May 2022

Examining the Conditions for Student Well-Being and Whole Person Health with Mindfulness and Somatic-Based Learning

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https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.EDU.13

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Examining the Conditions for Student Well-Being and
Whole Person Health with Mindfulness and
Somatic-Based Learning

by

Clarissa Alonzo

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California
San Rafael, CA
May 2022
Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand how mindfulness practices and physical activity in the classroom can contribute to the overall well-being and health of students and teachers. Research has shown that these practices increase self-awareness, compassion, introspection, and a reduction in stress and anxiety (Waterford, 2019). This study included interviews with one educator and their fifth-grade classroom, who all participated in a multi-week series of lessons using mindfulness and somatic awareness activities with post-practice writing reflection. The findings of this research indicate that somatically based mindfulness practices positively impact language patterns between students. Physical body-based activities were also shown to create greater calmness that in turn manifests as greater inclusion in the classroom. These findings make a case for integrating daily body-based mindfulness activities in classroom settings. Schools could also provide resources that can be taken home for students to engage in the practices with their families and as a progressive form of homework. These findings also provide support for minimum mandated instructional minutes for these kinds of activities during the school day, as well as professional development training for teachers to learn how to embody these practices for themselves.
Acknowledgements

To my family, without you all this project would not have been possible. You have given me all of the encouragement, support, and love in the world through such a difficult year. A special thank you to my mami y papi. There are no words to describe the amount of gratitude I have for you. For keeping me grounded and always reminding me that I can achieve anything I put my heart and soul into. For the times I thought I couldn’t push through, you always picked me up and never stopped believing in me. Thank you for the beautiful life you have given me filled with unconditional love and opportunities. Because of you two, my dreams are so big.

Gracias por todo lo que haces por mí. ¡Te queiro mucho! To my sister Madisson, for being the best listener, my biggest fan, and keeping me sane through the craziest time of my life. For always gave me the confidence when I needed it the most.

To all of the professors I have had the past five years. You have all helped me grow into the student and person I am today. To my intelligent group of friends, Adrienne, Michaela, and Katie. For five years we have been uplifting each other. I am so grateful to have gone through undergrad and graduate school together. I have been so blessed with the many amazing life experiences and opportunities throughout this graduate program. Thank you to every person that has been a part of it, especially this past year. I am overwhelmed with the amount of happiness I feel. My life has forever changed!
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On my first day as a student teacher, I woke up, opened my laptop from the comfort of my own bed, and logged into Zoom. Twenty-six students, one teacher, and one student teacher, all on one small screen. This was the new normal. No one could have predicted the extreme impact the 2020 Covid-19 global pandemic would have on our education system. Throughout a two-year period, I have been able to experience and observe the many shifts and struggles both students and teachers have faced related to this pandemic. Students started the pandemic by learning online, then transitioned to hybrid learning, and finally back to in-person learning. I observed that the inconsistent learning environments changed the way they learned and interacted with one another. Specifically, students’ overall health, social skills, and peer relationships were greatly affected. At the same time, towards the end of my senior year of college and the start of my Master’s program, I struggled with the depletion of my own mental and physical health. I began to value the importance of practicing mindfulness and physical activity to improve my overall well-being.

I began to recognize the challenges my own students were facing regarding their mental health and the relationships with their peers. I thought to myself, “How can I improve the overall wellness of my students?” I wanted to give students, and discover for myself, the opportunities and tools that would allow them to build stronger relationships, improve their mental and physical health, and the ability to succeed in and out of the classroom.

Statement of Purpose

A review of the literature revealed the intersection between mindfulness practices (Spencer, 2021), somatic-based learning (Browning, 2020), and practices for nurturing learning environments and well-being (Littlecot et al., 2018) as they collectively contribute to the overall
health and well-being of students. These frameworks shed light on how students' experiences with mindfulness and somatic-based practices can provide lifelong benefits. For instance, studies show that students who participate in mindfulness activities have experienced lower levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, as well as enhanced resiliency, attention, preparedness, information processing, creativity, empathy, and compassion (Magaldi & Park-Taylor, 2016).

Students and educators alike have experienced the shared trauma of interrupted schooling, increased social isolation, loss of economic stability and food insecurity during the global COVID-19 Pandemic. Thus, the need for special attention to the social and emotional needs of all students has been elevated and continues to be an area of great interest in the research (Cardona & Neas, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain a deeper understanding of how mindfulness and somatic-based exercises help students cultivate self-awareness, improve their peer relationships, and then apply these practices independently in various contexts, including the recent return to in-person learning.

**Overview of the Research Design**

The research was conducted using a phenomenological approach and utilized qualitative research design with a constructivist worldview. The researcher utilized a qualitative approach to examine how mindfulness practices and physical activity can enhance the overall well-being of elementary students after an extended disruption to learning due to the global pandemic. The research was conducted at Grey Elementary School located in Northern California. It includes a diverse student population with a high percentage of English Language Learners and low-income families. The student population of this school is approximately 62% Hispanic or Latino, 27% White, 2% Filipino, 4% Asian, and 2% African American (CA Department of Education).
The study was conducted at the same school where the researcher worked at this site as a student teacher for two years and had a pre-existing relationship with the research participants. Therefore, there is the potential that participants answered questions in ways that would cause the researcher to view them positively. Additionally, the researcher had personal experience with mindfulness practices and physical activity as a means to combat the ill effects of stress and trauma. The researcher attempted throughout the study to minimize the personal bias as she interacted with and observed the students as they participated in the mindfulness practices and physical activity.

The initial sample for the study included a diverse group of about 30 students from a fifth grade classroom and one educator. The participants ranged in age between ten and eleven years. The fifth grade students participated in mindfulness and somatic-based exercises for twice a week over the course of a month. The exercises included braindumps, gratitude lists, breathing, stretching, meditation, grounding, and yoga. The researcher conducted observations and asked open-ended questions through surveys. The researcher collected some written feedback from students’ experience. The purpose of the qualitative data was to highlight the meanings of student experiences through open-ended questions and reflection prompts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative data was additionally collected through observations, formal and informal interviews, and written/drawn responses.

**Significance of the Study**

The themes that emerged from the data included 1) seeing beyond student behaviors, 2) letting go and finding gratitude, and 3) students transfer and apply practices in their own lives. When teachers understand and utilize mindfulness and somatic-based practices, they are able to shift their focus on students’ behavior to understanding the students’ experience and perspective.
The findings of the study further emphasize that mindfulness and somatic-based learning are essential to support student success in and out of the classroom. Another theme that was consistent throughout interviews and student responses and behaviors was how mindfulness and somatic-based practices can help students let go of negative feelings both individually and towards one another. This was of particular interest to the classroom teacher in the study, as she was experiencing an increase in conflicts between students in her classroom after having experienced a year of distance learning. After the students learned a variety of mindfulness and somatic-based exercises, they began to apply them in their own daily lives. Students reported that they used mindfulness practices during conflicts with their peers, both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Research Implications**

These findings suggest that mindfulness and somatic-based practices help cultivate students’ self-awareness and improve their peer relationships in the classroom by letting go and finding gratitude. Students have also learned to transfer and apply practices across various contexts. Thus, mindfulness and somatic-based practices can be valuable for students' overall well-being. With the increased focus on social and emotional well-being of both students and teachers, mindfulness and somatic-based practices have the potential to complement a teachers’ repertoire of tools and strategies for creating nurturing learning environments for students in this era of interrupted schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students should also be given the tools and opportunities to practice these activities independently.

At a larger system level, more emphasis should be placed on implementing a curriculum based on the practices in this study, as well as developing plans to train teachers on how they can incorporate it into their own classrooms to ensure equitable access to all students. Implementing
mindfulness and somatic-based learning practices with intentionality can provide all students the opportunity to improve their overall well-being, not just in the classroom environment, but also outside the class and into their personal lives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this study, I will research the conditions for student and teacher well-being and whole person health. I will explore the physical, mental, and sensory learning benefits that physical activity and mindfulness practices bring to students and teachers. As both students and teachers return after a long period of interrupted schooling due to health orders brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic, the dynamic of the classroom has changed significantly (Meinck et al., 2022). Many students across the country have suffered social isolation during the school closures and many were not able to access the proper care and treatment for feelings of anxiety and depression, which has exacerbated the mental health crisis in schools as students return to in-person learning (Youki, 2020). Navigating through this time has become a challenge physically and mentally for students and teachers.

The shared trauma of interrupted schooling, increased social isolation, loss of economic stability and food insecurity has resulted in the need for special attention to the social and emotional needs of all students (Cardona & Neas, 2021). Even prior to the pandemic, teachers have reported an increase in the concentration deficits of their students (Budde, et al., 2008).

Now more than ever, there is a need for integration of mindfulness and physical activity into the curriculum. In this study, I will introduce what the research says about the role nurturing environments, physical activity and embodied learning, and mindfulness practices play in promoting overall well-being of both students and teachers.

Nurturing Learning Environments & Well-being

The recent pandemic-related disruptions to students’ educational experiences have brought to light the teacher's role in establishing a foundation where students feel safe, comfortable, and open to explore and introduce new ideas into the classroom. As teachers
develop strong relationships in the classrooms, students will become more engaged and connected to their school and their own health (Littlecott, et al., 2018).

Teachers play a critical role in a child’s development including their sense of belonging and peer relationships in the classroom (Tejeda, et al., 2022). Tejeda et al. (2022) suggest that teachers play an important role in awakening virtues and forming a child’s understanding of what is expected of them, and therefore must create the conditions for peer interactions that are meaningful for their students and their development. Shaping the social environment supports socialization among students and creates opportunities for them to develop their sense of belonging. This sense of belonging has been shown to have substantial positive impacts on them, specifically with their ability to develop and maintain positive peer relationships and to learn problem solving skills (Over, 2016). Despite the importance of this role, teachers often don’t have the time or training to implement these practices. Research suggests that teachers’ classroom management strategies focus mostly on reducing negative behaviors, as opposed to practices and pedagogies focused on building peer relationships (Gaias, 2019). This can be attributed to the institutional demands such as the need for classroom control and a focus on maintaining pupil attention, classroom control and task completion (Audley-Piotrowski et al., 2015). Thus, teachers have many competing demands, which result in the utilization of classroom management strategies that do not support a teachers’ ability to create conditions that promote positive interactions and relationships among peers (Tejeda et al. 2022). Perhaps with the renewed focus on students’ lived experiences and trauma brought on by the pandemic and interrupted schooling, policy makers and school leaders may encourage teachers to intentionally build in strategies for developing students’ social and emotional competencies.
Fajriah, et al. (2020) suggest that teachers are the single most important factor that contributes to students’ achieving maximum learning goals and submit that teachers have a duty to develop students’ ability to develop knowledge and skills. Kemeny et al. (2012) point to research that has shown that teachers are the single dominant factor that promotes students’ development and achievement and have pointed to teacher student relationships at the core and significantly affecting students social and academic competence as well as their well-being.

Teachers deal with many stressors in their daily work–increased class size, demands to implement initiatives and meet student’s academic and social needs (Lever & Mayworm, 2017). This presents many interpersonal and emotional demands of teaching, but despite these demands, teachers often don’t have the resources or training to be positive in the face of increased challenges (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The ability to cope with increasing demands in challenging environments is a critical need for teachers as students have experienced several years of interrupted schooling and personal trauma associated with the pandemic. Emotion regulation, empathy and compassion are considered key to teachers’ work and are crucial to their ability to identify and effectively respond to student’s needs. Some consider these three capacities as requisite dispositions to the teaching profession (Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020).

Emotional regulation is described as a teacher’s ability to cope with the stressful challenges of teaching (Fried, 2011). This can help them effectively manage student misbehavior and nurture strong and effective relationships with students. Emotional regulation is also a key predictor of performance and job satisfaction and can help to improve stress management and promote more calmness (Kluemper, 2011).
Empathy is described as the ability to share and understand the emotional experience of another person and is considered central to social interactions (Reiss, 2017). Empathy is considered essential for human survival because it motivates individuals to connect with each other and to consider others' feelings and experience. Empathy is important for care providers, such as teachers, in that it enables them to more accurately respond to the needs of those they care for (Moudatsou et al., 2020). And since teachers care for students, this is considered a core competency.

Compassion has been defined as the concern for the suffering of another, accompanied by the motivation to help (Singer & Klimecki 2014). Singer and Klimecki (2020) link compassion to well-being and positive emotions. This is critical for teachers as it supports the awareness of student needs and helps them see past students' problem behavior to what may be underlying that behavior. Some of these underlying factors can include the need for safety, care, reassurance, or limit setting. Compassion also helps teachers build and maintain relationships with students and colleagues (Cardona & Neas, 2021)

**Physical Activity and Embodied Learning**

Lengel and Kuczala (2010) note how students increasingly need help learning how to self-regulate their moods due to limited attention spans. Movement and music help students to manage their brain and body—physically, mentally and emotionally (Lengel & Kuczala, 2010). A student's health and wellbeing has been shown to benefit from physical exercise and movement (Booth, et. al 2014). Physical exercise and movement have been shown to be closely related to improved mental health and cognitive achievement (Hill, 2010). Physical activity can help to develop bodily awareness—a necessary and critical skill students need in the classroom (Mcclelland , et, al 2015). It can also contribute to improved self-control and mental focus by
using physical movements to train the body and brain to work together (McClelland, et. al, 2015; Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011). Physical activity supports improvement of attention, self-control through visual and auditory tasks.

In the 2017 Physical Activities Guidelines, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services underscore the fact that childhood and adolescence are critical periods for developing movement skills, learning healthy habits, and establishing a firm foundation for lifelong health and well-being. Physical activity also has brain health benefits for school-aged children and can play a role in cognitive decision making, self-motivation, and a search for personal meaning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Physical exercise can improve mood and psychological well-being; including stress, anxiety, and depression (Kashihara, et al., 2009). Budde (2018) suggests that coordinated exercises help to develop attention, working memory, verbal learning and memory skills and self-control in the classroom. This, paired with opportunities for regular group work, can lead to a positive effect on retention memory and transfer of skills. Group activities require complex cognition for students to be able to cooperate with others, play strategically, and adapt for unforeseen situations (Best, 2010). Participating in group games and complex motor skills leads to a positive effect on retention memory and transfer of skills. Ludlow (2020) suggests that physical activity requires similar cognitive performance to academic tasks and the mental performance required for retrieval of memories and memory storage practiced in physical activity can improve overall cognitive performance.

Implementing physical activity enhances brain health and cognition development, and contributes to overall physical health (Cruz et al., 2014). Cruz et al. (2014) further outlined how physical activity is particularly helpful for students with developmental disorders such as
ADHD, ASD, and others. For instance, one student in a case study “exhibited enhanced attentiveness and reduced hyperactivity when provided with regular access to playground equipment to engage in vigorous activities.” (Cruz et al., 2014, p. 94). Physical activity can also lead to increased cognitive ability, emotional development and positive social relationships—what is often referred to as soft skills. The soft skills include communication skills, decisive actions, teamwork, time management, self-esteem and sense of community (Maslen, 2015).

Physical activity has been highlighted as an effective non-pharmaceutical intervention approach for children with developmental disorders (Laxman 2020). Laxman (2020) agrees that programs such as yoga can prevent early life problems, if incorporated at a young age. Through a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, he draws the conclusion that yoga can be beneficial to physical and psychological health in young school children. He also writes about the need for increased attention to the mental health issues that students are exhibiting in school, in particular, students with Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD).

There has also been a call for novel approaches to increasing physical activity in schools, suggesting that educators make it fun for children and youth (Bates, 2006). Bates (2006) suggests that schools have the responsibility of creating and nurturing a learning environment for students that supports the development of the life-long habit for daily physical activity and for healthy lifestyles. It is recommended that daily physical activities should vary in form and intensity, take into account each student’s ability, consider resources available within the school and the larger community and allow for student choice (Best, 2010).
**Embodied Learning**

Embodied learning has been defined as “…the pedagogical approaches that focus on the non-mental factors involved in learning, and that signal the importance of the body and feelings.” (Dumont & Benavides, 2010). They further state that students who consciously use their bodies to learn are more engaged than others who are sitting at a computer as the physical, emotional and social must all be included in the learning environment. Embodied learning is offered as a way to foster non-cognitive skills in the whole through the following principles (Dumot & Benavides 2010):

1. Make learning central, and encourage engagement and awareness in students of their own learning strategies. Ensure that learning is social and often collaborative.
2. Be highly attuned to motivations and the emotions involved in learning.
3. Be acutely sensitive to individual differences, including in prior knowledge.
4. Be demanding for each learner but without excessive overload.
5. Use assessments consistent with the main goals for learning, with a strong emphasis on formative feedback.

Embodied learning is also used as a foundation in other approaches, such as Better Movers and Thinkers, which is aimed at improving the executive functions to enhance personal qualities and thinking skills, physical literacy and physical fitness (Paniagua, 2018). These mental tools help students develop self-regulation, which include attention, working memory, inhibition, control, cognitive flexibility, planning and goal setting, which are critical skills for students both inside the classroom as they interact with others outside the classroom.
Embodied learning is also connected with the idea of learning by doing and engaging with the environment, which can offer students a comprehensive learning experience as it shifts the focus from the cognitive to the physical, emotional, and creative aspects of learning (Paniagua, 2018). For students who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities or who learn better by kinesthetic approaches, this method of designing lessons and activities can create a more engaging and motivating learning environment.

Embodied learning is particularly suited to address creative skills such as curiosity, sensitivity, multiple perspective taking, risk-taking, and metaphorical thinking, among others (Treffinger et al., 2002), as well as other metacognitive and executive skills which foster learner achievement (Paniagua, 2018). Although the core concepts of embodied learning are commonly present in any experiential or expressive activity, arts, physical education and maker culture are key platforms to build embodied experiences. Skonig (2008) reports that students with perceived behavioral problems sometimes need lessons that are consistent with the way they learn best, especially students with learning disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders (Skonig, 2008).

There are three main pathways to implement embodied learning in the schools. It is suggested that educators start with single experiences based on core subjects or physical education and art lessons, then introduce and expand workshops/projects led by professionals or specialized teachers. In the final phase of integration of embodied learning, educators can incorporate these concepts across all other subjects in school (Paniagua, 2018).

**Mindfulness Practices and Learning**

The concept of mindfulness involves three interrelated mental skills and dispositions: (a) concentrating attention intentionally on the here and now; (b) perceiving the present moment in a calm, clear, and receptive manner; and (c) experiencing each moment just as it is without bias or
judgment (Kostanski & Hassed, 2008). The goal of mindfulness programs in schools is to improve students' school readiness, academic performance, and mental health by teaching children the skill of mindfulness (Spencer, 2021). Spencer, et al. (2021) identified four key themes that mindfulness meditation brings to a learning community:

1. encourages students to focus
2. helps promote student mental health
3. changes the classroom environment
4. creates a sense of peace and calm

Mindfulness practices support emotional cues, heightening empathetic awareness, which leads to improved social relationships in school (Magaldi & Park-Taylor, 2016). For all students, mindfulness can result in an increase in attention, responsiveness, calmness, and focus ability.

Studies have shown that students who participated in mindfulness activities reported to have lower levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, as well as enhanced resiliency, attention, preparedness, information processing, creativity, empathy, and compassion (Magaldi & Park-Taylor, 2016). These abilities all contribute to student behavior in the classroom. Throughout the day, students are expected to concentrate on their school work for long periods of time. Giving them a small brain break allows them to shift their attention and energy to another activity, making it easier for them to return to the work they were attending to previously.

**Mindfulness and Teachers**

Researchers at the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety describe mindfulness as “the practice of cultivating attention to foster greater self-awareness and self-knowledge about thoughts, feelings and sensations and how they can affect one’s actions” (Browning, 2020). It has also been described in the literature as the ability to maintain a
“moment by moment awareness of our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations and surrounding environment with openness and curiosity” (Mindful Schools, 2022).

Mindfulness can help teachers promote a calm, relaxed, and enlivened classroom. When teachers use mindfulness practices, they can develop more positive ways of dealing with conflict in the classroom (Jennings, 2015). Mindfulness practices can support a healthy classroom environment where students feel comfortable engaging and adapting new habits into their lives. These practices open up a space in which students have the opportunity to improve their focus, self-esteem, social skills, and the ability to regulate their emotions (Parker, 2014).

Jennings (2015) states that mindfulness can help teachers promote a calm, relaxed, but enlivened classroom. When teachers use mindfulness practices, they can develop more positive ways of dealing with conflict in the classroom. A few of the practices suggested for teachers included open awareness, focused breathing, and loving-kindness. The author highlights seven different ways mindfulness awareness can help teachers:

1. communicate more effectively with students,
2. understand their own emotions better
3. manage students they find difficult
4. set up a positive learning environment
5. strengthen our relationship with students
6. slow down when we need to
7. build community

Mindfulness includes the practice of being in control of one's own emotions. This skill can be beneficial for teachers when managing students that might challenge their emotions. The foundation of self-awareness for teachers is used to build a classroom where student
relationships are at the forefront. Without positive relationships in the classroom, the
environment, community, and classroom management may become a larger challenge of its own
(Jennings 2015).

Mindfulness training can help teachers shift from a self-focused processing mode, to
improving their emotional regulation and increased empathy and compassion, which are critical
to fostering nurturing relationships with students (Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020). Mindfulness
based interventions have been shown to increase teachers' caring and relationship capacities,
emotion regulation capacities, self-efficacy, classroom organization, instruction and even
classroom management (Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020). Mindfulness has been closely linked
with the cultivation of compassion, and compassion is considered a pivotal aspect of
mindfulness practice. Fostering compassion includes learning how to be present, compassionate
and forgiving with oneself and others (Neff, 2009). When teachers compassionately
acknowledge emotions that arise in their work with challenging students, the classroom
environment can become a positive and nurturing environment for both teachers and students
(Jennings, 2015).

Mindfulness is a tool that can help teachers regulate their own emotions and have a
positive influence on their students. Waterford (2019) found that teachers who practice
mindfulness are more capable of understanding their own emotions, developing good teacher-
student relationships, and establishing a positive classroom environment.

**Models of Mindfulness**

Lavy and Berkovich-Ohana (2020) propose that the Mindful Self in School Relationships
(MSSR) model supports teachers’ mindfulness by fostering habits of mind, which contribute to
their health, well-being, and engagement, and in turn, contribute to positive student outcomes.
Though mindfulness can be considered an individual experience, teachers are a part of a social organizational context, which means that others are affected by their practice (Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana 2020). This model suggests that teachers’ decreased self-centeredness mediates the effects on their caring capacities, relationships with students, students’ well-being, and students’ social and academic development.

*Figure 1 MSSR Model*

**Benefits of Mindfulness**

The benefits of mindfulness training in the classroom include an increase in self-awareness, compassion, introspection, and a reduction in stress and anxiety (Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M.L. et al, 2012). Students focus, self-esteem, social skills, and their ability to regulate their emotions increase as well (Waterford 2019). Kasson et al. (2017) suggested using a combination of mindfulness-based strategies with traditional behavior interventions in order to increase student on-task behaviors in classroom settings. This study showed a nearly 20% difference of on-task behavior when teachers added mindfulness and self-monitoring practices to their classroom management system. Given that classroom management is critical to student learning, incorporating mindfulness techniques into classrooms can contribute to an environment that is conducive to learning.
Magldi & Park Taylor (2016) suggest that students who learned mindfulness-based conflict resolution strategies are able to use these strategies outside of school with siblings and friends. When students build strong relationships with each other, they will feel more connected and have a positive attitude towards school. Though there is a growing body of evidence to support the integration of mindfulness practices in schools because of the benefits of mindfulness in producing positive learning environment with students more focused, calm and productive, Magldi & Park-Taylor (2016) report that special education classrooms have not experienced that full integration of mindfulness intervention into their curriculum.

**Mindfulness and Social Emotional Learning**

Mindfulness is complementary to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and is related to positive learning outcomes (Browning, 2020). Both focus on helping young people understand and regulate their internal life by encouraging them to learn about their emotions and how to take care of and express themselves in different surroundings when relating to other people.

Browning (2020) suggests that these approaches can help them learn how to handle difficult emotions and better self-regulate and learn to interact with others externally in relationships inside and outside of school. Since relationships and learning are closely intertwined, mindfulness practices can change the brain in ways that support students’ learning and can even change the structure of the brain to enhance attention, regulate emotion and reduce stress (Browning, 2020).

**Conclusion**

The literature highlighted many of the benefits and emerging research shows a connection between increased student well-being and academic success related to mindfulness practices. However, in order to achieve this benefit, teachers must learn and incorporate these
practices into their classroom routines. Not only do mindfulness practices benefit students, these practices have also been found to enhance teachers’ well-being and teaching self-efficacy, while strengthening their ability to manage classroom behavior and maintaining supportive relationships with their students (Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M.L. et al., 2012). The purpose of this study is to show how incorporating these practices into the school day can benefit teachers and students both academically and socially, both inside and outside of school. With the current state of education during a pandemic and the fact that teachers and students have returned to in-person instruction after experiencing drastic changes in their learning environment and personal trauma and hardship, mindfulness and physical activity can serve to support students and teachers as they create a new way of learning. I am especially interested in the impact of physical activity and mindfulness practices in the classroom, specifically with special populations of students, including those with learning disabilities, English language learners, and students who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
Chapter 3: Methods

Multiple research studies have shown that mindfulness practices and physical activity can enhance the overall well-being of elementary students. The benefits of mindfulness training in the classroom include an increase in self-awareness, compassion, introspection, and a reduction in stress and anxiety (Waterford, 2019.). Students focus, self-esteem, social skills, and their ability to regulate their emotions increase as well (Waterford, 2019). There are a number of mental and physical health practices identified that contribute to the overall health and well-being of students. Emerging research shows a connection between increased student well-being and academic success related to mindfulness practices, however there is limited research about how teachers can benefit from these practices as well. There is also a lack of information about how these practices may impact special populations of students, including those with learning disabilities, English language learners, and students who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, more data is needed to take a direct look at how teachers and special populations of students can also benefit from mindfulness and physical activity practices. I designed methods that highlight student’s emotions, thoughts, and voices. I also designed methods so that students could participate in activities they can use beyond the classroom.

Research Question

In this study, responses from both students and teachers were the primary sources of data on the subject. The student reflection questions and teacher interviews were based on the following:

1. How can mindfulness practices and physical activity enhance the overall well-being of elementary students after an extended disruption to learning due to the global pandemic?
Description and Rationale for Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a constructivist worldview. Creswell (2018) states that the constructivist worldview is focused on developing subjective meanings of experiences. I conducted a study using a qualitative approach to focus on the multiple benefits mindfulness and physical activity can bring to a student’s life. The constructivist worldview focuses on how backgrounds shape research participants’ own experiences. The individuals in this study were able to construct their own meanings of situations through discussions and interactions with their peers and myself. Creswell (2018) notes that qualitative researchers rely on the participants' views of the situation that is being studied.

Research Design

This study seeks to understand how mindfulness practices and physical activity can enhance the overall well-being of elementary students after an extended disruption to learning due to a global pandemic. Due to the disrupted educational experiences of students during the school shutdown and hybrid learning environments, students and teachers have been challenged to experience schooling in very different ways. Littlecott et al. (2018) has documented how health regulations have created a different reality in which teachers and students are challenged to build relationships and create a classroom and school environment that must address their trauma and lived experiences. Students across the country have suffered social isolation during the school closures. Worse yet, they were not able to access the proper care and treatment for feelings of anxiety and depression, which has exacerbated the mental health crisis in schools as students return to in-person learning (Youki, 2020). With more students needing support with mental health and well-being, this study seeks to learn which practices and tools positively contribute to the mental and physical well-being of students and teachers post-pandemic.
**Research Site and Entry into the Field**

The research was conducted at Grey Elementary School located in Northern California (to protect the identity of research participants, pseudonyms have been used for the research site and for the participants themselves). It includes a diverse student population with a high percentage of English Language Learners and low-income families. The student population is approximately 62% Hispanic or Latino, 27% White, 2% Filipino, 4% Asian, and 2% African American (CA Department of Education).

One educator at Grey Elementary was recruited to participate in individual interviews. I had a pre-existing relationship with the student participants as their previous student teacher and substitute teacher. In addition, I had a pre-existing working relationship with the teachers and staff at Grey Elementary.

**Participants and Sampling Procedure**

I had a pre-existing relationship with the students in this classroom from previous years. For my collegiate senior year of student teaching, I was placed at Grey Elementary School. Towards the end of my student teaching, I was asked to teach at the school for the remainder of the school year. This allowed me to build relationships with the students at Grey Elementary.

The initial sample for the study included a diverse group of about 30 students from a fifth grade classroom. Participants ranged in age between ten and eleven years. Only students who returned the parent consent form had their pre-survey and written reflections included in data collection for this research. Forms also included a space for students and the teacher to give consent.
Methods

At Grey Elementary, the students were introduced to the study and were asked to participate in daily and weekly reflections on paper. Teachers were also invited to participate with a signed consent form before beginning the study. Prior to the start of the exercises, the students completed a survey which asked them about their experience with mindfulness, how they would describe themselves, and their goals for better health (See Appendix E).

Over the period of this study, I introduced multiple mindfulness practices including braindumps, gratitude lists, breathing, stretching, meditation, grounding, and yoga. I encouraged the students to enter every exercise with an open mind and bodies. At the start of each exercise, I played classical music in the background to promote a sense of calmness in the classroom and to build on what the teacher had already established as a regular classroom practice. After a couple of weeks, the students' energy changed. The students were always very eager to start and looked forward to the next time I would be teaching them. I believe the shift in energy was partly due to the calmness and positivity I tried my hardest to bring to each session. I wanted to ensure I continued to maintain this environment, especially when introducing activities that might have been foreign to some students.

The fifth grade students participated in mindfulness and physical activity exercises twice a week over the course of a month. On the days in which they participated in the mindfulness activities, they went through a series of exercises that focused on breathing and body and mind awareness. One example of an exercise that was performed was called grounding. Before the exercise began, the students participated in deep breath exercises to calm their bodies and minds. The students were then asked to observe their surroundings in the classroom quietly, and identify 3 things they can see, 2 they can hear, and 1 they can feel. Body scan meditation was another
exercise I led. To begin, the students participated in what was called a “brain dump.” They were instructed to jot down any thoughts/ideas without filter or edits. Responses varied from words, sentences, and drawn pictures. After clearing their mind, the students began a body scan meditation. As they closed their eyes, they were asked to pay attention to every part of their body as they inhaled and exhaled slowly.

At the beginning of each lesson, students had the opportunity to identify how they were feeling using a feelings chart. The students returned the chart at the end of each exercise to identify how they were feeling post-exercise. During each exercise, I asked open-ended questions such as, “How did that feel?” and, “When do you think you can use this practice?” With some exercises, I was able to receive written feedback from the students. At the end of each week where I administered the mindfulness practices, I gave the students a reflection paper which consisted of questions about their feelings and experiences in school that particular week.

The students were asked reflection questions (See Appendix G) following the activities at the end of the week. The reflection questions were designed to give insight about their feelings and thoughts following both the mindfulness and physical activity exercises. The students were asked to write about the feelings they experienced throughout the week and asked them to describe all details such as when and where it occurred, who was involved, and what were the consequences of their feelings. For example, one question asked, “Was there a time where you felt distracted this week? Describe when/where this occurred. Were you able to refocus? If so, describe how. If not, what was the consequence of being and staying distracted?” The students were also allowed to answer questions through images that reflected their feelings. Other questions were asked to learn if students applied the practices throughout the week. For example, “How have you applied the mindfulness and physical activity practices learned in class this week
to help you with these situations?” and “Please rate your experience in school this week.” The students turned in their reflections which I collected and analyzed. I set aside ten minutes of time to allow the students who used visuals to explain their thoughts individually. All responses were stored in a locked cabinet at Grey Elementary that only I was able to access.

The fifth grade teacher participating in the interviewers was asked various questions about their students behavior and academic and overall well-being. The interviews took place at Grey Elementary School, from January 2022 through March 2022. The interviews occurred in three separate 20 minute sessions. In the first interview, the participant interviewed was asked to describe their students and classroom which gave me a general understanding of the classroom environment prior to the start of the study. For example, one question asked, “What is most challenging for you as a teacher? How has this changed due to the pandemic?” In the second interview two weeks later, the participants were asked questions about any changes they observed with their students. For example, one question asked “What have you noticed about students’ interactions with classroom peers, peers outside of the classroom, and with you?” At the conclusion of the study, the participants were asked to share changes of the dynamic and environment of their classroom. The educator was also asked, “How might you use these practices in your classroom throughout the school year? What would you do differently?” Each of the three interviews were recorded on my phone which is password protected. I took notes during each interview in which no identifying information was included.

Data Analysis

I collected data through qualitative reflections and open-ended interviews. All of the interviews were recorded on my phone and were later transcribed. Immediately following the interviews, I wrote analytic memos to capture bias, patterns and trends in findings, and to surface
ideas relevant to this study (Maxwell, 2013). By drafting analytic memos following the interviews, I was able to compare and contrast the responses from multiple interviews. Further, the analytic memos provided a starting point for categorization of the data findings. Memo writing allowed me to capture nuances in interviewees’ responses.

Discussions and interviews were coded by hand and categories of data were created (Maxwell, 2013). Using these categories, I created a concept map, which served as a framework for exploring the data to find themes and outliers about participants’ experience with mindfulness and physical education activities in the classroom. Once the concept mapping was established, I organized the data using a spreadsheet to more easily detect patterns in the data set. I then added descriptions of context and themes relevant to the research questions.

Additionally, I captured notes about the student and teacher experience with mindfulness and physical activity in the classroom. I searched for information to develop a description of the participants’ experiences and examine any commonalities amongst how the students were feeling and how the teachers observed their students’ ability to self-regulate using mindfulness exercises and physical activity. I searched for similarities in words or phrases used by the interviewees.

**Validity**

I held a professional relationship with Grey Elementary School staff and administrators, as well as a personal investment in incorporating mindfulness and physical activity into the daily classroom routines. Having seen the benefits of these practices in schools, I understand that this is a personal bias. As an advocate for the health and overall well-being of students, I believe that mindfulness and physical education practice can benefit students beyond the classroom and school environment.
I have experience collaborating with colleagues and students both inside and outside of the classroom. I was a substitute in the fifth grade classroom upon which the participants are drawn for this study. Over the course of two years, I have been able to build a relationship with the students and professional teacher participating in the study. My relationship with my colleagues allowed for a deeper debriefing, to enhance the accuracy and validity of findings and research methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I collected qualitative data by interviewing the professional teacher and gathering information from student reflections. I used triangulation by drawing from multiple viewpoints. This increased the validity, credibility, and accuracy of the study. By taking notes and drawing from concept maps, rich and clear data of the findings were uncovered (Maxwell, 2013).
Chapter 4: Findings

Through an investigation of how mindfulness and somatic-based practices can enhance the overall well-being of elementary students after an extended disruption to learning due to a global pandemic, a few themes emerged: 1) seeing beyond surface behaviors by cultivating self-awareness, 2) letting go and finding gratitude, and 3) students transfer and apply practices in their own lives.

Seeing Beyond Surface Behaviors by Cultivating Self-Awareness

This study began with the goal of developing a better understanding of the classroom dynamic and how students’ home environments may influence their behaviors. It began with an initial interview of the fifth grade teacher at Grey Elementary and in whose classroom the study took place in. Prior to being a fifth grade teacher, Sage was a principal at a nearby elementary school. During her time as a principal, she had started mindfulness initiatives in those schools and now included several practices in her own classroom. At the time of the study, Sage was in the process of introducing music appreciation and using it as a reset during the day. She started with playing music and tracking how long her students could go without talking or moving. She used this as a way to cultivate a practice to calm their minds and bodies. The students worked collectively to surpass their previous record each time they participated in this activity. Sage’s classroom included students who were experiencing homelessness, in foster care, and living in split households, as well as a high percentage of English language learners. She had to navigate teaching students that have experienced significant trauma. Sage shared that her main goal for her classroom this year was to create an environment in which she hoped students would wake up every morning wanting to come into school, especially since many new students had entered her classroom. She really values positive environments and building strong relationships with her
students and colleagues. In one interview, she said, “I wanted to create a place where they found a best friend, or find people that helped them find their place within the school. That was super important to me.”

Sage is able to use mindfulness practices to better understand her students and their behavioral challenges. By participating in the mindfulness practices herself, she is able to understand the positive effects it can have on her students. Since participating in these practices, Sage stated that she has become more self-aware, empathetic, and compassionate. These attributes have enabled her to build strong and effective relationships with her students.

Over the course of my study, it was possible to observe the positive interactions Sage has with her students. When challenges arise, Sage approaches the situation with open eyes, ears, and arms. Her own emotional regulation allows her to effectively manage student misbehavior. I have learned from Sage how important it is to model and practice mindfulness myself in order to understand my own emotions, develop strong teacher-student relationships, and establish a positive classroom environment.

Rediscovering the Love for Learning After Inconsistencies During the Pandemic

Sage faced several challenges in her classroom this year due to the current phase of the pandemic. When asked what her biggest challenge has been so far, Sage responded:

The most challenging part of my job is getting students to be compassionate towards others, as well as settling into routines. Many of my students spent the last two years with inconsistent learning environments due to the pandemic, so my work this year has focused on helping them understand the value of learning, to love learning, and to build good study habits. I have to prepare them for middle school, both academically and socially.
Sage also talked about strongly advocating and supporting her students at a time where they might not be receiving that from their parents at home. Sage noted that many of her students' parents were not as involved in their child’s academics. As her students are approaching middle school, she wanted to be sure she helped her students identify their own strengths and weaknesses in order to help them succeed in her classroom and in their own life.

**Transcending the Challenges of Peer Relationships**

One major challenge that presented in her classroom this year were the relationships between her students. The current pandemic has resulted in many students not having full socialization for two years, which has affected peer interactions. She noticed that many of her students could use work on being empathetic—understanding how their words and actions affect others. There was an instance where a student named Alex told her peer that she could not join her group because she did not like her. This student's body language indicated she was feeling hurt as she lowered her head and walked away from Alex. Seeing her reaction didn’t affect Alex. In fact, Alex proceeded to talk negatively about the other student to the rest of the group. This scenario continues to play out in schools, as students are returning to in-person learning and are expected to acclimate back to the structure and routines of school and peer relationships.

Sage had been teaching her students how to appropriately express their emotions without any need to be mean doing so. The students in this classroom were struggling to solve their problems between each other without exploding. As such, Sage used mindfulness practices such as a tool to get her classroom to a neutral place. Sage noted immediately after lunch was when her students were the most unsettled and agitated. Sage often administered her mindfulness practices during this time to get her students refocused as a collective group. She uses mindful drawing, guided visualization, meditation, and breathing exercises in her classroom. For
example, her students would participate in something she called mindfulness drawing. Sage explained that during mindfulness drawing, she would turn music on and instruct the students to draw a pattern or design. Sage shared that instructing the students to draw designs and patterns was an intentional way of getting the students to stray away from drawing objects like characters or animals. Instead, the students had to focus and be more mindful with their illustrations.

**Beyond Surface Behaviors.** Specifically, at the time of the study, a group of four girls were struggling with their relationship inside and outside of the classroom. One student in particular had a traumatic childhood experience which affected her relationships with peers and adults. Sage shared that Alex struggled with communicating and expressing her feelings. She often internalized everything, which led to explosive episodes in the classroom. For example, there was an instance where Sage was leading a math lesson and Alex left her seat to pass inappropriate notes to every single student in the classroom. The notes consisted of negative sentences such as “I hate you,” “I’m never talking to you again,” and “You're not my friend.” Alex's unfortunate childhood situation had changed her approach to relationships with all adults. Sage expressed to me that it had been quite the journey to build a trusting relationship between her and Alex. Sage stated:

> It has nothing to do with my teaching, or something I've said. I can't take it personally, because that's just how she's processing past trauma. She’s just like, I've been wronged by an adult, so I'm shutting you out.

Sage understands that Alex's outbursts are never to be taken personally. At the beginning of the episodes, Alex would declare, “Don't talk to me, you're the worst teacher ever, I don't even want to go to this school anymore.” Alex's past trauma led her to escalate quickly whenever anything occurred outside of her control that she perceived as negative. Sage often explained to
Alex, “When you're ready, I'm over at my desk, just let me know.” Sage never made Alex feel alone. Sage was always there to support the needs of Alex, even though Alex did not always see it this way. Regularly after each episode, Alex would eventually come around within a couple of minutes. Sage shared that Alex would approach her desk with sincerity and express, “Actually, I love you. Do you want to hang out with [me and] my dog?” She would also often bring Sage a note with remorse that read, “I like you.” Sage made sense of Alex's explosive episodes by describing them as her defense mechanism. Sage shared:

> With everything she's gone through as a little kid has just been like, either you're doing exactly what I want, or like, I'm shutting you out, like, this wall is coming up, and we're not talking and you're not my friend anymore. But really, that's when she needed me the most to be like, hey, still here for you.

Knowing she was having these behaviors and giving her the time to process these episodes was a part of her healing process.

The relationship Alex had with a group of three other girls in the classroom became the biggest challenge of Sage’s teaching year. Sage noted that at this age, girls become very cliquey and exclusive. Alex and the other girls had a strange relationship. Some days the girls got along and seemed to be friends, while other days were filled with arguing and a lot of tears. These three girls are aware of the difficulties Alex faces with her relationships. Sage stated that the other girls take advantage of and place blame on Alex when they were just as involved. At the beginning of this study, these four students were not allowed to spend any time at recess or lunch with each other, as enforced by the teacher, counselor, and principal. Since the beginning of the year, Sage was working with both the counselor and principal to give Alex (and the other girls) the support and guidance they needed to be successful in the classroom.
Letting Go and Finding Gratitude: A Case Study

The students were given a mindfulness pre-survey with the hope of better understanding how the students described themselves, their goals for better health, and their overarching mindfulness practices. On a 5-point scale, with 1 being inexperienced and 5 being knowledgeable, the students were asked to rate how knowledgeable they were about mindfulness. The majority of the students rated themselves a 3. This showed that the students knew what mindfulness was and could hopefully become more knowledgeable about the topic.

When asked about what distracts them the most, students indicated that they found themselves easily distracted when they felt stressed, overwhelmed, or tired. The students found their own thoughts and noises to be the most distracting. A few students indicated that they were distracted by other factors, which included their toys, the weather and their health.

When asked to describe themselves, it was revealed that most students used multiple words to describe themselves. Among the words most used to describe themselves were worried, stressed, tired, lazy, daydreamer, and distracted. A few students chose words with both positive and negative connotations to describe themselves. And while most students were familiar with the word choices, there were a few occasions where students asked for clarification and examples of the adjectives. Once clarification was provided, they were able to easily answer the questions.
Through classroom observations, it had been possible to observe how low the students' energy levels were. And Sage had similarly shared how the majority of the students were stressed, worried, and tired. In the survey, 60% of the students indicated that one of their goals was to feel less stressed, while a majority of students indicated they wished to feel better about themselves.
Each day before leading a mindfulness activity, Students were given the opportunity to share feelings they were experiencing using a chart. The feelings chart contained cartoon characters displaying a variety of facial expressions. The students were encouraged to select as many feelings as they were experiencing. The feelings chart was designed to help students become self-aware of the feelings they were experiencing. Figure 4 shows an example of the data collected from the first day of administering the feelings chart. The students expressed a wide range of emotions. The hope was to increase the percentage of students feeling overall happiness, feeling proud of themselves, and feeling hopeful for the future by the end of the study.
"When I'm Angry" I can Get it Out: Braindumps

'Braindumps' were introduced to the students as an exercise that would help them take all of their overwhelming thoughts and turn it into something productive. The students were encouraged to write or draw whatever was on their mind (thoughts, ideas, memories, or lists) onto a piece of paper without any edits or filters. After introducing this activity, the students' faces lit up. The students asked questions such as, “Wait, so I can write anything?,” “What if I have negative thoughts?” and, “What if I don’t have anything on my mind?” The students were again encouraged to freely express what they were feeling and had the option to communicate through drawn images.
According to the data, 85% of the students' braindumps contained positive words and drawings. The other 15% contained responses that could be considered negative and possibly concerning. This data is consistent with what Sage has reported about how she observed students and their dispositions and behaviors in the classroom.

After participating in the braindump, the students were asked to describe how it felt and when they might be able to use it. The majority of the students responded that they would use the braindump when they are feeling sad or overwhelmed with their own thoughts. The majority of the students were fully engaged and displayed positive attitudes towards the activity. The students wrote down words, phrases, and even some extremely detailed pictures. As students were wrapping up, they were asked, “How did that feel?” I invited the students to shout out their
responses. The students said it felt calming, relaxing, sleepy, and made them less stressed. They were also asked, “When do you think you can use this practice?” One student said, “I could use it when I have too many thoughts on my mind or when I’m at home when my brother is making me angry.” Alex shared that she could use this practice when she does not feel like she is able to express her feelings vocally. It was a pleasant surprise that Alex was able to identify that this mindfulness practice is something she could use on a daily basis. After administering the feelings chart a second time, the majority of the students selected that they were feeling happy, interested, and hopeful.

*Figure 7 Braindump experience*
Shifting with Gratitude

At one point during the research, Sage noted that Alex and the aforementioned three female classmates were having a tough time inside and outside of the classroom. Sage explained that the issues between this group often negatively affected the energy of the entire classroom, but as soon as it was announced that we would be conducting another mindfulness activity it was clear to us both that the students’ attitude and attention shifted immediately and positively. One of the students even asked, “Can you play the same classical music from last time?” Taking into consideration what Sage had just shared, it was interesting to see how Alex and the other girls in that group responded. After collecting the feelings chart from the students, it was possible to notice that Alex selected feelings such as irritated, lonely, and sarcastic from the introductory feelings chart.
The next step was for the students to create a gratitude list, for which the students were asked to identify about ten to fifteen things for which they felt grateful. In reading through the students' responses, several themes emerged. Based on the data analysis, the responses were grouped into four categories. The first category—Basic Needs— included responses such as shelter, food, water, and student’s material possessions. The next category—Home/Family, included references to guardians, siblings, and other family members. School related references included names of teachers, students, and other staff.

Out of 145 responses, the data showed that the 46% of students were grateful for their family, 25% of the students wrote down names of their teachers and Grey Elementary, 17% of the students wrote down the names of their friends, and 12% of the students were grateful for basic needs such as life, a place to live, food, and health. After the students finished their gratitude list, they were asked how it felt and when they might be able to use it. One student

Figure 9 Gratitude list
shared, “It made me feel happy and I was surprised at how many things I feel grateful for.”

Another student shared, “I wrote down so many things that I didn't even realize I felt grateful for before.”

They were also asked when they might be able to use this mindfulness practice. Alex answered, “When I am feeling sad and need to be reminded of what I can be happy about.”

The students were invited to share their gratitude lists with their peers if they felt inclined. There was an interaction between Alex and the other girls who were experiencing a lot of friendship turmoil. Alex decided she wanted to share her list with these girls.

*Figure 10 Alex’s gratitude list*

Based on her attitude, it appeared that Alex was proud to share what she wrote down and wanted her peers to know. She wrote that she was grateful for the earth, life, God, home, food, projects, math tests, her teacher, and even the names of the other girls she was having difficulties
with that week. As the lesson was closing, more students started sharing their gratitude list with each other with enthusiastic and positive attitudes. After giving the students the feelings chart a second time, the majority of the students (including Alex) selected the feeling of hopeful and happy.

Students were later given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences with mindfulness in the classroom and their feelings throughout the week. The reflection paper included a five-point scale in which the students rated their experience in school that particular week, as well as reflection questions.

One of the reflection questions asked, “How have you applied the mindfulness and somatic-based practices learned in class this week to help you with situations where you felt frustrated or unhappy?” Student responses included, “I used the braindump at home before I started my homework to clear my head,” and “I showed my mom the gratitude list me and my sisters could do when we are feeling sad.”

“My Body Feels Calm”: Mind and Body Connection

The next few mindfulness activities introduced to the students included deep breathing, body scan meditations, and grounding. To start this exercise, the students participated in deep breath exercises to calm their bodies and minds. The students were invited to close their eyes and focus on how they were feeling. At the sound of a bell, the students inhaled for three seconds, following a three second exhale. The students completed this exercise for a few minutes. After deep breathing for one minute, the students began a body scan meditation. On a piece of paper, they were asked to identify which parts of their body felt sore or tense. After they wrote down their response, they were invited to close their eyes and begin their deep breathing once again. After a few minutes, the students were asked, “How did that feel?” One student responded, “My
body feels calm.” Another student mentioned, “My body feels happy and light.” In one of the weekly reflections, students mentioned that they used this practice during multiple instances during class in which they felt stressed. Alex shared a story about the time she felt overwhelmed during a math test the day following the meditation exercise. She expressed that she took a few minutes to close her eyes and breathe slowly. Taking this time to herself allowed her to take a step back and refocus.

**Students Transfer and Apply Practices in Their Own Lives**

Over the period of this study, multiple mindfulness practices were introduced, including brain dumps, gratitude lists, breathing, stretching, meditation, grounding, and yoga. It was possible to observe that students’ energy changed as they learned the various routines. The students grew increasingly eager to start and looked forward to the next time I would be teaching them. The shift in energy was partly due to the calmness and positivity brought to each session. This complemented Sage’s efforts as she works tirelessly to create a safe, healthy, and positive classroom environment.

Once students learned these exercises, they began using them on their own during various situations where they felt stressed or anxious. Consistent throughout student responses and reflections was how they reported mindfulness practices helping them feel calmer, less stressed, more present, and happier in their minds and bodies. Based on the weekly reflection papers from the students, the data revealed that students incorporated these practices into their daily lives. For example, Sage also reported that her students were showing kindness towards each other for the weeks after leading the mindfulness and somatic-based exercises. Sage observed situations where Alex used the brain dumps and breathing techniques to calm herself down when she was feeling overwhelmed. Sage also reported that Alex was more conscious of her words and actions
towards her peers. Sage now has a plan to incorporate the introduced mindfulness and somatic-based practices to her daily schedule with students to further support their mental health, peer relationships, and nurturing learning environment.

**Conclusion**

This research study had one question it sought to answer: How can mindfulness and somatic-based practices enhance the overall well-being of elementary students after an extended disruption to learning due to the global pandemic? The findings of this study demonstrate a positive effect on students’ body awareness, self-awareness, and overall mental health. The data from this chapter indicates that incorporating mindfulness practices into an elementary school classroom routine can benefit children’s overall well-being and positive peer relationships. The theme that was consistent throughout student reflections and behaviors was how mindfulness and somatic-based practices help them feel calm in their minds and bodies.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of the study show the importance of mindfulness practices in the classroom to support the overall well-being of students by creating the conditions for 1) teachers to see beyond student behaviors, 2) allowing students to let go and find gratitude, and 3) equipping students to transfer and apply these practices into their own lives. In the following discussion, I will examine the role mindfulness practices, nurturing environments, physical activity and embodied learning in the classroom play in promoting overall well-being of students.

Additionally, I will discuss how my findings align with prior research in the field. Finally, I will discuss the themes that emerged in the research, the limitations of the study, and possible directions for future research.

Both the literature review and my research findings identified that mindfulness practices support students mentally and physically. The findings of this research closely align with the existing research on mindfulness learning. This research further underlined the importance of incorporating mindfulness and somatic-based learning to help students succeed in and outside of the classroom. The research literature has shown that physical activity can help to develop bodily awareness, as a necessary and critical skill students need in the classroom (McClelland et al., 2015). It can also contribute to improved self-control and mental focus by using physical movements to train the body and brain to work together (McClelland et al., 2015; Donnelly & Lambourne, 2011). Other research has shown a correlation between mindfulness practices and the increase in attention, responsiveness, calmness, and focus ability (Magaldi, & Park-Taylor, 2016).

The existing literature also discusses the importance of acknowledging the influence of the students' background as well as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to their
behavior in the classroom (Department of Education, 2022). For some students, childhood and post-pandemic events have been extremely traumatic.

**Implications for the Literature**

Similar to the findings in the literature review, this research supported the overall effectiveness of mindfulness practices for students. In particular, this study revealed the benefits for both students and teachers, during a time when their well-being is front and center for educators and policy-makers alike. In fact, the recent challenges brought on by the pandemic have contributed to an increase in funding to support the implementation of these practices.

As teachers across the country reported experiencing increases in challenging student behaviors upon returning to in-person learning, this study revealed a need for teachers to see beyond those student behaviors. Additionally, the use of activities that support students’ ability to let go of the trauma and negativity and to identify what they are grateful for, contributed to a palpable change in student attitudes and behaviors. One of the goals of this study was to understand how students might use the practices independently and apply them in various contexts. As more and more educators begin integrating these practices into their classroom routines, we can anticipate a need for further research on specific mindfulness and somatic-based practices and their effectiveness.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

Through my research, I have learned the importance of student's mental and physical health and how it can affect their overall-well-being. This study highlights the skills mindfulness and somatic-based learning offer that gives students the opportunity to improve their peer relationships and teachers the ability to see beyond behaviors. The findings suggest that the implication of mindfulness and somatic-based learning is essential for students' health, the
environment that they learn in, and teacher’s perception of students.

**Classrooms**

As shown in the findings from this research, students may benefit from daily practice in mindfulness with somatic-based learning. The student participants in this study exhibited positive results with just ten to twenty minutes of practice a day. By encouraging them to be intentional about naming their emotions and listing what they are grateful for, students in this study were able to let go of their negative emotions that interfered with their ability to focus, be present, and engage in positive peer relations. Making mindfulness a part of a classroom routine will familiarize students with these practices and give them the tools they need to independently apply practices inside and outside of the classroom. Also important is ensuring that teachers have input and flexibility on which mindfulness or somatic-based practice work best for their students.

**Schools**

School districts will find that implementing mindfulness and somatic based learning practices require relatively few resources. School leaders should secure adequate time for teacher training and planning for systematic integration of mindfulness and somatic-based activities.

This will be especially important as teachers contend with the ubiquitous tension between caring for the whole child, and focusing on academics due to pressures of national and local accountability systems. School communities can benefit in many ways when students have the opportunity to learn and utilize practices that improve their mental health, physical health, and overall well-being.

**Policy**

The growing interest in supporting students’ mental health and well-being can be used as a lever for policy makers to prioritize funding for research in mindfulness practices and somatic-
based approaches to learning in schools. Additional funding for research can contribute to
developing an evidence base for these approaches across different contexts and with diverse
student populations. In the meantime, parents and local elected officials can advocate for these
practices to be included in their children’s schools, while our society continues to move forward
from the ill effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations of the Study

There were various limitations this study presented while collecting and analyzing data.
First, this research focused on students in one specific classroom. Second, there was only one
teacher participant to collect data from. As such, the data lacked the perspectives of other staff
members, including the school counselor who worked with some of the students in this
classroom. This limited the feedback on how effective the mindfulness and somatic-based
learning was on students’ behavior and relationships in the classroom as observed by other adults
who had relationships with the student participants. Data collection of a more diverse population
of students and staff would have influenced the findings. The data from the study shows the
change in student behavior and peer relationships at school. Third, I did not include the
perspectives of parents. Collecting information from students' parents could have provided data
surrounding potential changes in student behavior and relationships at home as a result of in-
school mindfulness practices.

Another critical limitation was the amount of time available to conduct research. The
mindfulness and somatic based activities took place over the course of four weeks. If the study
was conducted over a longer period of time, more evidence could have possibly been collected
for data. Another limitation I faced was creating time to conduct the activities. During the time of
the study, students were participating in the California English Language Proficiency
Assessments, which resulted in smaller class sizes, less oral feedback, and fewer written reflections from students. This affected the data collected and analyzed as I was unable to receive important feedback from specific students who were working on improving their peer relationships.

My own bias and positionality were also a limitation. I had a long-term relationship with the students in the classroom as their student teacher. While the students knew there were no grades attached to participation and that their reflections and responses would not alter my perceptions of them, the findings could have been different if there were a less-familiar researcher conducting the study.

**Directions For Future Research**

To fully understand the effectiveness of mindfulness and somatic-based learning practices, future research should include a larger and more diverse sample of participants, such as students and teachers from different classrooms, specifically students with Individualized Education Programs. Future research should explore the effectiveness of mindfulness and somatic-based programs for teachers to examine how mindfulness affects teachers, their relationships with their students, and whether teachers’ mindfulness and somatic-based practices affect their students’ behavior and peer relationships. Additionally, this study might be replicated in other schools as well as longitudinally to better understand the long-term effects of these practices on students well-being across various contexts. The perspectives of parents should also be included when determining the effectiveness of mindfulness practices at home.

**Conclusion**

The research outlined in this study demonstrates the relationship between mindfulness and somatic-based practices and the effects they have on a student’s overall well-being. The
The purpose of this research was to determine how mindfulness and somatic-based learning practices give teachers the ability to see beyond student behaviors, help students to let go of negative relationships and find gratitude, and how to give students the tools they need to transfer and apply practices in their own lives. Through student responses and reflection, this study highlights the value of mindfulness practices, which should be shared in classrooms and schools everywhere to ensure that all students have access to such practices and their benefits.

The findings from the student participants and their teacher illustrated that these practices can contribute to the development of a nurturing learning environment. When teachers understand and utilize mindfulness and somatic-based practices, they are able to shift their focus on students’ behavior to understanding the students experience and perspective. This contributes to creating a nurturing learning environment where all students feel comfortable sharing their ideas, thoughts, and feelings towards mindfulness and somatic-based practices. With more application of these practices on a daily basis, students are more likely to transfer and apply them in their own lives.

These practices, when integrated regularly into the curriculum, have the ability to improve student’s peer relationships, self-awareness, self-esteem, and social skills, thus improving academic achievement. It also has the potential to provide students various tools to manage stress and improve their ability to regulate their own emotions. Mindfulness and somatic-based learning can help students adapt new habits into their lives that promote overall well-being. This thesis proposes the regular implementation of mindfulness and somatic-based learning practices into classroom routines to ensure student’s overall well-being.
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APPENDIX A: Sample Interview Questions
Interview 1

1. What is your goal for your students this year?
2. Describe your current classroom dynamic.
3. Please share what you would like to improve regarding the manner in which students interact with you, each other, and others outside of the classroom.
4. How would you describe your experience with/or knowledge of mindfulness?
5. What is most challenging for you as a teacher? How did/has this changed due to the pandemic?

Interview 2

1. Describe any changes you have observed in students’ behavior during the past two weeks.
2. What have you noticed about students' interactions with:
   ○ classroom peers?
   ○ peers outside of the classroom?
   ○ (you) the teacher?
3. Describe any instances where you observed students lose focus/attention and attempt to get back on task. What did you notice?
4. Describe any changes in your classroom dynamics/environment during the past two weeks.
5. Which exercises might you integrate into your classroom routines post-post pandemic? Why?
Interview 3

1. Describe any changes you have observed in students’ behavior during the past two weeks.

2. What have you noticed about students' interactions with:
   a. classroom peers?
   b. peers outside of the classroom?
   c. (you) the teacher?

3. Describe any instances where you observed students lose focus/attention and attempt to get back on task. What did you notice?

4. Describe any changes in your classroom dynamics/environment during the past two weeks.

5. How might you use these practices in your classroom throughout the school year? What would you do differently?
# Mindfulness Survey

**When do you find yourself most easily distracted?**
- [ ] In conversations
- [ ] During class
- [ ] Doing homework
- [ ] When I am tired
- [ ] When I am stressed or overwhelmed

**What distracts you the most?**
- [ ] Noises
- [ ] Technology
- [ ] Friends
- [ ] Family
- [ ] My own thoughts
- [ ] Other: ________________________________

- [ ] Other: ________________________________

**Which words describe you?**
- [ ] Worry
- [ ] Stress
- [ ] Tired
- [ ] Lazy
- [ ] Anxious
- [ ] Fearful
- [ ] Rushed
- [ ] Organized

**How knowledgeable are you about mindfulness?**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Inexperienced</th>
<th>Aware</th>
<th>Knowledgeable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What is your goal for better health?**
- [ ] To feel better about myself
- [ ] To be happier
- [ ] To feel less stressed
- [ ] To have more control over my own emotions
- [ ] To have more self awareness

**Do you have any questions about mindfulness?**
APPENDIX C: Feelings Chart
MY FEELINGS CHART
TODAY I AM FEELING:

- Happy
- Interested
- Proud
- Hopeful
- Playful
- Sad
- Lonely
- Ashamed
- Bored
- Ignored
- Fear
- Anxious
- Worried
- Overwhelmed
- Rejected
- Disappointed
- Avoidant
- Judgemental
- Hesitant
- Loathing
- Angry
- Frustrated
- Irritated
- Sarcastic
- Devastated
APPENDIX D: Sample Reflection Questions
1. Was there a time you felt distracted this week?
   • Describe when/where this occurred.
   • Were you able to refocus? If so, describe how. If not, what was the consequence of being and staying distracted?

2. Was there a time when you became upset or felt frustrated or unhappy?
   • Describe when/where this occurred. Who was involved?
   • Were you able to overcome this feeling? If so, how? If not, what was the consequence of being upset, frustrated, or unhappy?

3. How have you applied the mindfulness and physical activity practices learned in class this week to help you with these situations?

4. Please rate your experience in school this week:
   
   1      2      3      4      5
   Very Poor  Poor  Fair  Good  Very Good