immune-related problems (Creswell, 2016).

Several studies have used some facets of mindfulness and MBSR with middle and high school-aged populations. Twenty-five years after Kabat-Zinn (1982) conducted a study on MBSR, Sibinga et al. (2015) aimed to see if a correlation existed between a MBSR program and decreased levels of reported stress on urban middle school students in two Baltimore public schools. Students were enrolled in either a health education course or a MBSR program; the health education course acted as a control in this study. The results were that the students in the MBSR course reported lower levels of stress and positive outcomes for many other measures than their counterparts who attended only the health class. The MBSR program improved psychological well-being of students and their abilities to cope. The severe and repeated exposure to stressors can interfere with one's coping abilities in the short term and the long term, thus potentially interfering with healthy development and positive future pathways.



## **Emotional Regulation**

Emotional regulation is the ability to identify and then flexibly control one's emotions. Many skills fall under the umbrella of emotional regulation, including abilities to label feelings, have awareness of intensity, tolerate discomfort, and express emotions in a healthy way (Broderick & Metz, 2009). Mindfulness, according to Benson (1975), provides the user with a conditioned response to stimuli by calling for space between the stimulus, including personal and surrounding triggers and one's response to the stimulus. Mindfulness acts as a buffer, so one may respond wisely instead of reacting impulsively.

Acceptance of and the ability to observe and monitor experiences without attachment and to emotionally regulate are focuses of mindfulness interventions. One can then develop coping skills and a resilience to stress and “in turn reduce the negative impacts stress has on the increasing risk for stress-related disease outcomes” (Creswell, 2016, p. 497). Similarly, MBSR has been found to increase adults' ability to regulate emotions and to gain the skill of perspective taking (Hölzel, Carmody et al. 2011; Johnstone et al., 2016).

## **The Brain and Mindfulness**

Brain scans showed an elevation in activity level in the prefrontal cortex when exposed to mindfulness (Hölzel, Lazar et al., 2011). The study included a description of the benefits of mindfulness and elucidated the positive benefits of mindfulness, which exist at the neural level. More control over amygdala responses and an increase in gray matter in the hippocampus, which is responsible for memory and a vital part of the limbic system, was present in conjunction with mindfulness (Hölzel, Lazar et al., 2011b).

The effects of 8-week MBSR on levels of gray matter were similar to the gray matter of people who had been lifelong meditators (Gotink et al., 2016). The researchers found that

mindfulness-based cognitive therapy contributed to changes to the structure and function of their brains after the MBSR program. Participants' "prefrontal cortex, cingulate cortex, the insula, and the hippocampus showed increased activity connectivity and volume in stressed, anxious and healthy participants" (Gotink et al., 2016, p. 1). Similarly, the amygdala showed a decrease in reactivity and quicker recovery after introduction to emotional stimulation (Gotink et al., 2016).

### **Mindfulness and Mental Health**

More research is needed to support the use of mindfulness-based interventions in schools (Brown et al., 2007). The U.S. Surgeon General reported "one in 10 children suffers from a mental health condition that meets diagnostic criteria, and one in five suffers from problems that significantly impair day-to-day functioning" (Broderick & Metz, 2009, p. 36). Raes et al., 2013 used a random control treatment to demonstrate whether a mindfulness-based intervention could diminish or prevent depression in high-school-aged youth. The results showed how participants randomly assigned to the mindfulness-based intervention treatment group had fewer signs of depression after the study and 1 year after the study (Raes et al., 2013). Similarly, mindfulness meditation, when used as an intervention through therapy, showed positive advantages when used on symptoms, such as pain, depression, and anxiety (Gundel et al., 2018).

Students have shown a greater decrease in depressive symptoms over time when placed in a mindfulness class as opposed to a health class (Liehr & Diaz, 2010). An experimental design study included a sample of 18 students in minority groups. The participants were placed in either a health class or a mindfulness course and data showed with respect to feelings of anxiousness. Although both groups reported an overall decrease in anxious feelings over time, the mindfulness course was shown to continue to have continued effects on decreasing anxiety, while the health

class did not (Liehr & Diaz, 2010). This study corroborates the connection between mindfulness and mental health in minors.

## **Mindfulness Interventions**

### **Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditation**

Two offshoots of mindfulness-based meditation intervention that yield positive cognitive feelings in participants are loving-kindness meditation and compassion meditation (Grossman & Van Dam, 2001). *Loving-kindness meditation* is the practice of intentionally thinking loving thoughts toward oneself and others, and *compassion meditation* aims at practices to foster kindness and tenderheartedness for living beings affected by hardships (Hofmann et al., 2011). Evaluating the effect of mindfulness on emotional responses, Hofmann et al. (2011) reviewed various studies. A neurobiological correlates study from 2008 by Lutz et al. focused on a clinical setting with the use of cognitive behavior therapy coupled with loving-kindness meditation and compassion meditation. The study proposed both meditations are associated with an increase in positive demeanor and a decrease in negative attitudes. Although the study focused on a clinical setting, many of the topics are applicable to meditation in the school setting. The report also discussed that neuroimaging studies on loving-kindness meditation and compassion meditation may bolster areas in the brain, such as the amygdala, responsible for emotional regulation/activation, and which is linked to empathy and processing emotions in other people (Hofmann et al., 2011).

Growing research demonstrates a link between compassion meditation and a decrease in stress associated with physical manifestations (Pace et al., 2010). In a study done at Emory University, researchers administered the Trier Social Stress Test (TSST) 90 minutes before exposing participants to a stressor. This study was comprised of 30 participants who were asked

to complete a 6-week compassion meditation training course. Researchers collected blood samples from patients at six separate 15-minute intervals following the introduction of the stressor to measure the concentration of plasma cortisol levels and interleukin-6 concentrations and before the stressor was presented to have a baseline (Pace et al., 2010). The stressor included asking participants to publicly speak, followed by having them compute mathematical problems in their head (Pace et al., 2010). The results from the current study first suggest in the original study done by Pace et al. (2009), that the initial hypothesis was correct: A relationship does exist between compassion meditation and a reduction in reactivity on a TSST. Secondly, this study disproved what Pace et al. (2009) could not definitively show in their first study: Participants who had low reactivity to the TSST test were not more inclined to practice compassion meditation for longer periods of time (Pace et al., 2010). The initial study could not show whether participants who experienced low reactivity to the TSST practiced compassion meditation longer because they had less stress in their lives, or if they had less stress on their TSST because of the additional time spent practicing compassion meditation. By instituting an additional study, the researchers could rule out the results of the stress test TSST dictating the amount of time someone spent practicing compassion meditation (Pace et al., 2010).

The findings have two-fold importance, Pace et al. (2010) stated,

The current study strengthens findings from our initial work by supporting the conclusion that in individuals who actively engage in practicing the technique, compassion meditation may represent a viable strategy for reducing potentially deleterious physiological and behavioral responses to psychosocial stress. (p. 2)

Drawing parallels to how these studies and compassion meditation practices have affected adults and ways to harness similar types of outcomes with youth is worthy of more research.

## **Prior Mindfulness-Based Interventions in K12 Schools**

Mindfulness-based interventions in schools have been the topic of several previous studies. When focused on youth, mindfulness is taught as paying attention, on purpose and without judgment, to what is going on inside and outside of one's body (Viafora et al., 2014). One meta-analysis by Zenner et al. (2014) spanned 12 databases during August 2012, used 24 studies, 19 of which had controls in their research, and had a total of 1348 mindfulness-based participants, with 876 participants used as controls. Many forms of implementation of mindfulness-based interventions were accepted throughout these studies, so long as their intention was to foster mindfulness. The meta-analysis showed participants who underwent mindfulness-based interventions had an increase in cognitive performance and in coping abilities, resilience, and stress management.

Children can understand and learn how to train their minds to stay in the present moment and how to control their emotions when faced with difficult feelings including failure. Mindfulness practice enriches the qualities modern education strives to cultivate in a student and learner (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Cowger & Torrance, 1982; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Zenner et al., 2014). Previous research and analyses that have shown the benefit of mindfulness as it relates to education also provides a glimpse as to where more research needs to be done. However, it is the data from these studies that provides a foundation. Chia (1986) and Kabat-Zinn (1994) placed an emphasis on bringing attention to one's mind and body through awareness and developing skill practice that allows the person to rely on themselves and the attunement of their mind-body connection. According to Kabat-Zinn (2003), those in charge of teaching mindfulness, in any setting, must have personal relationships with mindfulness practice

themselves, so a level of authenticity is conveyed to the students (as cited in Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008).

Zoogman et al. (2014) introduced a meta-analysis of mindfulness meditation in which youth were targeted. To be included mindfulness needed to be the primary variable of intervention. The criteria of the studies needing to be published in English excluded valuable studies that may have been done in other languages. Twenty articles between 2004 and 2011 were included in the meta-analysis. The purpose behind a meta-analysis was to have a quantitative look into the usefulness of mindfulness meditation and how it could best be used in various settings. Twelve of the 20 studies used a control group. The results showed mindfulness meditation had medium effectiveness for participants in clinical groups and less effect on participants in school settings. Only four of the studies involved participants in a clinical setting, so making this generalization with limited data is not possible. The meta-analysis provides conflicting conclusions from other research done on the effectiveness of mindfulness and calls for additional research to be conducted on the topic.

Although much more is known on the effects of mindfulness meditation implementation and results for adults, there is, nevertheless, a significant push for mindfulness to be implemented with youth. Researchers are optimistic, that mindfulness can be transferable and successfully administered to children and teens based on growing evidence (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). There has been a recent resurgence of attention placed on SEL, and in 2009, the first reported school-wide mindfulness program, Learning to BREATHE—which stands for body, reflections, emotions, attention, tenderness, habits, empowerment—came to fruition (Broderick & Metz, 2009). The program was focused on creating balance through a six-session mindfulness-based school curriculum with 120 senior girls at a private school. While the

population for this study focused on a private school, the information gathered might show how youth in general reacted to a mindfulness curriculum. The themes outlined “body awareness, understanding and working with thoughts, understanding and working with feelings, integrating awareness of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, reducing harmful self-judgments, and integrating mindful awareness into daily life” (Broderick & Metz, 2009, p. 36). The BREATHE study used a control group of girls in their junior year of high school, was not randomized, and included pre and posttests as a means to gather data on their dispositions. The takeaway from the BREATHE program was that the treatment group reported feeling higher levels of calm and abilities to recognize and name emotions on the self-reported post-test (Broderick & Metz, 2009, p. 43). There is still a tremendous amount to learn from additional future studies.

### **Similar Mindfulness Interventions in Elementary Schools**

Many researchers have focused predominantly on the efficacy of mindfulness programs with students based on study designs that have measurable outcomes. Little research has been done focusing on how children view mindfulness practice in their perspective (Ager et al., 2015). In a study done at an independent school in New Zealand, researchers focused on the question “What are students’ perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school?” (Ager et al., 2015, p. 1). The findings from 38 elementary students and their mindfulness journals demonstrated students’ benefit from mindfulness for wellbeing, as self-reported.

Ager et al. (2015) reviewed nine articles focused on mindfulness practices from the perspective of children. One mixed-method design included a study where students practiced mindfulness and yoga twice a week for 6 weeks, and the results showed “yoga and mindfulness/relaxation has the potential of helping young children feel more relaxed, less afraid, less tense, less sad and more happy” (Cruchon, 2009, p. 50). The students were in first grade in

Montreal, Canada and self-reported (in journals) feelings that were positive in nature. Scientific Research Publishing (2013) focused on six children from a traditional elementary school in the United Kingdom. While each of the participants initially struggled with issues of attention, the mindfulness exercises, which were done twice a week for 5 weeks showed promise in “heightened awareness of the senses, especially physical sensation and sound” (Ager et al., 2015, p. 902).

### **Student Voice**

Student voice research places the student at the center, values their input, and “disrupts traditional student roles by reorganizing learning spaces that center youth voices” (Gonzalez et al., 2017, p. 451). Traditionally, education has prioritized and placed value on the input of researchers, then teachers, and lastly, students, creating an unequal distribution of power (Gonzalez et al., 2017). According to Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011, as cited in Gonzalez et al., 2017), the need for student voice comes down to three main points: (a) a moral, ethical, and fundamental need to afford youth their rights; (b) the idea that youth are capable of improving the function of the schooling process (through reforms) collaboratively with adults; and (c) that youth deserve a seat at the table given that school reforms directly affect them and have traditionally been done in such a way that has marginalized many.

Over 30 years of research has been done on youth voice, predominantly but not solely in the field of education (Gonzalez et al., 2017). A push for an interdisciplinary approach to student voice and agency gained traction with the initiative by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990), which required more involvement from students (Gonzalez et al., 2017). In one study, which focused on the implementation of a trauma-informed intervention program under the acronym RAP, students were part of a school-based group that



used cognitive behavior strategies along with mindfulness practices to deliver a 12-session trauma-informed intervention. The intervention was in a group setting and was delivered by both a community liaison and a mental health counselor (Mendelson et al., 2015). RAP was in an urban middle school and showed varying results in terms of teacher input versus student response, with respect to the lack of difference between the control group and the intervention group (Mendelson, et al., 2015). The intervention had hoped to show an increase in emotional regulation and decision-making skills, however, no clear answers emerged: “Focus groups or interviews should be conducted in future studies on RAP Club to explore students’ perspectives on the intervention and how it affected them” (Mendelson et al., 2015, p. 145). A focus on student voice may have unearthed answers to the given study’s research questions by asking students to describe their experience and placing the emphasis on what the student is reporting as opposed to what the teacher is witnessing.

While a major focus has been on youth of color, urban youth, and youth of low SES, there is still more research to be done on the intersectionality of different identities and prioritizing those voices (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Using the pre-existing research as a building block will allow for the centering of more youth voices and prioritizing which people are being heard, and what a new future in education may look like with an emphasis on the student as a co-creator. Learning is interactive and the learner decides the point in which they are ready to engage and invest (Caine & Caine, 1997). The importance of doing research with youth themselves on whether mindfulness practices help them or not will allow for a clearer idea of what youth believe help them. Without youth buy-in to the learning process, meaningful education will not transpire. To achieve youth buy-in toward the learning process, adolescents need to be consulted on what they learn (Doda & Knowles, 2008).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology for conducting a case study that investigated student experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum and its impact on stress, decision making, present-moment awareness, and emotional regulation in a wellness class at Cascade High School. Participants were recruited from a wellness class taught by a teacher, Mr. Smith, who has been trained in mindfulness essentials, mindfulness for educators, and holds a certification in yoga.

### **Context About the Course**

The wellness classes were scheduled as a period during the school day, where students had a 1.5-class every other day. While the students were in the wellness class, they learned the topics which were listed in Table 1. Six weeks into the semester, students began learning a mindfulness curriculum, which was embedded in the wellness class as part of each lesson. The curriculum originated from Mindfulschools, as a 16-week course of approximately 20 to 25 minutes each lesson.

Mr. Smith adapted the published curriculum by creating visually appealing slides that accompanied the content provided. The slideshows pared down the amount of information included from the content of the original lesson plans into smaller pieces so that the students could learn the mindfulness curriculum at a slower pace, while reinforcing key concepts each class through spiral review. Appendix A is an example of one of the slideshows that includes both the topics from the wellness course along with a mindfulness lesson (from the curriculum), followed by a mindfulness practice embedded in the lesson. At the time of the current study, the wellness class had been taught for 5 years and the course was created to consist roughly of one third mindfulness curriculum and related topics (present-moment awareness, difficult emotions,

direct mindfulness practice daily). The other two-thirds of the wellness course consists of topics including: creating and engaging in a supportive learning community, building relationships and resolving conflict, and cultivating a healthy lifestyle.

**Table 1**

*Wellness Class and Mindfulness Topics*

Week	Wellness Class Topics	Mindfulness Topics
1	School/classroom expectations	
2	Pillars of characters	
3	First impressions	
4	Interview/communication skills	
5	About You project (getting to know each other)	
6	Grade reflection #1	
	One-on-one grade review/support/chat	
7	4-year plan (meet the counselors)	
8	Emotional intelligence	Introduction to mindfulness
9	Identifying emotions	Emotions/punching bag
10	Distractions and struggles	
11	Eight dimensions of wellness	
12	Reaction vs. response	Response vs. reaction
13	Introduction to restorative circles	
14	Gratitude	Heartfulness (wishing kind/loving thoughts toward oneself and others)
15	Grade Reflection #2	
	One on one grade review	
16	Emotional intelligence (EQ vs IQ)	Thoughts: Paying attention to one's thoughts on purpose
17	Difficult emotions project	Gratitude and appreciation
	Brain Science (i.e., basic structure / function:	Pleasant/unpleasant labeling
18	Amygdala, hippocampus, & prefrontal cortex)	
19	Memory (vocab game) & smiling (benefits to smiling, relation to chemical releases)	
20	Anger management (brain structure in relation to anger); impulsivity / self-control; & power of thought (fueling your anger)	
21	Revisit classroom expectations & reflection, grade reflection, resolutions	
22	Inside the teenage brain	Mindful eating

**Table 1 (continued)***Wellness Class and Mindfulness Topics*

Week	Wellness Class Topics	Mindfulness Topics
23	Neuroplasticity	Trees in a forest: How we are all interconnected connection to others
24	Growth mindset	Past/present/future (Where is your mind?)
25	Habits (good and bad habits), grit/resilience, famous failures project, & StrengthsFinder	
26	Empathy & stereotypes	
27	Perspective & diversity	
28	Bullying & compliments	
29	Positive psychology, power of thought (review), & hedonic treadmill	Body scan meditation
30	Goals (intrinsic/extrinsic), how to write goals, affirmations, confidence, happy movie, & vision board project	Soaking in the good; loving things; help yourself first; heartfulness for oneself
31	Responsibility, pride/humility, technology addiction, & outsmarting the media	Judgment & body awareness
32	Blame/victimitis, environmental/social responsibility, decision making, & habits/addiction	
33	Relationships, peer pressure, introvert/extrovert, & conflict	Letting be & mindfulness of emotions
34	Domestic abuse, human trafficking; gossip, toxic masculinity, & apologizing/forgiveness	
35	Alcohol & drugs, nutrition; habits/addiction, & every 15 minutes	
36	Nutrition tracking & sleep	
37	Community clinic & health/sex education	
38	Community clinic & health/sex education	
39	Community clinic & health/sex education	
40	Community clinic & health/sex education	
41	College and career exploration & college / career	

According to Mr. Smith, the students would learn a component of mindfulness or review the tenets of the practice that they had previously learned and then they would conclude by doing a direct mindfulness practice, which included turning down the lights. During the mindfulness session, the students would practice between 2 to 3 minutes at a time, and they would practice at

least 2 times a week or more. When students were not in class, they were asked for homework to bring awareness to ideas throughout the week. For example, topics such as self-awareness and present-moment awareness reinforced the ideas learned in class. Table 1 shows the weekly topics taught in the wellness class and the aspects of mindfulness that were also addressed.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate student experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum in the areas of stress, decision making, present-moment awareness, and emotional regulation. The following research questions were answered in the study:

1. How do freshmen students who have practiced and continue to practice mindfulness in the classroom describe their present-moment awareness, decision making, and emotional regulation?
2. In what ways does mindfulness practice affect perceived levels of stress in freshmen?

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research is the study of something or someone in their natural setting, as the meanings are constructed and reinforced by those surrounding the subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). What made qualitative research an appropriate choice for this study was the focus on “understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Given the objective of the study was to understand students’ experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum, a qualitative methodology was most sound (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A case study was used as the method of inquiry given that it is bounded and involves rich description and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The investigation was bound by the confines of a single site where a mindfulness curriculum was implemented (Gay et al., 2009; Stake,

2005). Generalizing data outside of the targeted population and setting was not the goal of the study but rather learning about how one group of freshmen, enrolled in a specific teacher's class, responded to the implementation of mindfulness practices. This case study approach ensured that individuals could be investigated more deeply who might have been overlooked if the main goal had been to develop a more general theory (Maxwell, 2013). In describing the benefits of this type of qualitative data collection, Maxwell (2013) asserted, "The primary concern of the study is not with generalization, but with developing an adequate description, interpretation, and explanation of this case" (p. 79).

### **Participants**

Participants were to originally include 12 freshmen students from a comprehensive high school under the pseudonym, Cascade High School. Students were selected based on the criteria that they were enrolled in one of two wellness classes taught by Mr. Smith (a pseudonym). Mr. Smith had roughly 65 students in two classes. Freshmen wellness is a required, year-long course at Cascade High and fulfills both a graduation and an A-G elective requirement for college entrance. Additionally, wellness satisfies the state mandated Healthy Youth Act, which requires students to have comprehensive sexual health education at least once in middle school and once in high school (California's Health Education Initiatives). Students were placed in one section of the course, depending on multiple factors including student's choice of electives and master schedule availability.

The researcher went into each class, briefly described the study, and offered the option for participants to be part of the study. Participants must have opted in to participate. Proportional stratified sampling to be used, breaking participants into subgroup (i.e., by demographics) and then a simple random sampling in each subgroup (Mertler, 2019). What

made the sampling technique proportional is that each subgroup had a demographic makeup similar to the population of the classes. The researcher ran a report on the learning management system at the school site of the population of students in the two classes. Next, students self-identified with one or multiple race and ethnicities (i.e., Latino, Asian, Black, White, American Indian, other). Once the breakdown by demographics was identified and the number of students needed for each subgroup was noted, the researcher was to assign each student a number and use the software provided at Randomness and Integrity Services (Version 1) to choose participants for each demographic out of the target population. Although that protocol was what was intended, the number of students overall interested in participating was lower than anticipated.

Cascade High School is located in a rural setting in North San Diego County. The school serves a predominately Latinx population, with 77.4% of the population identifying as such (School Accountability Report Card [SARC]). Fifteen percent of the school identifies as White, 13.6% of the population are English learners, and 71.5% of the school population are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

The participants for the study were originally to be selected using the process previously described; however, when the researcher went into the two classes to explain the study and ask for participants, only eight students were interested in participating. Providing an incentive to participate in the form of a \$25 gift card appeared to be enticing for some of the participants in the study. The students also had very few interactions with the researcher prior to her going into the classroom to ask for volunteers to participate in the study. Although the participants' wellness class was taught in the same classroom as the researcher, the researcher's interactions with the students were limited to saying hello to them, as a whole, on occasion, before transitioning out of the classroom.

Given that the researcher had no prior connection to the students, it is unlikely that bias would have crept into that part of the selection process. Of the eight participants, it later became apparent through the interviews that three had previously or currently struggled with their mental health, two of which were well versed in mental health topics, while five of the students did not seem to have feelings one way or another about mental health related topics or practices. At the time of participant recruitment, students had not been formally introduced to mindfulness, besides a brief explanation in the introduction to the study. Therefore, students may not have had any exposure to the topic of mindfulness unless done so on their own outside of class.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher explored the research questions by asking the participants to complete mindfulness journals and participate in semistructured interviews. Because the purpose of the study was to capture the perceptions that students had about mindfulness practices in their daily lives, journals allowed participants to record their thoughts and feelings directly following mindfulness practices. Similarly, semistructured interviews created opportunities for students to explain their stories and journeys with mindfulness from their perspectives.

Students recorded their thoughts, feelings, and reflections about mindfulness each week for the duration of the 16-week mindfulness curriculum. The journals were to be originally housed in the classroom, but ended up being done on Canvas, the learning management system. The researcher provided a weekly targeted prompt and asked the participants to write and draw in responses in their journals. Included in the prompts were questions about aspects of students' present-moment awareness, decision making, and emotional regulation (see Appendix B). Mindfulness journals were one way for the researcher to gain insight, through participant writing.



At the end of the wellness course, participants engaged in semistructured interviews. Through email and in person communication, a date and time were determined between the researcher and the participants after the assent and consent forms had been collected. The interviews took place on the campus of Cascade High School, in either the Wellness Center or a classroom, to minimize disruptions. The interview questions were designed with a backward-design model (i.e., Wiggins et al., 1998) where the interviewer began with the topics of present-moment awareness, decision-making, emotional regulation, and stress all of which mindfulness claims to embody. Then, the researcher designed questions which would elicit participant responses on the topics. An outline of the interview process, type of questions, including the technique of episodic interviewing will follow in the subsequent paragraphs.

Episodic interviewing—asking participants to recall specific memories of past events—was used in the semistructured interviews (see Appendix C), allowing participants to access concrete experiences versus idealized accounts of what they “should” say (Maxwell, 2013). Episodic interviewing was essential to this study by asking students to recount feelings, thoughts, and emotions that arose directly after mindfulness practices took place.

The researcher asked questions about specific experiences and participants’ mindfulness journals. Throughout the interviews, the researcher kept in mind the notion that

At the same time, too much and ill-timed exploration of the participant’s words can make them defensive and shift the meaning making from the participant to the interviewer. The interview can become too easily a vehicle for the participants’ experience. Too little exploration, however, can leave an interviewer unsure of the participants’ meaning in the material he or she has gathered. (Seidman, 2019, p. 84)

Given the complexity of interviews in general and more specifically interviews with youth, the researcher paid special attention to developing a working relationship with the participants so that they might feel comfortable enough to share their feelings on the topic of

mindfulness. Simultaneously, the researcher kept in mind that each word she said and each acknowledgement she made might lead the participant down a path that was one of how the researcher felt and not solely that of the participant. While the youth were aware that the study was being done on mindfulness, the researcher made it a point each time she met with the participants to state that this study was about how they felt, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that their stories were what was most important. The researcher made it a point to limit her reactions to different answers as to not favor one specific type of answer.

Present-moment awareness is one tenet of mindfulness. Therefore, interview questions which encompassed that idea were specifically addressed. “Mindfulness meditation encourage nonjudgmental awareness of experiences in the present moment by focusing on bodily or other sensorial experience, affective states, thoughts, or images” (Hofmann et al., 2012, p. 4). Specifically, the interviewer asked participants to conduct their own 2-minute mindfulness session, in which they were to count their breaths (starting at one when they breathe in, two when they breathe out, and so forth, until a thought occurs to them). After a thought came to mind and as soon as they noticed themselves distracted by the story that the thought provoked, participants refocused their attention on the breath and began the count over again at 1. After this mindfulness exercise, participants disclosed what count they could achieve. Interview questions were conducted about how long the participants could pay attention to the specific task of breathing, and information was recorded. Participants in the study were asked to describe where their thoughts took them (the past or the future) at the point in which they lost count and were distracted. Similarly, an account of how long the participants believed they were distracted for during that time was asked.

Additionally, questions about the participants' decision-making tendencies with respect to mindfulness were asked. To gather information about decision-making processes, students were asked a series of hypothetical scenarios similar to "what would you do" situations. Participants were asked in the interviews to explain their stance on each scenario and to note whether they believed mindfulness influenced their decision-making one way or another.

Emotional regulation was another key focus of the interviews given its importance as a tenet of mindfulness. During the semistructured interviews, the researcher focused the questions on emotional regulation by having the participants identify a time when they recently felt overwhelmed or stressed and to describe the process from the time they were triggered, until the time they recovered their composure to see how students dealt with feelings of adversity. Pertinent follow-up questions were included based on emerging information. Seidman (2019) described interviews as the following: "I often ask participants to tell me a story about what they are discussing. In a sense, everything said in an interview is a story. But, if a participant were talking about, for example, relationships with students, I might ask for a story about one student who stands out in his or her experience" (p. 88).

The semistructured interviews were audio recorded using an Olympus WS-852 audio recorder, transcribed by a professional transcriptionist on Rev.com, and then the transcription was hand coded. Each interview took place in one single setting. An analytic memo was constructed after each interview, detailing what happened in the interview, information that the students reported, and any thoughts and reflections that arose as an interviewer. Emerson et al. (2011) stressed the importance of "one-paragraph summary commentaries at the end of each set of field notes, and lengthier in-process memos within a matter of weeks" (p. 11).

## **Data Analysis**

The first step in being able to analyze the data was through Rev.com (Version 4.0.2), a transcription service. While Rev.com provided transcriptions, it also acted as a place to organize the data analysis. Once the transcripts were complete, the data were cleaned by removing filler words and repetitive words that convoluted the clarity of the message. No other words were removed from the transcripts, and if any filler words remained, they indicated an emphatical pause or hesitation. After the transcripts were refined, the coding process of the analysis took place.

The transcripts were initially read through two times for understanding and then two additional times (one participant at a time), where emergent codes were recorded onto a memo pad on Rev.com. The codes recorded for the first round of data analysis included in vivo codes to capture the participants' tones and ensure their own words were dominant. After, the codes were reread and then transferred to a spreadsheet where all codes could be seen at once. There, the researcher read the codes presented and created different categories based on commonalities in the spreadsheet. Next, codes were color coded by theme and transferred to a new spreadsheet one theme at a time, until all codes belonged to a specific theme.

Once the themes were identified based on commonalities in each group, each transcript was reread, and tallies were made each time a code was identified in the transcripts. Once the count was recorded, the transcript excerpt that matched the participant's specific code would be copied and pasted into the cell. The process described previously was repeated until all transcripts were complete. The journal entries were then analyzed using a similar method of coding.

## **Coding Data**

After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher listened to the recordings and read through the transcript of the interview to ensure that the transcript did not leave out any words and was accurate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, the researcher reviewed the research questions and the purpose statement of the study to guide the data analysis process and to stay focused on what questions the data attempted to answer. After reading through the transcripts and listening to the recording, the researcher wrote a memo that consisted of “reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas and things to pursue” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 196) based on the first data set. Coding took place following the analytic memos.

Open coding or writing ideas or codes that emerge naturally from the data in the margins, was done first by hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In vivo coding, or using the participants’ own words verbatim as codes, was also incorporated into the initial coding process (Saldana, 2012). Open coding and in vivo coding were appropriate methods to capture what the participants said and used their own words to prioritize the student voice in the study. Using the conceptual framework of resilience theory as a lens, the researcher carefully read through the transcript to see if any of the participants’ stories about mindfulness fell into the categories of assets and resources.

The researcher met virtually with an affinity group (comprised of the researcher and two other people) and took part in peer debriefings after each member has had a chance to conduct an initial round of preliminary coding. During the peer debriefings, emergent themes and discrepancies were discussed from one another’s data sets (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher kept in mind that coding is an iterative process, beginning from an inductive standpoint, and

ultimately ending from a deductive lens where the categories are established, and data is being filtered into those already constructed categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Positionality**

The positionality of the researcher is one where she has a vested interest in the success of Cascade High School given that it is her employer, but moreover she has a genuine desire to highlight student voices. While the researcher is aware that researcher bias is a threat to the qualitative process, she focused on emic themes, which are “themes/patterns that emerge from the data itself as you begin to analyze it using an open coding strategy” (Fine, 2020, Session 3, Slide 18). To ensure the researcher made sense of what the interviewees were saying was their actual intent, the researcher asked clarifying questions for understanding. Follow up questions and member checking allowed the researcher to reduce the chances of incorrectly depicting the situation (Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher has taken three 6-week courses: mindfulness for educators, mindfulness essentials, and mindfulness for difficult emotions. The researcher and the teacher who is the subject of the implementation of the mindfulness curriculum in the study have historically both done mindfulness (in their respective wellness courses) with students, roughly 3 times per week for 10 minutes. With prior experience implementing mindfulness practices with youth, which included the benefits of mindfulness on the brain, it was essential for the researcher to not jump to conclusions about what they wanted the study to find to not fall into the trap of producing etic themes, which are “patterns that you predict that you will find based on your background knowledge, readings, and conceptual framework” (Fine, 2020, Session 3, Slide 18).

The researcher was aware that “researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete,

but while their research is actively in progress” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 1). The researcher made a conscious effort to recognize their positionality toward mindfulness and acknowledged they had a vested interest in the success of the program to produce sound research that is valid. While an acknowledgement of the extent to which the researcher wanted the benefits of mindfulness to be evident, it was up to the participants to describe their experiences with mindfulness in whatever light they so choose.

### **Trustworthiness**

While it is clear that “one can never really capture reality” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121), the researcher used triangulation to ensure the findings begin to resemble the participants’ reality and not the reality of the researcher from which the information is filtered. Using interview questions, mindfulness journals, and member checking, the researcher used multiple sources of data, as Denzin (1978) proposed, as one of the four types of triangulations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After initial codes were created and meaning was made, the researcher brought the information back to the participants to check to see if the student voice had been accurately depicted in the codes and themes to conduct member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To continually ensure ethical trustworthiness, the researcher constantly monitored how she attended to the implementation of methods, integrity at each level of the design process and critical attention to the accuracy of the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the various methodological considerations that went into the construction of the case study design. The study served to answer the research questions and give power to the voices of youth using semistructured interviews, episodic interviews and mindfulness journal reflections. Open and focused coding created the data analysis, and special

attention was given to potential pitfalls that risk trustworthiness and ethics. The positionality of the researcher has been highlighted in this chapter. Chapter 3 sets the scene for the data collection and analysis to follow in Chapter 4.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### **Participants**

A short biography of each participant follows. The overview of the participants serves to inform the reader who the students are because their comments are woven throughout the discussion of findings to support the themes identified. While the participant information may assist in a better understanding of each student, it is not meant to be an exhaustive list or reduce the participant to a series of facts. Student voice is at the center of the present study; therefore, a snapshot of the student is essential for context.

### **Matteo**

Matteo was a freshman male who participated in Ballet Folklorico 1 day a week after school and was connected to his Latinx culture through dance. Academically, Matteo was in advancement via individual determination (AVID), a college preparatory class, and took part in Spanish for Spanish speakers as his language class. Matteo was considered a redesignated English learner. At the close of his freshmen year, Matteo earned a 3.33 grade point average (GPA), and four teachers indicated he was “a pleasure to have in class.”

### **Kellen**

Kellen was a freshman trans White male who is active in his local Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) chapter. Every Friday, at the start of the school day, Kellen and his friends helped the school social worker and school psychologist greet the other students, as they walked through the gate. Kellen received a 1.8 GPA during the academic year this study took place, had an interest in art, and two of his teachers stated that he was “a pleasure to have in class” and “exhibits a positive attitude.”

**Hugo**

Hugo was a White freshman male. Besides achieving a 4.0 GPA in his freshman year, he was learning Spanish, alongside strengthening his native French tongue with his family at home. Hugo was a soccer player and played on the Cascade High School team and a local traveling soccer team. Four of Hugo's teachers wrote he was "a pleasure to have in class" or "exhibits a positive attitude" when submitting his final marks for the year.

**Lola**

Lola was a Latinx freshman female, active in school life at Cascade High School. Lola was involved in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), culinary arts, and had earned the title Redesignated for the English Language Development test. While Lola earned a 3.0 GPA her freshman year, two teachers wrote she had displayed "consistent effort Shown," and four teachers wrote she was "a pleasure to have in class."

**Adelia**

Adelia was a Latinx freshman female who played percussion with the marching band at Cascade High School. While shy and reserved, Adelia was also enrolled in art and was a redesignated English learner. Adelia has earned a 3.0 GPA for her freshman year. Adelia attributed her success to the kindness of her freshman year English teacher, who was one of the only people with whom she felt comfortable speaking.

**Liv**

Liv was a Latinx freshman female heavily involved in life at Cascade High School. Liv participated in Wind Ensemble for Marching Band, JROTC, and culinary arts. Liv participated in these extracurriculars and played multiple instruments. She took it on herself to ask her teacher if she could teach herself how to play the bassoon over the summer, given that

there was only one bassoon in the school. Liv attended Band Camp over the summer, and her dedication to Cascade High School ran deep. The colonel for JROTC indicated Liv was “a pleasure to have in class.”

### **Cole**

Cole was a Latinx freshman male who was a dedicated member of the Cascade High School football team. He spent much of his time going to the gym to get stronger for football season. Cole was a part of the English Learner Program at Cascade High School and had a case manager, where he received additional support in a study skills class offered in the school day.

### **Blake**

Blake was a White freshman female who spent many after-school hours perfecting the color guard routine. With a 2.8 GPA for her freshman year, Blake was also involved in German. Her wellness teacher described her as “exhibiting a positive attitude” in class. Blake used the pandemic to explore her personality, uncover who she was meant to be, and had proudly identified as a member of the LGBTQIA community.

### **Challenges During a Pandemic**

While the research questions guiding this study did not focus on the fallout from and experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, participants’ experiences during that time influenced their overall experiences with mindfulness. As such, references to the pandemic occur throughout the discussion of the findings. Chapter 4 is structured to briefly discuss how the participants experienced events in 2020 through 2022. The rest of the chapter discusses the themes from data analysis using the participants’ own words to illustrate the conclusions. It is impossible to fully describe the depth and breadth of feeling conveyed during the interviews, but the rich description here is an attempt to do the participants’ emotions justice.

## COVID-19 Issues

When participants were asked to describe their experiences with COVID-19 over the previous year to 2 years, the responses included descriptions of anxiety, depression, and isolation. Further, one participant's mom was placed on hospice and ultimately passed away. She described her experience as follows:

COVID was very difficult for me, especially right at the beginning of COVID, in January, when COVID was first discovered and everything. In 2020, my mom was placed onto hospice. I was not well aware of what that was. I thought they were going just take better care of her while she was at home. So, when I was told about it, I was told about it at school. And a lot of, a lot of pain came out during that day, a lot of understanding that, okay, this is where I have to not be selfish for a few minutes and actually, take time with my mom. That was a really stressful moment. So, when COVID came, it was kind of like a blessing in disguise, almost, because I got to spend more time with my mom. I got to be there for her. And then in April of 2020, she sadly passed. It was difficult for me afterwards because school was online, and I wasn't physically there. It was difficult for me to put my focus into it when I had other places that had my focus. So, during that whole time slot of those few months, there was just a lot of tension and stress, and I was freaking out. Afterwards, I started, diving deep into depression and anxiety, and being scared to leave my room, and I was very isolated. I very much pushed myself away from my family and my friends and was very isolated. I didn't want to talk to anybody. My birthday for that year—My 13th birthday was not good. I did not want to celebrate it. I did not want to acknowledge that, hey, I was turning 13, got to be a teenager. I was just like, "I don't want to do anything." It showed me that I needed that person in my life and if I didn't, I was going to fall apart because I already had a really rough experience with my life so far. Having my mom is like, okay, I'm not so stressed out, you know? She was there for me to help me with everything that I needed help with. (Blake)

Two participants described worrying about their family contracting COVID-19 and their own experiences with society's responses to the virus and its effects on their social and emotional lives. Matteo explained,

I felt mostly worried for my mom and, and for my little brother because my little brother—I always pray for him and my mom. Because she's my mom. But the next few days it got really boring being at home doing nothing. I really wanted to go back to school or be somewhere because being at home it gets stressful for you a lot. Not having social interactions. I mostly felt boredom and repetitiveness. I kept on trying and I talked a lot with my friends through social media, but it kind

of felt like blank stares. I couldn't really see their emotions like how I would with talking to them here.

Hugo described how the uncertainty of the virus affected his life:

It was stressful, and it was like when are we going to get back to normal life kind of. It was stressful because we didn't really know what it was; it was new this virus, so stressful about my parents and my family, just making sure they were safe.

Other participants described how going anywhere during the pandemic was difficult, "Well, I played a lot of video games, and I watched a lot of anime since I really couldn't go places and do things" (Kellen).

The effects that COVID-19 had on some participants seeped into their schooling and affected their academic performance. Some participants noted how their grades suffered as their motivation fluctuated, as Matteo described,

For me, I think it was just like a blank stare. I got really lazy. Yeah, I didn't really do anything and it showed in my grades. The last year, they almost took me out of the school because I really got horrible grades, but then I tried to change it up and I got my grades back up.

Although COVID-19 brought about a unique time of super stress, students did not seem to be affected all in the same fashion. The secondary effects of this virus on poverty and racism were exacerbated in already difficult times in the lives of students. Some students attending Cascade High School had families that were essential workers. Food insecurity was present as well noted by the large numbers of families that accessed Cascade High School for weekly lunches-as a food distribution center for the district during the pandemic. As Lola, who identifies as Latinx, stated in the interviews, she had to be careful not to get her mother sick because she was an only child in a single parent household, where her mother needed to attend work. Other students such as Hugo, who identifies as White, stated his family would spend time outside going on walks and hikes and to the beach as a family, something that he really enjoyed. Cole,

who identifies as Latinx, discussed how he was supposed to be attending class but would oversleep despite having set his alarm indicating it was his responsibility to get himself to eighth grade online school. He stated he stopped showing up to school and started hanging out in person with his friends and going to the gym instead.

Cole portrayed the stress of attending online school through a pandemic and recounted how he ended up not attending classes:

So, it was around eighth grade and I thought I was going to be out for 2 weeks, but we ended up going off for a year or 2. A year, right? It just didn't feel good. Well, I felt good going back to school, and then we had to wear masks for a while. Then with the online, I didn't really like it, like, at all because I'd never wake up. Yeah, I'd be, like, oh, my God. [Laughs]. I mean, I'd just show up super late, and they'd ask me, "Why were you late?" I'm like, "Just 'cause." [Laughs]. I'd have the Chromebook sitting on the bed. I'd just open it up. I'd feel embarrassed and, kind of dumb because why would I wake up super late? I had my timer—well, my alarm on, and I still didn't wake up. [Laughs]. Well, it was kind of hard because I was just doing a bunch of things instead of school. I'd hang out with friends all the time. Like, that's really it and then, I wouldn't show up to any of the classes most of the time. Then I'd just go to the gym.

With a lack of motivation, little accountability to attend online school, an infrastructure not intended for total reliance on remote learning, and the uncertainty of what was to come, many participants found adjusting difficult. Liv described,

All right, so beginning of COVID happened when I was in seventh grade. It was difficult because we had to transition into online and then back in person and then back online. It was like back and forth. So, grades and schoolwork were kind of hard because of that. It was hard to adjust to the situation, but throughout the year, eighth grade got easier. High school was a little bit easier, less online [laughs] learning. I think that in person makes it better and easier to learn.

While several participants shared commonalities with the difficulties of online schooling and fear, others shared unique situations about coping and what the pandemic represented to them.:

I'm not sure why, but sometimes devastating news wouldn't really affect me. I don't know why. I think maybe it's because when I was younger, I wouldn't understand some situations, but when a relative would pass away it wouldn't

really affect me. I would just think, oh, I'm not going to see them again, but it would blow over. So, when the COVID news was on or something I wouldn't even pass it on. Then when they would announce how many people would die, I would just think, oh, um, it is sad, but I don't think I processed it, all of it. Yeah, because it's people that I never knew, and it's like finding out that these people that existed just all of a sudden died. It's odd. (Adelia)

## **Stressors**

Stress is at the center of the present study. To provide context for why mindfulness is important, it is first essential to examine the topics and ideas that created stress in the participants' lives. The following sections discuss general stressors and stressors present during COVID-19 in their words. The current study aimed to understand the relationship between stress and mindfulness and how the practice of mindfulness affects perceived stress levels in the participants.

## **Family and Friends as Causes of Stress**

While COVID-19 created unfavorable circumstances for the participants, additional stressors in the form of friends and family were at play. People closest to the participants served a unique role as both the cause of and the cure for stressful situations. Kellen said,

Some stuff outside of school like family can be stressful sometimes, or friends. Friends not as much. But in the past, it was a bit more stressful, now it's not. My family is another stressor. My relationship with my dad isn't the best anymore, and my sister is just driving me insane. She's being a little pest. And my mom, my relationship with her is okay, but it's not the best. Before, this was, like, last year, when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I was kind of the leftout friend. Like, I'd see stuff about them hanging out, or they'd always be doing stuff together, and I'd just kinda be left out.

While some stressors are ongoing and variable such as his relationship with his sister and father, which have happened since the introduction of the mindfulness curriculum other stressors occurred prior to the introduction of mindfulness such as being left out amongst his friend group. Kellen also relayed the following story in response to explaining about a time he was very upset and how he calmed himself down. In this story it was unclear if this scenario had occurred before

or after Kellen had begun learning mindfulness formally, but rather showcased the type of stressors that the students are facing in their everyday world.

I guess there was like an incident with my dad, which is what screwed up my relationship. I was, like, extremely upset and scared. And the way I calmed down was I was on a call with my friend, and he was just talking to me getting me to calm down and make me feel better.

Stressors create many of the difficulties youth are forced to overcome. Examining the various coping mechanisms participants had before the exposure to the mindfulness curriculum can ensure youth voices are centered and not overextend the potential benefits of the mindfulness practices. One participant reported stressors in the form of having to self-advocate for her mental health to her father after her mother passed. The following story took place before the inception of the mindfulness curriculum and showcased the level of stress in which the participant underwent. Despite her father initially verbally disagreeing with the use of antidepressants, Blake did what she knew was best for her:

So, I was like, I'm going to be placed on that. So, we had gotten the medication and then, we came back to my house. I straight up flat told my dad, "I'm on antidepressants." And he was like, "You don't need them. You don't, you don't need them." Like, "Why would you want to be placed on them?"

Participants disclosed several of their reactions to family disagreements that caused them stress. Although Hugo and Adelia found ways to cope with the arguments with their families, it was unclear whether their families knew the toll it had on each of them. Hugo said,

I use it [mindfulness] whenever I feel stressed. So, that can be when I'm at home and my family argues sometimes, and so, it puts a lot on my mind. So, when I take deep breaths and just focus on something else than what they're talking about, than the arguing.

Adelia said,

He just left after that [a fight], and he called us rude. My mom got upset because he rarely visits. I don't think she was intentionally trying to make me get anxious, but it's probably because she missed him a lot and wanted to see him, so she got



really upset, and I got an anxiety attack, and it was really hard to stop it or prevent it from happening.

### **Positive Outcomes of COVID-19**

The following excerpts showcase the positive experiences or outcomes that emerged from the pandemic. Although this category was unexpected, several participants' recollections surrounding the pandemic were positive. For example, Blake described how she found strength and empowerment after her mother's passing by being confident in her decision-making abilities. Blake also described using the pandemic to explore sexual orientation and find pride in figuring out her identity:

So, when COVID came, it was kind of like a blessing in disguise, almost, because I got to spend more time with my mom. I got to be there for her. So, when I didn't have her, that moment, the entire COVID experience just kind of, made me realize who I wanted to be. That I didn't need those—I didn't need my mom to be there by my side. I was very capable of making my own decisions. So, around August of 2020, I went on a trip with my sister and her and my nephew. We went around Massachusetts. We had a lot of fun and I realized, at that moment, there was, a lot of choices I had. Like, I had the choice to go on a trip, or stay home and be isolated. I had the choice to stay at home and you know, not experience this fun of leaving California to go to Massachusetts. I was like, I'm going to take this opportunity that I have and do it to the best of my ability, and so I did. I had a lot of fun. I was on a plane for the first time, and it was a, it was a wonderful experience.

In October of 2020 is when I started discovering, there were more options than just being straight. Or you know, just she/her pronouns or he/him pronouns. In October of 2020 is really when I looked into it, and I saw that LGBTQ+ people aren't any sort of, you know, "sinful people." What people say. I was very open about it. I was open to seeing what other people had to say. I was in total for me. I was a very open-minded person. So, learning new things was nothing scary to me. So, when I learned more about LGBTQ and discovering what it is, it was really, exciting because it was something new. It was something to try. You know, it was something to like, okay, wow. There's, a whole other world out there. So, in December of 2020, I decided, all right, you know, we're going to try this out. So, I did have a crush on a girl. It was a mind-opening experience. I was like, okay, maybe I'm gay and then, it was a back-and-forth experience. You had to figure out where you were going, what's your line, what's your in between. What's your preference, what's your not? I really struck on being bisexual. So, I'm bisexual to this day. Heck, yeah. So then, that happened, and I was really scared to tell anybody because my family didn't seem too supportive. So, I told my sister, and she was like, "Heck, yeah, girl. Go for it." I was really excited because she was

like, “I support people in that area.” And it was, really excited because as the years, months came by, I really realized, okay, I was kind of just scared to move outside of the box. So, during COVID I just said I’m getting out of my safe zone. I’m leaving my safe zone and I’m really discovering who I want to be, where I want to go. What are my feelings, emotions? How are other people feeling? How am I going to help people? How am I going to help myself? That was—What? My 2020 year, 2021 pandemic, was a whole, discovering myself moment. And that’s how I made it through was just trying to discover myself in, more ways than one. Yeah, so I was like, a freshman. You know, very remarkable how far somebody can come. Like, it’s just amazing to me.

Blake was not alone in explaining how the pandemic offered the students extra time to explore their identities and interests and to consciously create what and who they wanted to become. Cole described his experience prior to high school and therefore before he learned mindfulness as to how he coped with stress:

Okay. So, the gym was, like, the main thing that was trying to put me back into everything. I felt like the gym helped me out in many different ways because it boosted my confidence and everything, and I felt somewhat better about myself and everything. It was building the strength, and a bunch of compliments from other people in the gym. They saying, “Oh, are you getting stronger?” Because my first day there, I couldn’t even lift up the bar on the bench.

For others, the pandemic allowed them to spend time with family. The novelty of having additional time both at home and with those with whom they lived manifested in unique ways.

Hugo said,

Well, because of COVID, I’ve been more with my family, so that kind of copes with stress. We do things that we like, we like going on hikes and walks and stuff, and we go to the beach a lot, that’s our thing. So just being with my family kind of copes with stress these last few years and being with friends also.

Adelia said,

For me, I liked it. I didn’t like the fact that people were dying or anything. I was also scared about that, but I liked that I was able to stay home, but I did miss school. Well, I didn’t really miss middle school because I was over that experience, but I did like being at home because I didn’t have to socialize or worry about having to talk to people or face them or make eye contact with new people.

While the pandemic, in general, was not originally part of the study's purpose or design, it came about at a time when it impacted the participants' experiences with stress and the development of their coping mechanisms. Stress and coping skills were at the root of this study, which is why this focused discussion about the pandemic is appropriate in the context of the larger findings. The world in which the participants live had been uprooted and given the importance of this study on youth stressors, it was a logical conclusion to include youth voices on this topic. Furthermore, adolescents in this study were eager to tell their stories of their most recent life experiences and allowing them to do so served to address the conceptual framework on student voice. Additionally, COVID-19-related topics are referenced periodically throughout the findings and themes in later sections. Coping skills which youth possessed before the inception of mindfulness practices follows.

### **Coping Skills Prior to Mindfulness (During COVID-19)**

During the interviews, the students described coping strategies they employed before being explicitly taught mindfulness strategies. It is helpful to consider the techniques the participants learned before the introduction of mindfulness practices as compared to their choices and reactions after learning about mindfulness. Listening to and playing music, going to the gym, and escaping through video games, books, and fantasy worlds all served the participants in combatting the stress of both adolescence and COVID-19. Liz said,

One way I like to cope is like listening to music, drawing, playing my instruments, going out for a walk. I have emotional support animals, so I hang around my pets. It helps a lot. Sometimes, I bake just for fun with my mom. And I just watch movies. I binge watch a lot of shows.

Kellen described what kept him busy and helped him cope during the pandemic, such as “anime, video games, and art” and how some of his past hobbies came back: “I started drawing a bit more, as well.” Liv detailed how music helped her in many difficult situations: “When it comes

to playing my instruments, I can feel the vibrations on the keys and instruments, and it's just very calming, just the touch and sound of the instruments." Liv stated that listening to music had many benefits for her well-being, such that

when it comes to my music, if I'm listening to music, I could listen to different types of music, depending on what mood I am. Music just lets me forget all the stress and the negative thoughts that I'm thinking, and it lets me be on my way.

While music came up frequently in the interviews, another participant described how the gym gave him peace of mind. Cole stated,

I felt like the gym helped me out in many different ways because it boosted my confidence and everything, and I felt somewhat better about myself and everything. All my friends knew I had potential and everything. The gym. Again. I'd just focus on myself, and then keep building muscle, and listening to music.

One participant explained how escaping through fantasy served as a means of coping with stress. Lola explained,

I don't know why but I got really into romance books or like reincarnation books. I also did watch a little bit of anime and those tropes. Anything in the fantasy world where like people aren't dying, diseases, stuff like that, anywhere like, a happy place, in a way.

The sentiments from Lola illustrate how much of an impact the pandemic had on the participants' levels of stress and the importance of escaping as a way to lessen the effects:

Personally, for me, I just, I just took my mind off of this world. Like I did a lot of reading during COVID time. So, instead of coping with like the reality of everything I just like, for a short amount of time put everything in my mind on a book and just imagined myself in that perfect fantasy world. Of course, if I couldn't be able—if I wasn't able to do that, I would just distract myself as much as possible. Yeah. The reincarnation books most of them are surviving as, like, a got reincarnated into. So, it's kinda like a way to relate to like surviving during COVID and stuff because they're surviving in a new world that they're unfamiliar with and we're surviving in a tough time with a disease we're not familiar with.

While some strategies were tangible coping skills such as drawing and playing video games, others were more abstract such as being self-aware about mental health issues. Blake's

following comments highlight her level of self-awareness prior to having been in a wellness and more specifically mindfulness course. Blake stated,

Yeah, in May 2021 is when I made a very difficult decision to be placed on antidepressants. My doctor told me I had very severe numbers, and that she wanted to get me onto it. But my dad wasn't so open minded about it. So, she said that she didn't need any parental approval. This was all me. So right then and there, I had—Once again, I had a very big decision to make. I was like, okay, either be placed on anti-depressants and really start to experience a change or say no and keep moving in isolation and keep being that depression keep, going deeper and deeper into it.

Student voice, from the study's conceptual framework, prioritizes the words of the participants. In a previous section, family and friends as the cause of stress were mentioned, but participants also detailed how family and friends served as coping mechanisms. The following section highlights people who aided in reducing stress for the participant.

### **Family and Friends as Preventative Coping Mechanisms for Stress**

Students' stories about their stressors and coping mechanisms are valuable so that the readers have a clear mental image before considering how the students used the tools they learned from the mindfulness curriculum. Regarding his brother, Matteo described how close the two were and how when his brother contracted COVID-19, Matteo did as well: "And we're really close, so even if I would've prevented anything, I still would've gotten it no matter what. But it didn't really hurt me because I had the vaccine, and it covered me a lot."

Once Blake made the decision to take antidepressants, despite her father's wishes, he noticed it was in her best interest, which changed his stance from resistance to approval:

And after like, a few months, my mood definitely started to change again. I was definitely more outgoing, more talkative, more out of my room, less isolated away from everyone. My dad, like, really noticed. And he was actually surprised. And so then, he had told me, "Oh, I'm really proud of you for making a decision. Even though I may have not liked it. But now I do because I see that you're more outgoing. Like, you're feeling better." And I was, like, really excited about it.

Cole described his time during online learning and quarantine: "I'd just hang out with

friends all the time. Just, like, that's really it." Adelia described how her mother helped her calm down and combat her anxiety which began long before she was introduced to mindfulness at Cascade High School. Given that Adelia had experienced levels of anxiousness prior to the study may have made her more willing to join the study initially. Adelia described her mother's role in helping her cope with anxiety:

It was a long time ago when my mom figured out that I would get anxious really easily, and she would usually help me during the time. She told me to not let it get to me, and she would stand there in front of me and help me with my breathing. She would sometimes hold my hands. Like, right here in front of me, or sometimes she would hug me, and we would just wait it out, because sometimes it's—It feels better to let it all out instead.

Liv emphasized the importance of friends and family when dealing with a recent breakup that occurred months after the participant had first learned about mindfulness strategies in class and said friends and family helped her ability to cope with the stress:

But one way I calmed down was I went to my friend's house. ... I went to her house, and we dressed up. We put on random clothes to see which one matches and which one doesn't. We ate, she helped me distract myself and then we talked about how I felt. And it was just better. Then my mom, when she heard the news [of the breakup], she kind of helped me calm down a little bit, kind of made me laugh because when I texted her what happened, she burst through my door holding water, cookies, and tissues.

When asked about the current stressors that the participants are experiencing not every mention of stress was cause for the participant to become overly stressed and need a coping skill. During this part of the study, the participants were engaged in their closing interviews after having gone through the majority of the mindfulness course. The following were examples of topics that the youth reported as having caused them stress: balancing responsibilities; balancing sports with school; band camp; color guard; deadlines; living with a single parent; grades; not having friends but wanting them; and learning a new language. Additionally, participants stated loneliness or lack of connection, loud and energetic people, no motivation to do homework, no

free time, people taking things out on them, trouble staying focused, organization, and time management were all topics that caused them stress. Lastly, bad memories, reading, overthinking, annoyances, disrespectful people, getting into a 4-year college, and becoming anxious were reasons why participants felt stressed.

Participants in the study described a wide variety of stressors in their lives. It is essential to understand the stressful topics and situations that the participants reported and the people in place who helped them cope. Participants all came to class with varying degrees of coping skills. The following section explains the impact of the class on the evolution of those skills and how the implementation of mindfulness practices affected coping afterward.

### **Emergent Themes in the Findings**

Many themes emerged from the stories that participants shared during the semistructured interviews and journal entries. The themes were comprised of the codes which were most frequently mentioned. Table 2 has a short description of the theme and how it relates to the research question and the conceptual framework. A brief depiction of each theme with supportive narrative from the participants follows.

#### **De-Escalation and Anger Management With Mindfulness**

Mindfulness to diffuse anger was one theme that emerged from the data. The following points were the participants describing the effects of the mindfulness instruction on their ability to deal with anger. Many participants explained they “feel edgy when I don’t do mindfulness,” or they try to “be the bigger man” when engaged in confrontations, and they tried to “de-escalate the situation.” Other participants discussed that they had learned to weigh the consequences of their actions and then to leave the situation instead of starting a fight, because they wanted to avoid adverse outcomes. Participants described not wanting to fight, not necessarily due to the

consequences, but because they wanted to do the right thing and help all parties diffuse the situation. In reflecting on anger, Matteo stated, “I think they’ve [my reactions to anger] changed since the beginning of the school year because now I sometimes take a breather when things get bad.” Matteo explained in his interview how he used the mindfulness strategy of taking a breather earlier this school year to de-escalate a stressful situation:

**Table 2**

*Emergent Themes*

Theme	Description	Research Question or Conceptual Framework Connection to Theme
De-escalation of anger with mindfulness	This theme describes being able to calm down through the use of mindfulness tactics. Similarly, if triggered, the participant is able to weigh the consequences of their actions in advance.	Research Questions 1 and 2
“Clear mind”	This theme describes a way to reduce unwanted thoughts and focus back on the breath.	Research Question 1
Mindfulness as a safe harbor	This theme is one of safety and comfort. Mindfulness as a safe harbor represents a reprieve as if “we’re in our bubble and nothing else can bother us.”	Research Question 2
Mindfulness as stress reducer	This theme describes a release or relaxation period following mindfulness. Mindfulness as a stress reducer allows for controlling the breath to reduce stress and calm down.	Research Question 2
Decision making with mindfulness	This theme allows for the participant to make sound decisions due in large part to mindfulness practice and to think of the consequences of their actions before acting.	Research Question 1
Managing impulsivity with mindfulness	The theme of managing impulsivity is the ability to control oneself and to think before acting through the use of mindfulness.	Research Question 1
present-moment awareness	The theme of present-moment awareness is the ability to pay attention to the present-moment. Present-moment awareness looks at such things as focusing solely on the breathing and not other things.	Research Question 1
Self-esteem building with mindfulness	The theme of self-esteem building with mindfulness focuses on obstacles and mindfulness that build self-esteem. Using mindfulness as insightful and reflective to create self-esteem.	Resilience theory
Negatives/neutrals of mindfulness	The theme of negatives/neutrals of mindfulness focuses on anything that could be deemed negative which is associated with mindfulness.	



A time that I felt most upset was when I lost my shoes in the bus. I tried to figure out how to find them, and I felt like I should have paid more attention. But then I tried to calm myself down to think more clearly, and when I did, I just said, oh, I should probably check because I also went to the market, and right here. So, I first went here to the nursery. He [my brother] was like, “Oh, you should probably tell your teacher, so she at least knows.” And I told the teacher, and she was like, “Oh, okay, I’ll get you some other ones.” It was the boots for Ballet Folklorico. For that, I just took a breather. Since I already have a good relationship with my brother, it wouldn’t be that hard to tell him mostly anything, so I just told him about it, and he understood because he also sometimes loses things. ... After mindfulness I feel a little bit tired because it really cools you down. And then that just really lets me calm down for a while. Yeah, sometimes it does because I’m really hot headed. Whenever someone says something that really hits me, I get really mad at them. But then I try to calm myself and try to say something back at them like, “Hey, don’t really say that” or “What’s wrong with you?” It lets me think more clearly and see what I should do, instead of just like beating the pulp out of him.”

Similarly, Blake used another mindfulness strategy—thinking about her choices—to control her anger:

I get upset very easily. I do get upset easily. But then, I do calm down easily. Like, I get my buttons pushed a lot. Last time I was upset—I don’t remember the last time I was like, really upset. I think it was—I think it was a couple months ago. I think I got upset at someone for saying something rude to me or my friend. I don’t remember the situation. It was like—It was a moment where I was like, okay, I can either say a bunch of stuff to this person and continue to raise my attitude and get more. What’s going to be a good decision here? Like, what choices are going to be made? I was like, okay, there’s—It’s not really worth it to throw myself into my anger. And so, I took a step back. I looked at the bigger picture, and I was like, okay, this isn’t worth it. It was really about my anger, because I was yelling. And I was like, why am I yelling? Why am I raising my voice? Let’s just calm down. Let’s just take a second. And so, in that moment, I just turned away from that person and walked away and I took a few deep breaths. Realized, okay, where is my happy place? Where am I going to go? You know? Whew, take a deep breath. It’s Going to be fine. It really did. It showed me that okay, in a matter of seconds, I can really just calm down. You can be like, okay, new person, new mind, right now.

Youth explained the self-awareness which accompanied the anger-management strategies demonstrated that the mindfulness strategies had an impact on the students’ present moment awareness. Blake described, “I have definitely figured out what calms me down more. I have seen what happens when I use the things that are important to calming me down. I am just more

aware of everything.” The following quote by Hugo describes his ability to de-escalate a situation due to mindfulness and demonstrates decision-making abilities:

Mindfulness has helped me think more before I speak. So maybe relaxing and thinking about a situation before just going with my instinct and making a bad decision. Yeah. Let’s say if someone was fighting, instead of going in and maybe if it was my friend fighting someone else, and they were just arguing. Instead of just going in and fighting the other guy, maybe mindfulness has helped me stop the fight, instead of helping my friend. I’m thinking about what would be the, the best way to deal with the situation. I feel, feel calm and there’s no—Like, I release the tension in my body.

Cole’s experience practicing mindfulness illustrates how the strategies can be used to respond more productively to the anger that occurs in stressful situations:

And recently, I did mindfulness in my coaches’ class, [physical education]. Now, I started to get really mad, and I just sat back down and put my head down and thought—thought about what I could do, and I brought up my grade. It really calmed me down, honestly, and it made, made me feel a lot better. I think mindfulness plays a big role when it comes into stressful situations, and I’ve learned to control myself and just stay calm and try to talk situations down. Stuff like that. Sometimes, it’s instant, but most of the time I have to think about it before I do it. That really helped me because now I actually think before I do something and yeah. And it makes me a calmer person. I think because, every time when it gets stressful, stressful like-situation, it would be easier to get calmer and everything, easier to, you know, tell if you’re taking it too far, stuff like that. For example, if somebody’s like trying to fight, I want to try to deescalate the situation and try to be the bigger man.

In one journal entry midway through the mindfulness curriculum, Cole explained, “I think mindfulness helps people with their anger and helps people,” and Kellen stated, “I’d say mindfulness is a feeling that they can’t really describe, but it makes you feel good, and it make you a lot calmer.” Cole detailed how mindfulness might help someone with their anger: “I don’t know. Honestly, it just comes in mind. I’m like, do I really wanna do this and really risk fighting and getting suspended for something dumb?” Cole described his perceived decision-making and emotional regulation abilities: “Or, if I take it personal, I’d probably fight, but most of the time, I’ll try to deescalate the situation, cut it all off.” Cole’s testimony served to help answer Research

Question 1, which is focused on how freshmen who have practiced mindfulness and continue to practice mindfulness describe their present-moment awareness, decision-making, and emotional regulation. Although Cole did not use words such as present-moment awareness and emotional regulation, pieces of his testimony suggest these qualities. For example, when discussing his use of mindfulness after being upset, Cole stated, “It really calmed me down, honestly, and it made, made me feel a lot better.” Furthermore, Cole went on to explain how learning mindfulness practices seemed to lower his perceived stress level because he could think about the consequences of his actions, leading him to make more effective choices.

### **Clear Mind**

Another theme from the data was using mindfulness to clear one’s mind. Matteo discussed in his journal, “Mindfulness makes me just think of nothing, which is surprising since I’m always imaginative.” Although not the purpose or goal of mindfulness, many participants spoke of developing a blank or clear mind due to deep breathing and other practices. They said it helped them to calm down and approach stressful situations more thoughtfully. As Kellen explained, “Mindfulness is kinda like meditation in a way. Like, a way to calm yourself and get all those thoughts out of your head.” Being explicitly taught how to focus one’s attention appeared to help the students “pause and divide it all up instead of taking it all in at once” (Lola).

Lola explained,

For me, personally, it just feels like a bit overwhelming. Like, oh wait, I need to do this [assignments and tests] as quickly as possible, so I can get on to the next one [question] as quickly as possible. Especially during times where there’s like a time limit. That is much worse for me versus when I have more time. Having to do something that may be extremely difficult and having fails within that. If I have like 10 minutes to do something, something goes wrong, and I need to fix it as quickly as possible to move onto the next step. So, having the feeling of if something goes wrong, I’m losing time for it. It gives me time to pause for a second and then think about how I can fix it better, so I won’t waste that much time.

Other codes under this section were focus, pause and then start again, prioritizing, and taking things one step at a time. Lola explained how learning mindfulness allowed her to clear her mind when she said,

Then I just take in a breath, deep breath in and out, and then I just start working on what I was doing one by one instead of taking it all in. In a way, it kind of changes my way of thinking because, like I said before, I'm not like absorbing everything up.

With a greater sense of calm created by focusing on their breath, the participants could return to work with more clarity and less overwhelmed. "Instead, I'm actually thinking about parts of it instead of the whole, parts of the picture instead of the whole picture in total," Lola recounted. Blake described in her interview how mindfulness allowed her first to manage the intrusive thoughts that were causing distress and then relax her entire body. Once her body was calm, she could reduce the stress and tension she felt, transforming her mood. Blake described the experience in her interview:

Oh, mindfulness. I love mindfulness. I think it's actually very opening. It's showing us that we can take our thoughts and turn them off, practically. When I'm doing mindfulness, I'm in my own space. I very much block out everything. I like to keep to my own area. I'm quiet. I'm still, which doesn't happen often. I can feel much clearer. I can feel very relaxed with my shoulders aren't as tense. My jaw isn't as much clenched. I can really just relax and just be, for 2 minutes just know it's going to be just fine. And you can be like, okay, new person, new mind right now. Clear, clear mind. Clear abilities. You can do more things without being so stressed out. Your mood definitely changes from being sad or tired or angry to relaxed, comfortable, happy. And mindfulness is very much like floating on a cloud.

Other participants reinforced the idea of clearing one's mind as a way to calm the body. For example, Hugo said, "I would say it's a way to relax and calm your body, and to clear your mind from everything." Clearing one's mind came up frequently, and Lola described the experience in the following way, which was consistent with what many of her peers experienced as well:

I think I would say something where you can just pause everything and relax, instead of having to do everything. Because you may have to deal with work, or school, or some big project you have to deal with. It just gives you time to pause that, relax, and then gives you time to also think about a little bit of it that isn't so stressful. So, it kind of clears everything up so you don't have to worry about it before you may resume after, more calmer. Instead, less stressed out than you were before.

### **Mindfulness as a Safe Harbor**

Participants continually referred to mindfulness as making them feel safe or content. Comments participants made included the idea that mindfulness provided a “small break from running around,” and “We're in our own bubble, and nothing else can bother us.” Other references to the theme were “mindfulness as pleasurable” and “makes you feel good.” While each quote represents something unique to that participant, the idea of mindfulness as soothing or peaceful ran through each interview and many journal entries.

Blake recounted in her interview what mindfulness practices meant to her about the safety and security she internalized by feeling enclosed during the practice:

We can focus on, okay, we have this bubble. We're in our bubble and nothing else can bother us. When I'm doing mindfulness, I'm in my own space. I block out everything. I like to keep to my own area. ... Which, I, I love experiencing mindfulness. I love doing it in class. It's just very eye-opening to me.

Liv provided analogies in her interview for the tranquility that mindfulness practices elicit in their lives:

So, I would explain to them—like, the way I use my analogy—I would say it's like a calm river. And with a little paper boat flowing, no bumps, no waves, nothing, just smoothly riding. And we could just imagine hearing, the sound of nature, the forest, the waterfall, how calming it can be. I would say it's like you're on a fluffy cloud. [laughs]. It's just very calming. It does make you want to fall asleep, and I say that's a good thing because you're really getting into it. So yeah.

The analogy of clouds and serenity, likened to the feeling mindfulness elicits during and after engaging in mindfulness practices, arose from more than one participant in the present study. Blake described in her interview what mindfulness was:

Floating on a cloud. Very much floating on a cloud. Sure, it's mist. But it's floating on a cloud. You're just sitting there, and you're just in yourself, practically. You're in your own brain. You know? You're taking—You're looking at all the stressors. You're looking at all your options in life, and you're looking at all of these ordeals. And you're like, wow, in 2 minutes, I can look at all of these things and be like, they don't matter and just push them all away.

Participants described feeling safe in different ways when participating in mindfulness practices. Matteo had time for himself: "I'd say mindfulness is just you and yourself, just thinking for a while and no one else distracting you. I think about what have I done during the day and what I should do tomorrow?" A time for self-reflection and uninterrupted thought was what Matteo believed he needed and what he gained from engaging with the mindfulness practices. It appeared that the two minutes daily of mindfulness practice where the lights were off, and the class quietly engaged in breathing together benefited some of the participants. Lola felt safety in the mindfulness practice in the absence of worrying whether her actions might cause something bad:

I would say it's pretty positive. I don't have to worry about as much as I usually do. I don't have to worry about: if I do something wrong, something bad might happen. It's more like letting my mind have like a short break about from running around all the time and me finally being able to just loosen my body because I'm very [laughs] stiff, even when I'm dancing.

How the participants spoke and wrote about people besides themselves, in their journal entries, showed a vested interest in others, as Hugo said, "Mindfulness makes me think about the good and hopeful things about others. It makes me think of what others are doing good, instead of the bad." Kellen indicated, "I can really think about how others act or memories I have with them, and I can think about what I think about them." Blake displayed empathy toward others: "You also realize that they must be tense or just tired too because they are finally relaxing their bodies and finally thinking of themselves." The participants' stories demonstrated that when some adolescents feel safe, they can then care about the safety and well-being of others. These

self-reported feelings of safety and serenity may allow for better emotional regulation and decision-making abilities. Because mindfulness helped the participants clear their minds and feel safer, it also reduced their stress, as described in the next section.

### **Mindfulness as Relaxing and a Stress Reducer**

By and large, the most prevalent theme is the use of mindfulness to relieve stress or relax.

Matteo described,

After mindfulness, I feel a little bit tired because it really cools you down and relaxes you sometimes. I kinda like it because during the day. I'm always thinking of many things. I have a lot of imagination, and then that just really lets me calm down for a while.

Similarly, Kellen stated, "I feel calm but also tired because the lights are off, and we close our eyes and stuff. So, I feel tired, and I'm like, ugh, I just want to keep my eyes closed. But it also feels really calm." Both Kellen and Matteo described doing mindfulness practices in the classroom setting in school where the outcome of the practice was calm, tired, relaxation.

Many of the codes that led to this theme related to relieving worry, using mindfulness to calm down, aiding in sleep, controlling the breath to calm down, emotional regulation, and time constraints where mindfulness is needed. Hugo described how he used mindfulness to relieve worry:

I use it whenever I feel stressed. So, that can be when I'm at home and my family argues sometimes, and it puts a lot on my mind. So, when I take deep breaths and just focus on something else than what they're talking about, than the arguing, then it helps me relax and not think about that. I'm thinking about just relaxing my body and taking slower breaths and deeper breaths.

It appears that the focus on the breath and the redirection of attention away from the stressors served as a form of relaxation, this time in an at home setting. Liv had similar experiences and explained the following in her interview:

I have used it outside of class. Usually when I'm at home and everything's very stressful, a stressful day for the family, I should say. I usually lock myself in the

room. I put on some, waterscapes in the background or-sounds of, rain drizzling on me, too and I sit on my bed, crisscrossed applesauce. [Laughs.] I close my eyes, and I just think deep breaths to calm down.

Cole suggested mindfulness practices helped: “It makes me feel calm.” Lola expressed how the use of mindfulness helped her calm down:

Yes. But it’s more like I use it without noticing. Instead of doing it intentionally. It’s more like me: oh my God, I need to calm down. And then I start using mindfulness tactics without noticing. And then I don’t realize until a while later, like a good hour later, that I’ve been using mindfulness tactics.

Liv also attributed an ability to calm down to mindfulness:

I feel very calm during it and after. It feels inside me when I’m like doing things, just like a rushing river crashing through the walls and stuff like that. But once we do mindfulness, it calms down and it’s nice and smooth. There’s no, like, currents, no waves, it’s very peaceful. Sometimes when we do mindfulness, I want to go to sleep. [Laughs.]

One commonality that was previously addressed by Kellen and Matteo and now discussed in further detail by Liv is that when doing mindfulness practices at school with their peers it provided them with a level of relaxation and calm, which may be different than if they are using mindfulness practices on their own or in their home. In another example, Cole used mindfulness by himself to relieve stress. Cole said,

I use mindfulness when I feel like I’m stressed out, and I don’t know. Like, I’m just stressed out, and then, if I’m ready to leave somewhere, I’ll just do a little bit of mindfulness and then come back and see how it, it plays out.

Blake noted she sought mindfulness practices when she has circumstances causing her distress:

When I went on my trip to Arizona last weekend, there was a lot of tension, a lot of stress due to a funeral. I was very stressed out. I was very saddened by why I had to be there. And so, I took like, 5 minutes in my hotel room to just breathe and close everything out. Shut everything out. Listen to rain, and just be like, everything’s going to be okay. I do not have to stress over something like this. And you can be like, okay, new person, new mind right now.



In the previous example, Blake described practicing mindfulness by herself in her hotel room, which might be different than practicing either with a teacher and classmates at school or at home.

Lola indicated how mindfulness practices have helped her with sleep or caused her to become tired after practice, such that “for me, whenever I’m doing mindfulness in class, I feel kinda sleepy and relaxed because usually throughout the day, like, without doing the mindfulness stuff, my head is always running around.” She described how busy her mind caused her additional stress and how mindfulness helped restore her to a calm baseline:

So, whenever I do mindfulness, it kinda relaxes my mind a little, and I always end up feeling sleepy. Because I know most people drink coffee to wake themselves up, but I haven’t had coffee in 5 years because I myself just have my head running around all the time.

When the effects of stress are left unchecked, it can manifest into other issues, including anger and anxiety. Liv described in her interview what happens to her if she does not practice mindfulness after she has felt stressed:

If I don’t do mindfulness, I would be more sarcastic, more kind of rude, in a type of way. I would be slamming stuff, walking faster than my normal speed, which is still pretty fast, as people say, for a short person. [Laughs.] I walk faster than I usually do. I tend to ignore people. Sometimes I leave them behind if I’m walking, and they’re talking in a group.

Adelia detailed in her interview how learning the mindfulness practices aided in stress reduction and emotional regulation. In this example the setting for mindfulness is done outside of a classroom at school:

Well, last Friday, during my third period, I had to step outside and, like, suddenly. I had to sit down. I don’t know why but I just started crying. I don’t know why. I think I just got a bunch of just stress came onto me or something. I really just control my breathing and think about some dumb stuff. [Laughs.] I’ve done and laugh about it, and then, also focus on breathing. Well, when I start crying sometimes, my breathing will get out of hand. It will get rapid, so I have to think about it well, mainly just, I don’t really think about anything at first ‘cause I’m just focused on how I’m feeling at the moment and then, it’s hard to explain but

I'll just sit there for a few more moments and stop breathing, to like catch up on myself, and then start trying to breathe normally again.

Adelia also described in her interview how present-moment awareness, coupled with mindfulness practices, served to help her regulate her breathing and thus regulate her emotions.

In the following excerpt, Adelia discussed how she used mindfulness practices both in and out of the classroom and the different ways in which she adjusted what she needed in the moment. She said,

I think it brings awareness to how I'm feeling at the moment. Like, if I'm breathing really fast, it'll let me know I should probably not be doing that. I don't know. Then I'll just panic more if I'm breathing faster, so I should breathe slower and calming down so I can feel normal again. Yeah, because it had helped me outside of that class, and in that class too. I think to calm down when I couldn't. ... When I didn't want to step outside. And I just wanted to stay in the class. It would help me when I was in the class. I would just sit there, and think about those methods I used before, but instead use it inside the class to prevent myself from getting anxious or panicking, to not let it lead to that much.

Adelia's earlier reference to how her mother would aid in breathing exercises with her (prior to formally being introduced to the mindfulness curriculum in class) had helped her calm down and not become inflicted with panic attacks. Adelia stated mindfulness is "a mental practice that can help you manage your emotions, in better ways and strategies."

Throughout the journal entries and interviews, there was a clear connection between the participants paying attention to how they felt in their minds and bodies and better managing their stress levels. Students said learning mindfulness strategies helped the high school students manage their stress and regulate their emotions, which led to more effective decision making.

### **Productive Decision Making**

Decision making with mindfulness is an emergent theme that came from the codes about making decisions, using mindfulness to plan, and easing anxiety about the future decisions.

Many participants' statements in this section reflected the following themes: decision making

with mindfulness, present-moment awareness, and de-escalation with mindfulness. Hugo said, “So, maybe relaxing and thinking about a situation before just going with my instinct and making a bad decision.”

While the participants’ comments throughout this section also reflect their abilities to manage their anger and be present in the moment, they were more clearly illustrative of mindfulness’s impact on effective decision-making. Cole described how mindfulness allowed him to think before he acts by controlling himself, staying calm, and talking situations down. While controlling himself is an example of emotional regulation, staying calm results from breathing deeply and focusing on the breath. Being able to talk situations down shows mature decision-making abilities. Cole said,

I think mindfulness plays a big role when it comes into stressful situations, and I’ve learned to control myself and just stay calm and try to talk situations down. Stuff like that. Sometimes, it’s instant, but most of the time I have to think about it before I do it. That really helped me because now I actually think before I do something and yeah. And it makes me a calmer person. I think because, every time when it gets stressful, stressful like-situation, it would be easier to get calmer and everything, easier to, you know, tell if you’re taking it too far, stuff like that. For example, if somebody’s like trying to fight, I want to try to de-escalate the situation and try to be the bigger man. I don’t know. Honestly, it just like comes in mind. I’m like, do I really wanna do this and really risk fighting and get suspended for just something dumb? Or if I really take it personal, I’d probably fight, but most of the time I’ll try to deescalate the situation, cut it all off. Yeah. Football, I’d literally get kicked out really quick. Well, not like kicked out. I’d get suspended for like a couple games.

Cole discussed “staying calm” and trying to “talk situations down.” He described thinking before acting and had developed the wherewithal to have self-reflection in the moment to try and see if he had taken a situation “too far.” This excerpt provides insight into what Cole is thinking in the moment as he makes decisions. Blake also described in her interview how her decision-making abilities have improved, which allowed her to cope during stressful situations such as a recent family funeral:

Like, what you can do because I know eventually, it's going to be okay, and it's not going to matter as much anymore when I come back. Sure, yes, someone passing is very sad, and it's very hard. But I realized that I've come very far from where I was and I was like, I'm not going to let this take me two steps back when I'm going so far right now. So, I was like, we're moving forward. We're not looking behind.

## **Managing Impulsivity**

Managing impulsivity emerged in the data after several codes were collapsed:

impulsivity, impulse control, and think before I act (after mindfulness). Kellen said, "In some situations, I'm able to think before I act." The participants explained several ways practicing mindfulness helped them manage their impulsivity, especially in stressful situations. Hugo said, "Mindfulness has helped me think more before I speak." Managing impulsivity and productive decision-making abilities go hand in hand, therefore many of the participant examples could be used in either category. Blake felt as if self-awareness and impulsivity were interconnected and described the following in her interview:

Recently, in class, we've learned about impulsive stuff. And like, how that really affects ourselves. And, I realized, I was a very impulsive person. I would never think before I said something. I would do everything without thinking. Acting was just like, my only way. So, mindfulness kind of made me realize, okay, let's think before we do something. Let's realize, okay, what are our options here? Like, how is this going to work for us?

Learning mindfulness allowed the participants to focus on stopping themselves from acting and thinking about potential choices before making a decision. In a journal entry, Hugo stated, "I just take deep breaths, practice mindfulness. I used to be more reactive rather than responsive." Similarly, Liv provided the following example in her interview of how mindfulness practices allow her to think before acting, practice de-escalation and impulse control and finally make positive decisions:

So yes, it does change the way I think and talk and the way I think things. When I don't do mindfulness, I feel like I'm more edgy. And I'm easily irritated by people, And I don't socialize, but once I'm irritated, I start having an attitude, and

I give people attitude. I talk to them in not-so-pretty ways. [Laughs.] But once I do mindfulness, I calm down. And I'm not irritated, and I talk to people in a nice way and peaceful way. Peaceful, as in—I don't know—If you were just asking me a question, and I didn't meditate before, I'd answer it in a rude way. Be like, "Oh, it's that. Didn't you see the question?" But if I have meditated, then they ask a question, and I'd be like, "Oh, if you read the question carefully, you can find the answer. You can find the answer on this page or that."

Time constraints appeared to be a factor in feeling anxious and then impulsive because as Lola stated in her interview, "Usually, before mindfulness, I would be pretty negative about things like having a short amount of time and being like, oh my God, I'm not going to be able to do this. I can't do it." Lola expressed, "I have noticed I'm not that hurried or negative after I do it." Mindfulness practices appeared to have aided in Lola's situation in feeling anxious and impulsive when faced with a timed task. Her previous thoughts seemed to have her stuck in a negative thought loop. At the time of her interview, which was after the mindfulness curriculum inception and close to the end of the wellness class, Lola could soothe her anxious feelings and practice accepting the outcome: "But with mindfulness, I'm okay. I may not be able to do it, but that's all right. People make mistakes."

Cole's previous example that he shared about being upset in his physical education class and how he felt himself start to get mad about his grade, but instead of getting mad he put his head down and thought demonstrates not only the original category of anger management/de-escalation, but also demonstrates decision-making and impulse control. Cole described how he could control his impulses to initially react until he could calm down so that he could make decisions that had positive outcomes.

### **Mindfulness With Present Moment Awareness**

Present-moment awareness is paying attention to the present moment without trying to change it. Present moment awareness, mental practice, and alertness/wakefulness were several of the codes that emerged from the interviews and journals and then were combined to create the

theme of mindfulness with present moment awareness. While the participants may not have used the vocabulary directly, it was what they alluded to when Hugo commented, “I can feel my emotions more when we practice mindfulness,” which illustrates characteristics of present moment awareness. For example, Blake said, “You really just realize how tired you are or how tense you are. You don’t think about it until you think about your body.” Adelia described present moment awareness:

Yeah. We would have them every day. [Our teacher], he would bring out his bell, I think. I don’t know. Chime? I don’t know what it’s called. Yeah. And that’s how he would start it. It was just 2 minutes with the lights off and no one speaking, so it was really nice. Especially if I was almost falling asleep, because it’s in the morning, it would help me wake up.

While Adelia explained how she used mindfulness practices in the classroom, Matteo honed in on aspects of mindfulness which he remembered learning in class. Matteo described in his interview how he learned to observe the moment,

For me, [our teacher] said, “Whenever you’re doing that, just think. Just go. Go back to thinking.” And then he said, “Thinking, thinking, thinking.” And then he says, “I’m breathing.” Then he says, “Breathe in and breathe out.”

Matteo provided another example of paying attention on purpose to the present moment:

Sometimes when I’m going to sleep or when I’m in the shower, thinking. I like showering with cold water, and I noticed you breathe more slowly in cold water. It doesn’t really hit you that hard. I really like that, so then I was like, I’ll shower more with cold water because I don’t like wasting it with hot water. And sometimes, when I’m outside, and it’s really cold, I also breathe slowly.

Matteo’s description depicts how paying attention on purpose without judgment, the definition of mindfulness, allowed for the cold water to have less of an effect. Observation and attention to the present moment allow the mind to be free of mindless wandering and can focus on one object or thing at a time, in this case, the breath. Kellen explained, “I guess like focusing on just the breathing and not focusing on other things. It gets me to focus on just my breathing and not

focusing on all the other things going on.” The calming effects of deep breathing relate to the breath’s rhythmic nature. Hugo said,

I feel calm, and there’s no like I release the tension in my body. And I feel like when we breathe, we take deep breaths and longer breaths, so I just feel the air. I get less fidgety. Like, my feet don’t move on the seat. My feet are placed on the ground.

In her interview, Lola described the mindfulness practice which took place as a class as present-moment awareness:

And I also really focus [laughs] on being able to breathe in and breathe out deeply whenever he says so. Usually, what my teacher does is he’s like, “Breathe in for 1, 2 seconds. Breathe out another 1, 2 seconds.” And he like—At the end, “Take the deepest breath you can, and then let it out.” It feels quite calming. Probably cause of the little thing he uses, the one where he rings the bell. And whenever he, like, does that I just count how many times, until the sound goes away from me. And then I like to compare it to the other times I’ve heard it. [Laughs.] Like, how long I can hear the bell going before I can no longer hear it.

While calmness and stress-reduction are not necessarily the objective of mindfulness, their existence is often a secondary effect. Liv said,

It just helps you think back and let go of all the stress that you have. And taking big deep breaths helps a lot. Calm you down. You might have a lot of energy, but, during those times, it helps you focus, and I guess gives you a feeling of peace sensation that you have during that.

Present moment awareness allows for acknowledgement and acceptance and often affords people with a general ability to be more reflective, as Adelia illustrated in her interview when she explained how she uses breathing to slow herself down:

Something I do a lot is mess with my sleeves or my hands to distract myself, and then I’m not sure, but I slow it down as much as I can and breathe like bring it up to a normal pace. And if I was stressed or anxious or just tapping my leg a lot, it would help me stop.

Additionally, a focus on the breath gives the mind something to label or count, while the deep breathing is inherently soothing. Blake explained these characteristics when she was interviewed:

We can focus on our breathing. We can focus on our ability to stay still. When I'm doing mindfulness, I'm quiet. I'm very still, which doesn't happen often. I'm a fidgeter. So, I'm very quiet. I'm very still. And it surprises me often how quiet and still I can be for just 2 minutes. And just breathing and just like, deep breath in, deep breath out. It's very wonderful to feel.

Adelia demonstrated when interviewed how she used present-moment awareness to return to her breath, after an episode of mind wandering:

I think the quietness or the sudden awareness. Yeah, because if I was zoning out and it suddenly all gets quiet, I would just realize, oh, something's happening right now. And then it would be all quiet, and I'd feel less. Yeah. I would look around and I'd start thinking about how I feel at the moment. Sometimes, they would change, where we would see how many breaths we would take in a minute, or sometimes, we would all take a deep breath together and then wait a few seconds, and then let it all out at the same time. Or we would sometimes just do it normally—and see if anything changed from, compared to the other times. I think it was nice, because sometimes I forget to actually take deep breaths, so when I do it, it feels relieving. I think it brings awareness to how I'm feeling at the moment.

### **Self-Esteem Building With Regard to Mindfulness**

The theme of self-esteem building concerning mindfulness was built as several different codes: mindfulness as higher-order questioning, mindfulness as insightful, self-esteem building, mindfulness as a reflective practice, obstacles, and mindfulness to build resilience and obstacles, and were collapsed into one theme. As Kellen demonstrated in the following quote from his mindfulness journal, “I can think about all the different things about myself and what I like and don't like,” this theme is about overcoming adversity and creating positive changes that lead to higher self-esteem. Hugo described in his mindfulness journal how mindfulness affects how he thinks about himself such that, “Mindfulness lets me feel comfortable about the way I think about myself. I relax, and I think about positive things.” Cole stated in his interview how mindfulness practices have led to positive changes in his life:

I'd say mindfulness would help you out in many different ways, and it will make you a better person in general, and it will change your world, No, it'll change your life. I'd say mindfulness is a feeling that they can't really describe, but it makes you feel good, and it makes you a lot calmer.



While some participants attributed mindfulness practices to their newfound abilities to remain calm and regulate their emotions, others questioned how mindfulness practices might affect their brain chemistry, and Blake stated in her interview how she found strength in knowing her development:

So, for me, it was like, okay, mindfulness is definitely something that's changing and it's going to affect my brain and how it works. Does it stop? Does it slow down? How is this going to affect me? For me, that was the importance. Yeah. It it's very powerful to understand yourself. Because as soon as you understand yourself, then you're like, okay, how far can I go now? Then you realize, you can do so much with just knowing that you can.

### **Negatives, Neutrals, or Drawbacks of Mindfulness**

The following excerpts represent the negative or neutral comments and codes the participants disclosed during the interviews or journal entries. Some words represent indifference—"Just I don't think about using it outside of school really. I just don't really think about it"—while others represent the participants having had a change of heart throughout the semester on mindfulness. Cole said in his interview,

Once we started doing it, I felt weird. I was like, why are we doing this? There's, like, no point. But just because I felt like somebody was looking at me while I'm closing my eyes. And I was like, "Man, I don't want anybody looking at me." And then, I started over the year I was like, "I don't really care. I'm just going to focus on myself and stuff like that." And now I feel more comfortable doing it outside the class and inside the class.

When asked how mindfulness practices had affected how the participant thought about themselves part way through the mindfulness curriculum, Adelia stated in a journal entry "It doesn't, it remains the same which isn't necessarily bad it just has no effect." She continued when asked to explain how mindfulness affected how she thinks about others by explaining, "It doesn't change it much at all either I just think of people the way they show themselves as a person and express it too." Midway through the curriculum in a mindfulness journal entry, participants were asked directly after a practice "were you able to just pay attention to your breath and not notice

any thoughts,” in which one participant answered, “No.” It is unclear from that response if the participant’s mind drifted away from focusing on the breath or if they were unable/unwilling to even pay attention to their breath. More information and follow up questions would have given the researcher more insight into what was meant by the participant.

Participants were asked midway through the mindfulness curriculum directly following a class mindfulness session “Were you able to label "breathing in, breathing out" and/or "thinking, thinking? while participating in the mindfulness practice?” In the journal responses three of the participants stated, “No,” but without any follow-up information in the writing or detailed explanation, it is unclear as to what exactly the participants were feeling or meant by that answer. Similarly, in another journal entry toward the end of the curriculum, participants were asked whether “They have learned anything new about the emotions that occur in you over the past semester? What? Please explain.” Although this question blurs the lines between the mindfulness curriculum and the rest of the wellness course given the nature of the overlap, one participant, Liv, stated “Not really.” She said, “Kind of. Still not really,” as her answer to whether she noticed her emotions more often now and to explain. Lastly, Liv said that she was “Not sure” when asked “Has how you deal with your emotions changed? How? Explain”

This chapter provided an inside look into the words of the participants through interviews and journal entries. After the data analysis in the previous chapter, the following themes had occurred: de-escalation/anger management, clear mind, mindfulness as a safe harbor, mindfulness as a stress reducer, productive decision making, managing impulsivity, mindfulness with present-moment awareness, self-esteem building, and negatives/drawbacks and neutrals of mindfulness. The following chapter revisited the research questions, used the conceptual framework of resilience theory along with the words of the youth to conclude the study by

answering the research questions. Finally, implications, and a discussion of the study will be addressed in the final chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the current study, which is followed by an overview of the problem. After the research questions are answered, using themes from the data and resilience theory, the significance of the study will be illuminated. Next, a description of the limitations of the study will be disclosed. Chapter 5 reviews implications for leadership in social justice and equity work. Lastly, the chapter closes with recommendations for future educators in mindfulness work with youth and a conclusion to the study.

### **Answering the Research Questions Using Themes and Resilience Theory**

In the following section, themes from Chapter 4 are discussed in conjunction with resilience theory to answer the research questions. To stay true to student voice, the words of the youth are used as a launching point toward takeaways, next steps, and recommendations where future research is needed. This section begins with a recap of why the study was conducted, leading to answering the research questions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate student experiences with a mindfulness-based curriculum in the areas of stress, decision making, present-moment awareness, and emotional regulation. An understanding of the impact of mindfulness practices on how adolescents experience stress was illuminated.

Youth have high levels of stress and equipping youth with the ability to regulate emotions and make sound decisions is vital to healthy adolescent development. For adults, mindfulness has benefits in lowering stress levels and emotional regulation, improved attention, and decision making; this study has demonstrated how youth believe similar benefits are present in their lives. To best understand how youth cope with stress and respond to a mindfulness curriculum, it was

essential to understand their lived experiences with stress. Using the voices of the adolescent participants and their stories to answer the research questions aimed to show the youth how valuable of a role they have in the process.

### **Findings for Research Question 1: How Do Freshman Students Who Have Practiced and Continue to Practice Mindfulness in the Classroom Describe Their Perceived Present-Moment Awareness, Decision Making, and Emotional Regulation?**

#### ***Emotional Regulation***

This study revealed how youth emotional regulation could happen through the use of many mindfulness strategies and techniques discussed in the mindfulness curriculum.

Participants perceived mindfulness as a way to first calm down, by focusing on breathing and not reacting in the heat of the moment. Many participants described how they could build a type of pause into their lives, so once they were triggered or activated, they would not react emotionally or impulsively but instead could stop and think about how they wanted to respond. This study demonstrated how some youth attributed their ability to have better emotional regulation to mindfulness. The following illustrates emotional regulation as a precursor to better decision making:

I think I got upset at someone for saying something rude to me or my friend. ... And I was like, why am I yelling? Why am I raising my voice? Let's just calm down. Let's just take a second. And so, in that moment, I just turned away from that person and walked away and I took a few deep breaths. (Blake)

According to several participants in the current study, practicing mindfulness has allowed them to learn additional ways of self-control and to remain calm during stressful situations. Others attributed mindfulness practices to having taught them to think before they act. In the prior literature, the role of the amygdala was discussed, the fight-or-flight activator in the brain similar to an alarm system (Gotink et al., 2016; Kolb & Wishaw, 2009). "If a threat is significant, the

amygdala responds within milliseconds and activates the sympathetic nervous system” (Bouret, et al., 2003). The significance of this study is that in a specific type of mindfulness practice, MBSR, the amygdala plays a more significant role than in traditional meditation (Gotink et al., 2016). “When the situation allows for cortical processing the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) can regulate the amygdala, either increasing or decreasing its activity” (Ohman, 2005). MBSR seems to be associated with more efficient PFC inhibition of amygdala responses, improving emotion regulation” (Gotink et al., 2016, p. 40).

Different types of mindfulness meditations have produced differing levels of efficacy toward emotional regulation, in prior literature. Participants in the current study expressed how they believed their abilities to control their emotions by calming themselves down and de-escalating their anger were positive. Therefore, allowing students opportunities to learn the skills of mindfulness in the school day and allowing them time to practice serves as a promotive factor, in the realm of resiliency theory. More specifically, the mindfulness course itself would act as a promotive resource (Zimmerman, 2013).

### ***Present-Moment Awareness***

In the current study, participants described present-moment awareness abilities as being able to focus on the breath and bring their attention back to the breath once their mind had wandered. One participant, Matteo, said how they could focus on the breath, and once their mind wandered, they could label it as “thinking” and then return to the breath—a tactic taught in the curriculum to avoid overthinking. According to participants, other benefits of present-moment awareness included a newfound ability to feel one’s emotions during mindfulness practice and beyond. The present study revealed how participants can now pay attention to current activities,

such as how the water feels on him in the shower and the pace of his breathing outside during cold conditions. Greater awareness of the situations may signify a greater mind-body connection.

Participants cited how mindfulness allowed them to recognize stress in their bodies and where it is located. Two participants from the study noticed their bodies staying still and quiet during mindfulness, when previously they had been fidgeters. Similarly, another participant described noticing that she played with her clothing when she would feel stressed and how she became aware that her leg stopped tapping after doing mindfulness. Adelia described the connection between mindfulness practices and present-moment awareness: “I think it was nice because sometimes I forget to take deep breaths, so when I do it, it feels relieving. It brings awareness to how I’m feeling at the moment.” This current study supports in youth what prior research had already shown in adults, including that present-moment focused attention on the breath, through mindfulness, has health benefits, including slower heart rate and neurophysiological changes.

Meditation can help control the hypothalamic-pituitary-adreno-cortical axis and associated systems (e.g., parasympathetic nervous system), which are pathways that control stress-response mechanisms and regulate various bodily processes including digestion, immunology, mood, and energy usage. Meditation can also affect neuroendocrine status, metabolic function, and related inflammatory responses and can decrease experienced stress load (Black et al., 2009).

The awareness that mindfulness brings allows for more focus on the breath and how one feels and shows promise in diminishing perceived stress levels in youth. Many participants in the study described an awareness of paying attention to their breath and breathing deeply, with a link to them feeling calm and relaxed. While it may be unlikely for a first-year student in high school

to have the vocabulary to describe neurophysiological changes associated with deep breathing and present-moment awareness, throughout the interviews, all eight participants discussed their lived stress and how mindfulness made them feel calmer.

Participants noted how mindfulness practices have given them the space to explore and bring awareness to complex emotions that they are experiencing, such as anger: “It feels like I can’t breathe sometimes, or I can tell I am just genuinely quiet. I don’t want to say something I regret” (Blake). When asked if the participants noticed what was happening in their mind and body when they practiced mindfulness, Blake stated, “A slower thought process while it was happening, I wasn’t that tired either. A moment of calm realization of my surroundings and current physical status.” Participants were then asked to describe how they react when they don’t like something. “I would react mad and angry” (Hugo). When asked how they believed using mindfulness could change their reactions, (Kellen) stated, “Maybe make my reactions change so stuff doesn’t bother me,” while another commented, “It could make it less intense” (Lola). This demonstrates how present-moment awareness is essential in youth understanding themselves. Without attention and emotional regulation decision making abilities may suffer and make it difficult for the students to learn.

### ***Decision Making***

Participants believed mindfulness practices helped them make decisions that were in the best interest of the well-being of themselves and others. As opposed to going with their instincts and impulses, participants reported thinking before they acted, which created better decision-making abilities, according to their testimonies. Participants thought about what was best for the greater good of the situation and not solely for themselves, which not only demonstrated empathy, but a case could be made that this was an example of mindfulness and resilience theory



colliding. More specifically mindfulness was first used as a resource in terms of making better decisions, and then in practicing mindfulness and decision making, awareness for others and empathy emerged which turned into an asset. More research is needed to explore these possible connections.

Participants discussed how making decisions after mindfulness exposure granted them the ability to evaluate the consequences of their actions before acting. Hugo, Matteo, and Cole described how mindfulness allowed for them to not get into physical altercations where they may have otherwise been inclined. Blake and Liv also described how mindfulness aided them in their abilities to de-escalate situations that might have led to verbal altercations.

### **Research Question 2: In What Ways Does Mindfulness Practice Affect Perceived Levels of Stress in Freshmen?**

Participants cited mindfulness as calming them down and relaxing their minds and bodies from stress. Several participants noted that practicing mindfulness made them feel sleepy by reducing the number of thoughts, giving them a break from thinking about other stressors, focusing solely on their breath, and having the lights off with their eyes closed.

Participants explained how mindfulness reduced their levels of worry. Many students explained how stressful school, family, and sports can be in their lives and how mindfulness allowed them to break from worrying about whether something will go wrong and minimized the intrusive thoughts that created stress inside them. Furthermore, participants verbalized that practicing mindfulness made them less edgy and rude to others because they could calm themselves down first. In this case, stress and mindfulness have a direct correlation to decision making. It is worth further investigation to see how the use of mindfulness over time would enhance or hinder participants' stress levels and, furthermore, how the use of mindfulness as a

promotive factor, namely, a resource might change the participant through neuroplasticity and the rewiring of the brain. Daily practice of mindfulness may transform negative characteristics, such as impulsivity into neutral or positive qualities, thus creating a promotive asset.

Other participants could make the connection that regulating the pace of their breath directly affected their levels of calm and thus the amount of stress they perceived. Similarly, participants became aware that breathing practices were successful ways for them to calm their bodies once exposed to an unpleasant stressor. The participants expressed how stress was a problem in their life and how mindfulness practices helped stop potential fights and not act impulsively in several participants. Mindfulness practices helped reduce the number of unwanted thoughts, which typically led to feelings of stress in some participants.

The present study adds to past literature providing encouraging ideas about the benefits of mindfulness with youth (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Similarly, the present study corroborates the importance of self-regulation and how students found emotional regulation and anger management to be two important skills which were fostered from learning mindfulness. According to Blair and Diamon (2008) and Ponitz et al. 2009), several of the topics that could be learned from practicing mindfulness (self-regulation, ability to control attention, etc.) play a role in child development; “emerging evidence, however, suggests that self-regulation, such as the ability to control attention and inhibit aggressive responses, plays a critical role in children’s success in school and with their social, emotional competence” (As cited in Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010, p 3). As educators, a commitment to teaching the entire child exists, and it is no longer enough to educate solely in content.

## **Limitations of the Study**

While the study yielded many strong opinions from the participants, providing essential data to be analyzed, the study only included eight participants. Of the participants, the experiences described were limited to the sole viewpoints of Latinx and White students, given that that was the makeup of the participants. Asian, Black, and Indigenous voices were not represented in the study, due to the students not wanting to participate or those groups not being well-represented in Mr. Smith's two class periods. While generalizing data in a case study of eight participants is not appropriate, there is value in their perspectives. Similarly, the participants in the study all had some type of connection to school whether it be soccer, color guard, band, JROTC, football, Ballet Folklórico, field hockey, GSA, special education, etc. While some of the students were ineligible for their sport or club due to grades, and this group of students did not necessarily collectively represent the highest achieving students in terms of GPA, each of these students did have some connection to Cascade High School, outside of solely attending for academic purposes. The significance of the participants already having a connection to school at the ninth-grade level on this study is unknown, but future studies on mindfulness might include a wider representation including the disenfranchised student who does not yet have a connection to school.

Other limitations include the pacing of the curriculum by Mr. Smith coupled with a lack of certainty by the researcher as to how closely the curriculum was followed during daily instruction. Mr. Smith discussed pacing, length of time spent doing mindfulness, and frequency of practice with the researcher, but without direct observation, the small details of implementation are uncertain. The researcher, Mr. Smith, and two other teachers have taught this wellness course, including the mindfulness curriculum, close to the same pacing guide for 4

years and have met twice a month in a professional learning community to discuss curriculum and pedagogy. In terms of repeatability, the teacher implementing the curriculum may significantly affect how well students understand mindfulness and their willingness to engage in the practice altogether. Future studies should explore the teacher as a facilitator and their role in implementation of the mindfulness curriculum. A brief review of the conceptual framework, resilience theory, follows, including a discussion of how it was used in collaboration with the findings presented in Chapter 4.

### **Study Findings and Conceptual Framework**

Using the tenets of resilience theory and applying them to the current findings, a better understanding of how mindfulness practices support adolescents when faced with stress is possible. As a review, resilience theory purports that exposure to risk and fostering competencies that counter the effects of risk are interconnected (Zimmerman, 2013). Adolescents experience stress. Some children and youth succeed despite significant life stressors and trauma (Condly, 2006; Hoekelman, 1991; Leonard, 1991; Patterson, 1991; Sinnema, 1991). Other adolescents need assets and resources to bolster their resilience.

Opposite of risk factors are promotive factors, which are positive factors liable for helping individuals bounce back from risk factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Promotive factors are categorized into assets and resources, as noted in Chapter 3. Assets reside in a person and include positive feelings of self, while resources are peripheral (Zimmerman, 2013). Resources include courses, programs, people who support the individual, and chances for competencies to be fostered (Zimmerman, 2013).

## Resources and Assets

The implementation of the mindfulness curriculum in the present study showcased how providing adolescents with access to a specific tool and allowing them class time every other school day to foster their practice can create change and be interpreted as a resource. The data from the current study suggest some students attribute mindfulness to an ability to better calm themselves down in scenarios that could have led to violence (in their own words). Mindfulness practices can be seen as a resource in the study. Participants chose to change environments and then practiced mindfulness to calm themselves from family arguments and fighting. According to the participants' testimonies, mindfulness practices would be a helpful way of relieving the stress associated with family discord. One participant, Hugo, stated,

I use it whenever I feel stressed. So that can be when I'm at home, and my family sometimes argues, so it puts a lot on my mind. So, when I take deep breaths and focus on something else than what they're talking about, then the arguing.

Additionally, the participants suggested that mindfulness practices contributed to a level of impulse control, decision-making abilities, and de-escalation in the face of stress, as depicted in the following: "I close my eyes, and I just think deep breaths to calm down. And to make sure that I'm not stressed or irritated, and I don't answer to my family in any rude manner" (Liv). Reliance on mindfulness as a skill set helps serve as a resource for the participant when looked at through resilience theory.

The calm produced during the participants' (self-reported) time spent doing mindfulness practices may be viewed as an asset. While assets live in a person and serve as a positive force for counteracting risk factors in resilience theory, the positive effects that resources had on the participants may go on to create changes in the future makeup and development of the person.

Cole believed mindfulness practices made him calmer and less reactive and gave him a better ability to make positive decisions, all of which fall under resources; however, how Cole

viewed the benefits of mindfulness practices on himself showcases positive transformative ideas of self and could go on to serve in a future scenario that requires an asset or resource. Cole stated, “I’d say mindfulness would help you out in many different ways, and it will make you a better person in general. And it will change your world—No, it’ll change your life.” Whether the mindfulness curriculum could serve as an asset, or a resource may be negligible to the idea that they operate as promotive factors in building resilience in the participants.

The benefits of mindfulness with youth on a micro level have been explored throughout this study and examined through the lens of resilience theory. The following section took a macro look into how mindfulness might work to reach more youth.

### **Implications for Leadership in Social Justice and Equity**

While many adolescents have developed methods of coping with stress, for many, it is primarily based on trial and error and not necessarily explicitly taught. The variability of who is taught stress management and emotional regulation at home makes way for inequity to be created. Students with both parents working multiple jobs may not have the same access to an adult who can directly teach these skills as someone with more accessibility to an adult. Attending to one’s mental health has largely been a privilege, given that if the focus is on survival, then the priority is not on attending to mental well-being. Marginalized groups are often, therefore, exposed to high-stress levels.

The current study focused on learning from the adolescents’ voices about stressors they have had to go through and their experiences with mindfulness practices. Lola detailed how life with a single parent has its difficulties, given that she had to grow up quickly and be responsible. Other participants, including Adelia, discussed how money had been tight and how arguments over food among siblings caused significant tension. As Maslow described in his hierarchy of

needs, if food, shelter, water, and other basic needs are not available, then they must first be obtained before attempting to learn about things such as mindfulness.

While systemic oppression must be dismantled and is by no means a responsibility of the oppressed, teaching mindfulness tactics explicitly may allow for more equity in who has access to the skill set and benefits. Research shows clear benefits of MBSR (Gotink et al., 2016), and coupled with student voices in the present study, teaching mindfulness techniques in the school setting can allow all students to gain essential tools and skills which can be added to the arsenal that they are already familiar with.

While some adolescents may not need additional support to flourish, others could benefit from targeted programs that increase their abilities to manage stress and increase their resilience with resources and assets. Mindfulness programs, including curriculum and weekly practice, have shown promise in the eyes of several students in the current study. Coupled with more than 30 years of research on the importance of implementing school-based social-emotional programs in schools, the Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence (1994) stated,

Schools are widely acknowledged as the major setting in which activities should be undertaken to promote students' competence and prevent the development of unhealthy behaviors. In contrast to other potential sites for intervention, schools provide access to all children on a regular and consistent basis over the majority of their formative years of personality development. (p. 278)

## **Recommendations**

With growing stress levels, dependency on technology, and societal issues, a return to the breath and a grounding force for teens is necessary. Adolescents described mindfulness practices and their benefits as being able to de-escalate their anger, allow for a “clear mind,” and help with stress reduction. Evidence from the current study highlighted the voices of the youth and detailed how mindfulness has helped several of them with an ability to make more well-thought-out decisions and to understand the consequences of their actions before making decisions. Other

participants in the study cited mindfulness to help them manage their impulsivity through present-moment awareness.

Constant distractions reduce attention span, and multitasking by adolescents has led to an impossible job for educators to try and teach at a much slower pace than students are used to outside of school. The world is moving quickly, focusing on productivity, and although not solely the cause, it can lead to anxious feelings, stress, and mental health concerns in youth if not addressed. Mindfulness will allow students to connect with their breath, unplug, and calm their central nervous systems.

Implementing mindfulness curriculums in all schools would help ensure that the benefits of mindfulness, which were detailed in Chapter 4, are made more widespread. Directly teaching mindfulness techniques through a targeted curriculum allows students to feel empowered by practicing ways to self-regulate their emotions. Many skills taught through the curriculum are skills that transcend multiple disciplines throughout the school day and may aid in supporting other courses. It is crucial to grant students access to as many quality skills as possible to help aid in their transitional time.

To ensure students receive the best access to education, teachers must receive training or attend educator courses for mindfulness. Otherwise, the curriculum may appear choppy, disorganized, and noncohesive. Educators should also have a foundational knowledge of mindfulness themselves before taking the mindfulness course for educators; otherwise, it may be difficult for teachers to be grounded in practice, therefore potentially coming off as inauthentic to students.



## **Conclusion**

This study and the findings add to the limited number of studies on mindfulness-based programs from the perspective of the youth. Prioritizing student voices is powerful and allows students an opportunity to tell their stories and have their voices be heard and valued.

Throughout this study, it became apparent that adolescents will describe precisely how they feel, what they know, and answer the questions posed; someone needs to ask them. Youth are eager for their input to be valued. The journals and interviews with the youth produced rich data. Future studies should treat youth as the experts they are on themselves and prioritize their voice when seeking to learn about them.

While this study focused on a mindfulness curriculum and how adolescents experienced the curriculum, the themes that the practice claims to possess in the literature were present-moment awareness, emotional regulation, stress reduction, and decision making. Although this study only focused on eight participants in one grade level, it unearthed many valuable themes grounded in the students' stories. Understanding mindfulness curriculum, its benefits, and how students respond to that type of learning will allow teachers to be better support their students and for students to be better equipped to cope with life stressors. Similarly, depending on the implementation, the mindfulness curriculum may enable students to feel cared for by the teacher, strengthening the bond between the two. Additionally, students can benefit from stress reduction, present-moment awareness, decision-making, and emotional regulation skills and present in mindfulness education.

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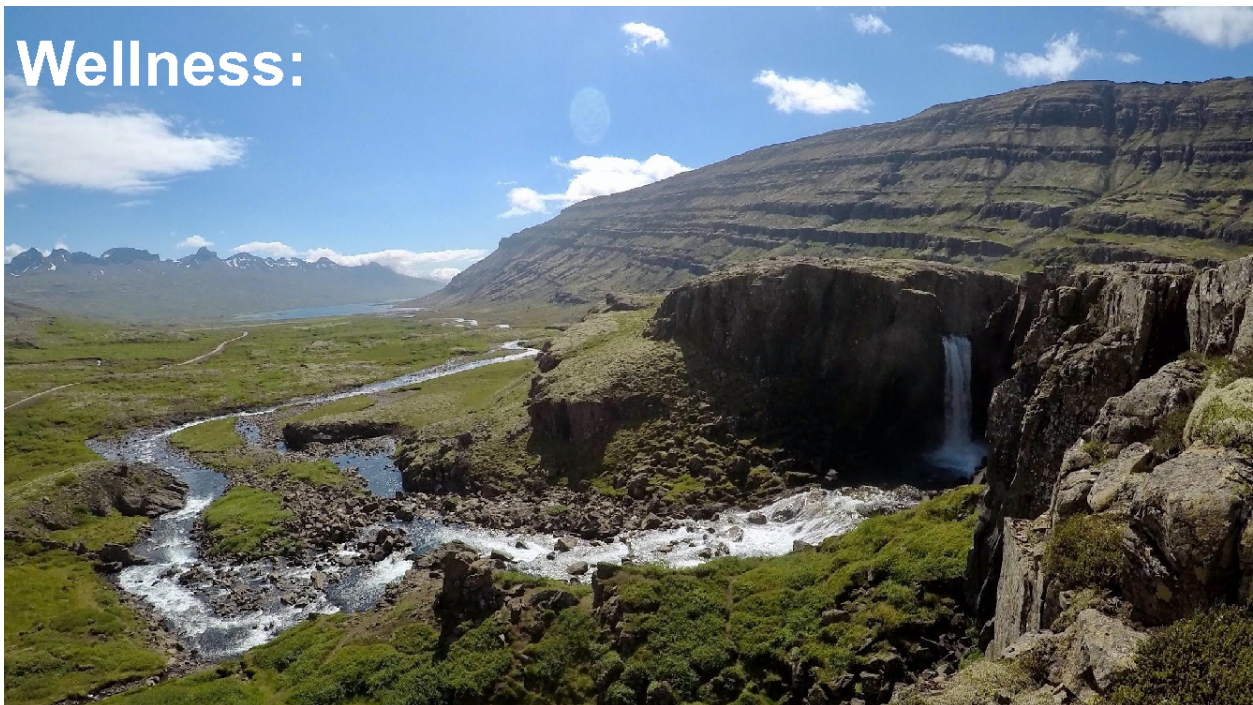
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## APPENDIX A – EXAMPLE OF WELLNESS AND MINDFULNESS LESSON

(Smith, 2021)

# Expectations

- **Be on Time**
- Be Positive
- Be Present
- Be Kind
- Be Respectful



# Chromebooks

Today & Thursday





It's spooky season



**Slow is Smooth  
Smooth is Fast**





Are you a good swimmer who wants to try a fun new sport?

The **Girls' Water Polo** team is recruiting for the upcoming winter season!

Come to room **V7 Wednesday, October 13th at lunch** for more information.

No experience is necessary.

# Introduce Yourself:

## **Assessment = DONE**

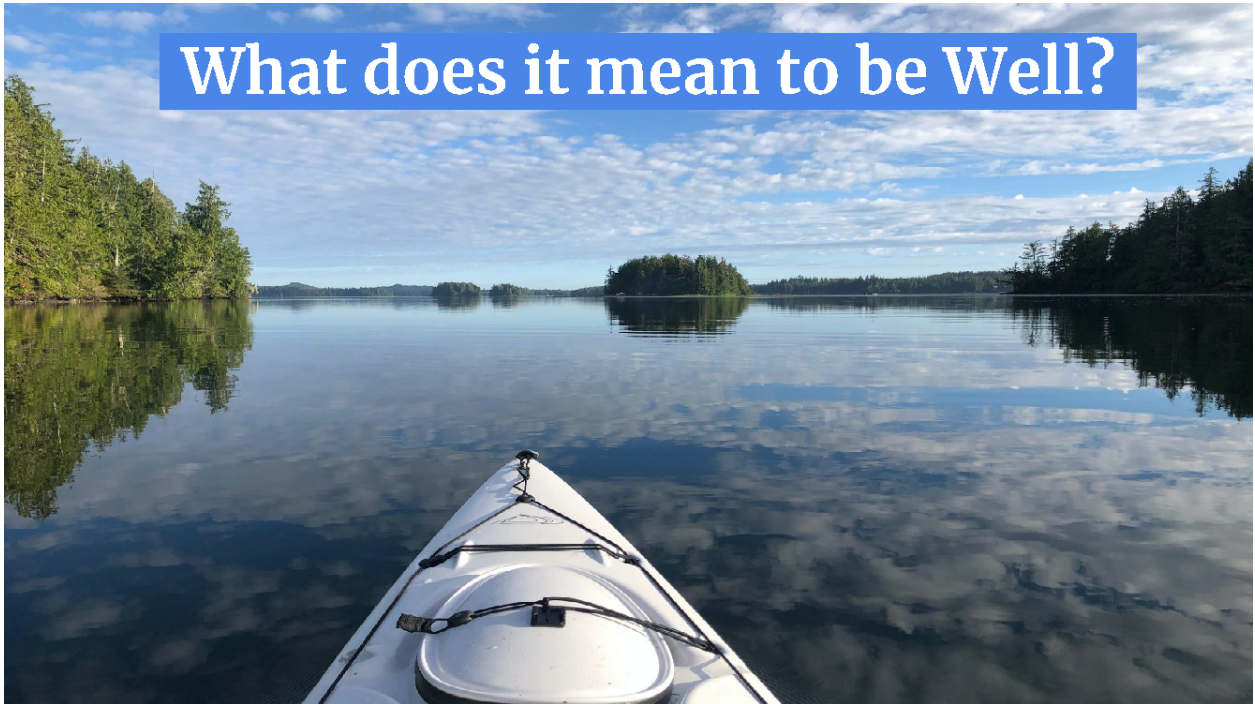
- ❖ **On Time** (0 = late / 2 = on time)
- ❖ **Eye Contact** (0 = none / 1 = some / 2 = perfect)
- ❖ **Speak clearly** (0 = Can't understand you / 1 = Can hear you but, not clearly / 2 = Can hear you perfectly)
- ❖ **Greeting** (0 = No greeting / 1 = Improper greeting / 2 = Appropriate greeting)
- ❖ **State your first & last name** (0 = No name / 1 = First name only / 2 = First & last name)

TOTAL = **10 points**



# New Stuff

What does it mean to be Well?



**WELLNESS**

**ILLNESS**

**WE  
LLNESS**

**I  
LLNESS**

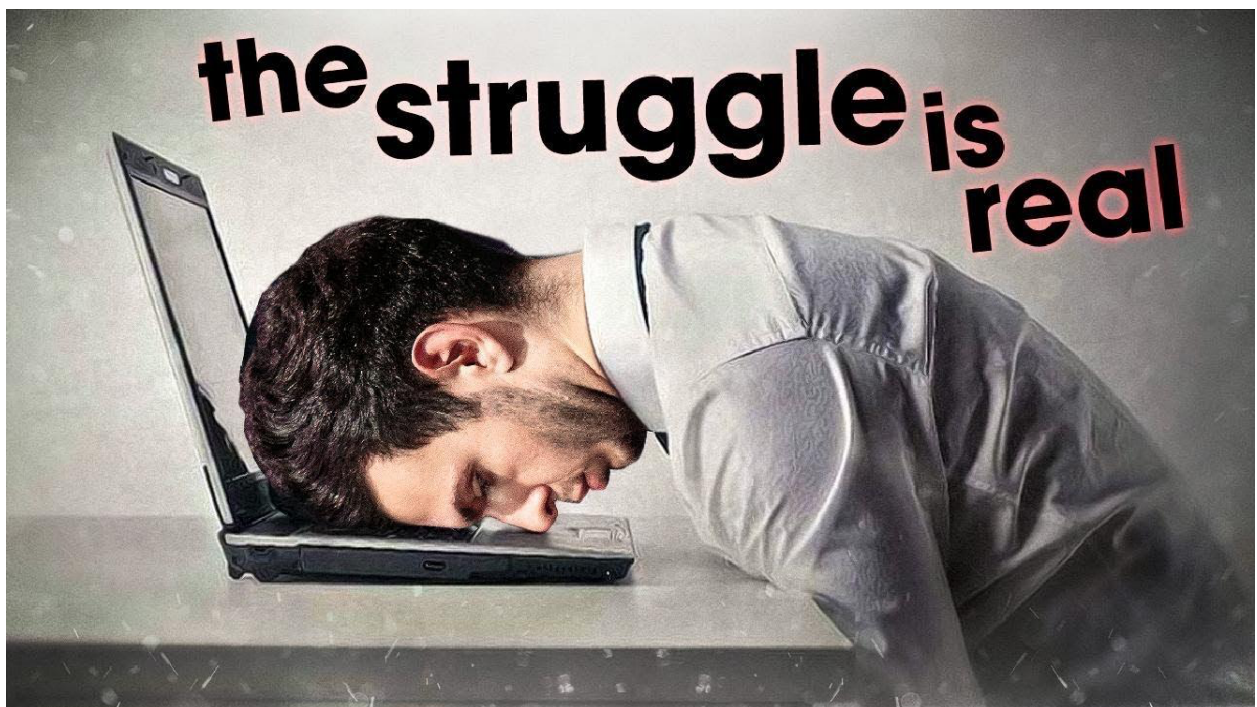
**Wellness is an active process of becoming aware of and making choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life.**



## **8 Dimensions of Wellness**



# Why Wellness?



# Distractions

# Struggles

- VIDEO GAMES
- PEOPLE TAPPING THEIR PENS

## On your Post It note:

- List 2 - 3 things that are Distractions for you
- A Distraction is something that takes away your focus

- WAKING UP  
- MAKING NEW  
FRIENDS

### On your Post It note:

- List 2 - 3 things that are a **Struggle** for you
- A **Struggle** is a difficult or challenging task

## Have You Ever?

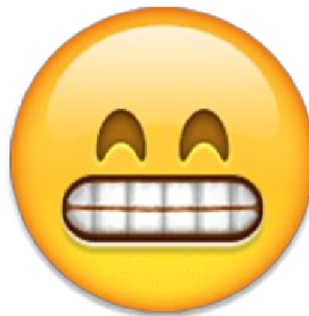
- Said something you wish you could take back
- Done something you later regretted
- Felt angry or out of control
- Felt nervous or anxious about an test or performance
- Been in a bad mood but not sure why
- Been in a bad mood but not even sure what emotion it is
- Felt like you need a break and want everyone to just leave you alone
- Had trouble falling asleep because your mind won't be quiet or body feels restless
- Been accidentally spacing out in class when the teacher calls on you
- Noticed that you do much better at sports or music when you are really focused

## Why does this happen?



# EMOTIONS

Our Emotions constantly change



# EMOTIONS

Our Emotions constantly change

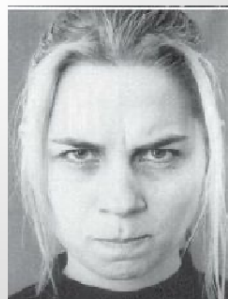
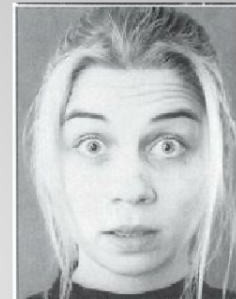
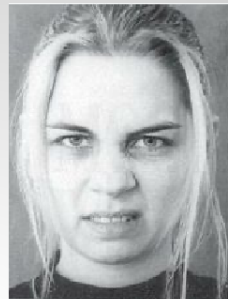
## 6 Basic Emotions:

1. Happiness
2. Fear
3. Disgust
4. Surprise
5. Sadness
6. Anger

**Emotions** release chemicals (**HORMONES**) in our brain that can make us react and say things we won't want to

## 6 Basic Emotions:

- Happiness
- Fear
- Disgust
- Surprise
- Sadness
- Anger







**IT'S OKAY,  
NOT TO BE  
OKAY**

How do you **DEAL** with  
**Difficult Emotions?**



# Mindfulness

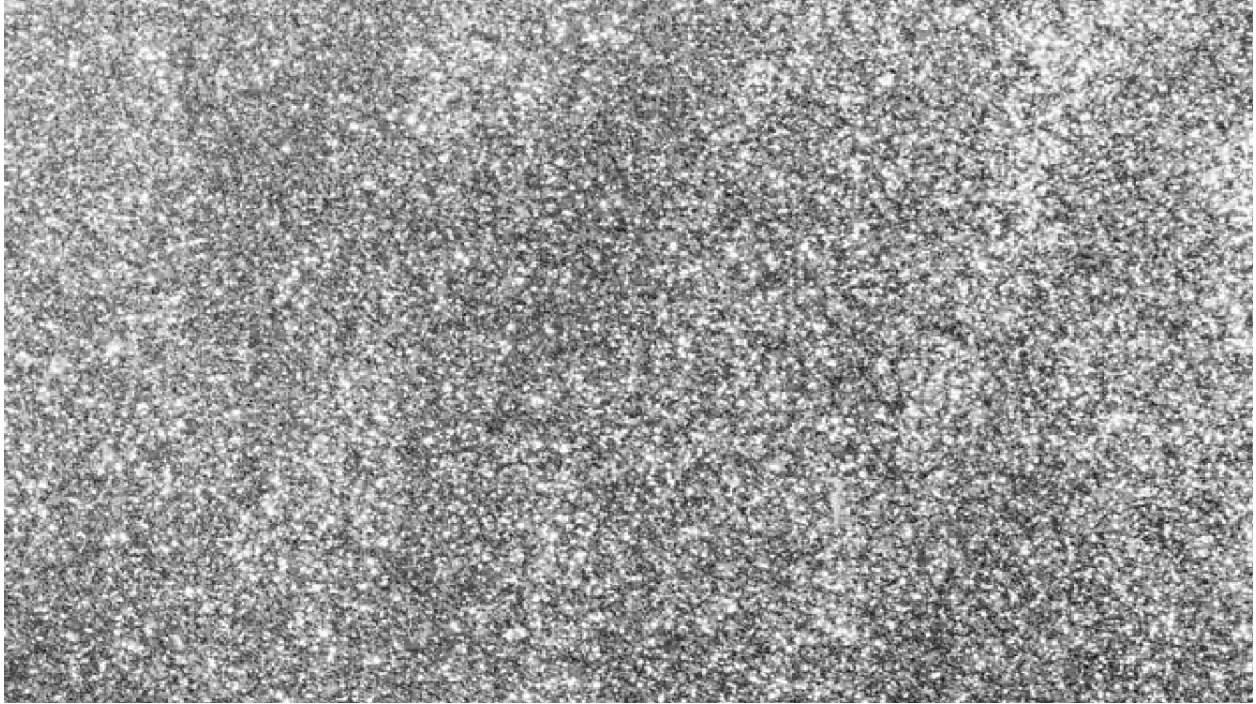
Stops the “chemicals” in our brain and allows us to process our emotions in a healthy way



# Mindfulness

Paying attention to what is going on in our mind and body right now, without judgement or trying to change it





**Strengthen  
&  
Develop  
the  
Mind**

# Mindfulness

Helps you:

1. Improve **focus**
2. Recognize and manage **emotions**
3. Make better **decisions**
4. Empathize in **relationships**

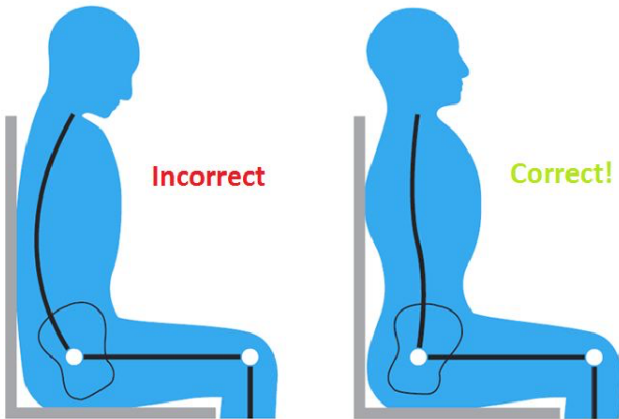
## Mindfulness Practice



Short periods of paying attention on purpose with no judgement



# Mindful Posture



1. Facing Forward
2. Lengthen your spine (back is upright)
3. Let your body be quiet and still
4. Let your eyes close



Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice  
Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice  
Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice  
Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice  
Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice  
Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice Practice  
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# Wellness Journal Introduction

- You will be maintaining a Wellness Journal throughout the semester. It is an exercise in Self-reflection meant to increase your Self-awareness. You can expect to write a Wellness Journal entry at least every week.
- Feel free to write in a style that is comfortable for you. However, entries should be in paragraph format with **complete sentences**.
- Be sure that your entry responds to all of the questions in the journal prompt.
- These will be graded on how well you relate your entries to the Wellness lessons.

## Journal: Sentences

- Journal entries should be **3 - 5 sentences** (or more)
- A sentence always begins with a **CAPITAL letter**
- A sentence always ends with **punctuation** ( . ? ! )
- A sentence always has a **verb (action)** and a **noun (person, place or thing)**
- A sentence must express a **complete thought**

# Academic Extension

**NOW IS THE TIME TO  
DO WORK**

Please let me know if you have  
questions, problems or need help.





## APPENDIX B – MINDFULNESS JOURNAL PROMPTS

Prompts are taken directly from Mindful Schools (2015).

### 1. Prompt #1 (Mindful Schools, 2015, p. 10)

Imagine for a moment someone does something that makes you very angry: an argument with a friend, someone hitting you, someone yelling at you, someone disagreeing with you. And imagine your typical reaction - your automatic pilot reaction. What do you say, how do you act, do you yell, swear, say things you later regret? Imagine yourself having any of those reactions.

- Describe the feelings that came up in as much detail as possible.

Now back up and imagine the situation again but from the point before you respond. First consider where you feel anger in your body. See if you can identify where it is. Also notice the thoughts associated with this anger. Are they thoughts of revenge, hatred, hurt, disappointment? (Mindful Schools, 2015, p. 10)

- [Pause while the student responds]

Can you watch all this as if you were simply observing . . . “hmm, that’s interesting, I’m really angry, I’m really upset, my chest is tight, and my body is tense . . .” With the time it takes to notice all those things, you have created space between the situation and your typical reaction. Normally, the situation and the reaction happen so quickly we don’t have any space in between. It’s like they are glued together. But when you bring awareness to a situation, you can often create enough space between the situation and the reaction that the reaction becomes a response.

- Explain a time where you were able to respond instead of react? Why do you believe this happened?

2. Prompt #2 Which of the difficult emotions (anger, fear, sadness, stress) do you struggle with?

What is something that “triggers” or sets off that emotion in you?

How do you know that you are experiencing the emotion (what do you feel and where do you feel it)?

How do you deal with the emotion when it gets overwhelming?

Using words or images what does Mindfulness look like to you?

What did you notice happening in your mind and body when we practiced Mindfulness?

List any emotions you remember having in the last 24 hours. They do not have to be strong, and they do not have to be negative, just anything you remember in the last 24 hours.

Describe a stimulus/trigger that causes you to feel a negative emotion (anger, sadness, stress, fear, jealousy, loneliness).

What is your typical reaction to the negative emotion?

3. Prompt #3 (Mindful Schools, 2015, p. 16)

First Thought: During this minute of mindful breathing, pay attention to every breath as much as possible, and notice the first time you have a thought. Practice 1 minute.

Were you able to keep your attention on your breathing that whole minute? Did your attention wander away? Can you tell me what your first thought was?

Let’s try this again. Start with your breath. When you notice you have started thinking, say to yourself, “thinking, thinking.” Then gently come back to your breathing. When you notice thinking, it means you’ve left your anchor, but when you notice the thought

you have regained mindfulness and you can continue to be mindful of your breath. 2 minutes.

Were you able to just pay attention to your breath and you not notice any thoughts?

Did you notice you were thinking at some point?

Were able to note “thinking, thinking”?

Were you able to come back to your breath?

How long (in minutes or seconds) do you believe you were focused solely on your breathing?

How long (in minutes or seconds) do you believe you were carried away in thought?

4. Prompt #4: (Mindful Schools, 2015, pp. 20-21)

Liking/Not Liking

I am going to list different situations, feelings or emotions. Each time, imagine how you would feel. Do you like it, hate it, fear it, look forward to it, wish for it, hope it happens again, hope it never happens again, etc. Get involved in that. Imagine as much detail as you can.

You fail a class.

Someone wakes you up early on the weekend.

Someone criticizes you.

Someone gives you a gift when you weren't expecting it.

Being tickled.

You get caught in a lie.

You are praised for good work in your favorite class.

Soft clothes.

Someone gives you money for a special occasion.

You get new shoes.

A friend is angry with you for something you did.

Seeing a really bad movie.

You're starving after school. You get home and there is not one good thing to eat.

Pleasant/Unpleasant

This time listen and consider each one carefully. But only identify each thing as either pleasant or unpleasant. Those are your only two choices to apply to the experience. Try not to add the same thoughts or imaginings that you added to it a moment ago and don't go beyond the point of pleasant or unpleasant.

You fail a class.

Someone wakes you up early on the weekend.

Someone criticizes you.

Someone gives you a gift when you weren't expecting it. Being tickled.

You get caught in a lie.

You are praised for good work in your favorite class.

Soft clothes.

Someone gives you money for a special occasion.

You get new shoes.

A friend is angry with you for something you did.

Seeing a really bad movie.

You're starving after school.

You get home and there is not one good thing to eat.

Please read and describe your entry to Journal #6 in as much detail as possible.

- How do you usually react when you don't like something?
- How do you usually react when you do like something?
- How will using mindfulness change those reactions?

5. Prompt #4 (Mindful Schools, 2015, p. 29)

Listen to your body as we move throughout the day and feel. Check in with yourself. Take notice of any feelings that came up for you during this session. Scan your physical body, your emotions, your memories. How does mindfulness affect the way you think about yourself?

About others? Please be specific and detailed.

6. Prompt #5

Think back to a particular time recently when you were stressed or overwhelmed. From the time that you were triggered (by a stimulus) until the time that you recovered your composure, describe the story of what happened. How did you feel?

7. Prompt #6 (Mindful Schools, 2015, pp. 42-43)

Mindfulness of Emotions

*Ring bell.*

Today, see if you can count 10 breaths or more in a row during this minute. Whenever you notice you have become lost in thought, gently come back and start at one again.

*One minute of mindful breathing.*

Today we are going to explore how emotions take place in our body and our mind. I am going to say a list of emotions. Notice if that feeling is in your body or mind. What does your body feel like when I say the word, what does your heart feel like when I say the word?

*Pause briefly between each emotion.*

Happy. Sad. Excited. Mad. Stressed. Bored.

Loving. Anxious. Worried. Scared. Jealous. Quiet. Silly. Peaceful.

Now we will have some silence and you can count your breath at your anchor. When you hear the bell, listen to the whole sound of the bell and then open your eyes.

- How did you feel when I said the word “Happy . . . Sad . . . Excited . . . ?
- Have you learned anything new about the emotions that occur in you over the past semester? What?
- Do you notice your emotions more often now?
- Has how you deal with your emotions changed? How?

#### 8. Prompt #7

Looking back over the past semester, would you consider yourself to have been stressed for any length of time? Explain (How long? How frequently? How severe would you identify your stress in your own words?)

If you did experience stress, did you ever use mindfulness before, after or during an episode of stress? How? (i.e mindful breathing, mindful meditation, body scan, guided mindfulness meditation, mindfulness app, mindful walking, loving-kindness meditation)

In your own words, is there a relationship to mindfulness and stress in yourself? Describe.

#### 9. Prompt #8

For the following hypothetical situations, describe how you would respond:

You notice that one of your friends, Jaime, posted a story on their Instagram where they were at the pier with three of your other friends. You did not get invited.

What are you thinking? How do you feel? What do you do? Why? Is this the same or different than how you would have responded at the beginning of the school year?

Explain.

One of your friends is having a party since their parents are going out of town. To go to the party, you have to lie to your parents.

What are you thinking? How do you feel? What do you do? Why? Is this the same or different than how you would have responded at the beginning of the school year?

Explain.

#### 10. Prompt #10

In what ways, if at all, has mindfulness been incorporated into your life outside of the classroom? Listen to your body as we move throughout the day and feel. Check in with yourself. Take notice of any feelings that came up for you during this session. Scan your physical body, your emotions, your memories.

## **APPENDIX C – SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What are some of the current stressors that you are experiencing?
2. Describe your experience over the past year with COVID. How did you cope with those experiences?
3. Tell me about a time when you were very upset. How were you able to calm yourself down?
4. How do you feel after doing mindfulness in class? Be as specific as possible.
5. Have you been using this skill (mindfulness) outside of class? If so, when and in what type of situations?
6. Has mindfulness changed your way of thinking or responding in any way? If so, how?
7. If you could describe mindfulness to someone who had never heard of it, what would you say?