

**Data Analysis and Action Plan:**  
**Relating Mindfulness and Student Stress at the Upper Elementary Level**

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## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Stressors**

The main focus of this action research project was to determine how well mindfulness would improve students' ability to cope with stressors. A key theme in analyzing data then would be to see what stressors students experienced, in order to understand the program's impacts. Interesting to note was that students listed a wide variety of stressors, with few repeats among different participants. The most common stressor which five students reported on their final questionnaires was fighting at home, either between themselves and a family member or between parents. Recorded in the researcher's field notes during the study, fighting parents also came up on more than one occasion as a stressful situation. Most listed stressors on the final questionnaire however, were school-related, including taking tests, the expected workload, speaking in front of others, and making friends or meeting new people. One student admitted to feeling stressed "all the time." Another commented, "When I feel stressed is when I dug a hole too deep in missing assignments." When naming reasons for anxiety during the Mindful Listening lesson, the field notes for the day listed that students mainly shared school-related ideas.

### **Mindful Breathing**

Of the entire presented program, the lesson on mindful breathing appeared to resonate most with participants. Called the "Core Practice" (Hawn Foundation, 2011), this lesson taught students to focus on the physical act of breathing to calm their minds. 14 out of the 17 students who journaled that day gave positive feedback about this lesson and of the positive feedback, half of the students gave applications for situations in which to use mindful breathing. For example, one student said, "Today we did mindful breathing and it really helped me calm down

and stop worrying about stuff so I think I'm going to do this a lot." Another student commented, "Sometimes, I get very angry and I never know how to calm down. Sometimes I also get very sad... I usually just go in my room and lay down, but that doesn't help because my bedroom door doesn't lock." On the final questionnaire, nine out of the 18 total participants in the research project expressed that they used or would use mindful breathing outside of the class sessions. One student talked about being nervous and using the breathing exercise. Another student shared the frustration of trying to fly a kite and explained, "Instead of being frustrated I took a minute to breath [sic] then everything was solved."

When analyzing student journal responses based solely on lesson applications and references to stress, the mindful breathing lesson also stood out. A key phrase students used when expressing how to apply their knowledge was that the program helped them "calm down." Of those students who used this key phrase, it occurred most in the journal entries referencing the mindful breathing technique. Of the students who journaled about their stress levels throughout the program, half recorded that the lessons helped bring their anxiety down. The lesson most commonly associated with this improvement in stress levels was the mindful breathing activity. One student recorded, "My stress level was kinda [sic] high cause [sic] I don't want homework cause [sic] I don't think I'll get done in time and all the negative [sic] answers come to me so it helped a lot." According to the researcher's field notes, students journaled longer during this lesson than the others, demonstrating they had more connections and thoughts related to this activity than some of the other exercises.

### **Benefits and Drawbacks of Mindup to Impact Students' Ability to Handle Stress**

A major benefit of using the Mindup curriculum to teach students about how they can handle stress is that overall, students showed enjoyment of the program. When examining

journal entries, only four students did not find the lessons useful, and described the activities as “weird,” “boring,” “didn’t enjoy,” or said they “didn’t help me.” The other journal entries that commented on the curriculum were much more positive in nature. Common words associated with the lessons were “fun,” “easy,” “helped,” claims that the participant “felt good,” and that the lessons led to them being able to “calm down.” On the final questionnaire, 17 participants specifically commented on how they liked the program. One participant said, “It helps a lot and I think it can help a lot of people out.” Other comments shared included, “I think it is going to help me a lot when trying to calm down,” and “I thought it was great and it helped a lot with stress.” 12 participants also marked that they used mindfulness when performing a task in front of other people.

While students had many ideas to contribute during the lessons on how to apply the learning to their lives, most participants did not seem to have any background knowledge on using the techniques. An anomaly to this trend were two students who have engaged in formal counseling or therapy sessions in the past. Their journals spoke of previous training with the concepts by their mental healthcare providers. They had a positive outlook on the program because they had seen the success of some of the techniques in the past. An added benefit of the MindUp curriculum then appears to be that it aligns with the professional training students may be receiving elsewhere.

While every lesson dealt with mindfulness, which can be a powerful tool to combat stressors, not every lesson directly addressed anxiety and how that particular mindful activity could be used in a stressful situation. For example, the Mindful Smelling and Mindful Tasting lessons were designed to lead to a discussion of focused senses, not direct application to the purpose of the study. Other lessons that had little student feedback on the usefulness of the

lesson in terms of helping with stress were the Mindful Listening and Mindful Movement lessons. Only two students made a lesson application for the listening lesson and only one student for the movement lesson. While the applications were substantive, including listening to a substitute teacher, mindful listening when it is hard to concentrate, and controlling movements by walking in the hallway, there just weren't many of them.

### **Action Plan**

Because there was a subset of students who expressed feelings of stress on a number of occasions throughout the study, I believe there is still a case for the explicit teaching of stress management strategies. With the emerging themes of this study in mind, however, there are a few changes I plan to make in the future.

### **Lesson Selection and Focus**

While the back cover of the MindUp teacher's guide states that each lesson will, in addition to several other benefits, "...build resilience to stress..." (Hawn Foundation, 2011), that point is not always clearly defined. Based on the feedback received from students and my own field notes, I would narrow the 15 lessons down to eight or nine if stress management was my main focus. The lessons I would keep are based on how the brain works, mindful awareness and breathing, mindful listening, and attitude. While teaching those lessons, I would also make sure to reiterate the themes of training our brains to work for us, not against us and the direct link the mindfulness activities have on helping with anxiety. I think the broader context of mindfulness is helpful in teaching students about why stress management techniques work and completing the entire program would likely further benefit students, but if pressed for time, some lessons seem to have made a deeper impact than others. For example, when reviewing the field notes taken during the course of the study, certain topics like mindful breathing and how the brain works

easily took close to an hour to teach because there was a lot of depth to those lessons. Other activities like mindful movement, smelling, or tasting were best taught combined with another lesson since they didn't have a lot in terms of a strong discussion component.

### **Consistency of Delivery**

After completing the study within the time constraints of the semester, I can see the future benefit of specifying the days of the week and times that the lessons will take place. As a change in schedule could be an added stressor to many students, knowing ahead of time when a MindUp lesson would be occurring could help students be mentally prepared to receive the instruction and practice it as intended during the lesson. Students may also be able to journal more thoughtfully after the completion of a lesson, knowing there is scheduled time for that portion of the activity as well. While during the study students were given a long list of prompts to help them freely journal as they wished in the interest of data collection, I would only post the suggested prompts for each lesson in the future. The suggested lesson prompts are much more specific to the actual lesson and activities done in class, and encourage students to more deeply reflect on their learning. I would also work to fit in the curriculum during the first half of the year so students have ample time to practice and apply the strategies they learned with me before leaving the classroom. The deeper the strategies are embedded, the more likely students will be to use them.

The preferred method of delivery for MindUp would be in-person because I think the group discussions are what made the program successful. Students would piggy-back off of each other's comments and based on what they said, allowed many teachable moments to take place. For example, I have marked in my field notes a day when the discussion led to a side conversation about whether or not an unmindful person is a "bad" person. While many of the

activities could be posted online for virtual learning such as asking students to engage in breathing techniques, learn about the brain, think about happy memories, and so on, the community created throughout the program would be lost. If students were required to attend virtual classes synchronously, that would help, but my district does not require that students attend office hours or live meetings.

## **Reference**

Hawn Foundation (2011). *The mindup curriculum: Brain-focused strategies for learning-and living*. Scholastic.