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## The Mindful Child: Supporting Children's Development Through Mindfulness

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The Mindful Child: Supporting Children's Development Through Mindfulness

Erica Flesher

August 10, 2020

Thesis Advisors: Melissa Jean and Andrew Olendzki

**Dedication**

To my family,

Thank you for your constant support in all I do. You cultivated the confidence I have to always pursue my passions. Because of you, my journey into mindfulness and higher education was possible.

To my mentor Nancy Van Fleet,

Your guidance and teachings throughout the years have inspired and nourished me. I will likely never master mindfulness, but I have experienced through you that walking the path is where our true spirit lies. Thank you for your peaceful presence and essence.

### **Abstract**

This study is about mindfulness and its impact on the development of children. The three developmental categories this project will be addressing are cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. These developmental categories will be supported by the following mindful rooted practices; contemplative walking, meditation, and mindful communication. Mindfulness is an important practice to incorporate into the lives of children because it can be used in various forms and fashions as a tool towards developmentally targeting and supporting the whole child in early adolescence. My findings are that incorporating mindfulness activities and practices into the life of children directly impacts their physical, social-emotional, spiritual, and cognitive health in a positive way. My findings suggest that mindfulness is a tool that parents and educators from all backgrounds can bring to their children to support their growth.

*Keywords:* mindfulness, education, child development, meditation, physical, social-emotional, cognitive

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### **The Mindful Child: Supporting Children's Development Through Mindfulness**

This paper will be discussing how mindfulness-based practices and activities cultivate the growth of children's social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development. A range of mindfulness-rooted practices such as mindful movement, meditation, and mindful communication will be explored as support systems for the development of the whole child through these categories. The practices can be used as tools towards developmentally targeting the whole child in early adolescence. The first section of the paper will be exploring the importance of each developmental category (social-emotional, cognitive, physical) and its relevancy to children. The second section of this paper will introduce three mindfulness-based practices. These include mindful communication, mindful movement, and meditation. It will also explain how each practice directly supports the developmental categories above. The third section will include the rationale and conclusion.

The literature discussed in this paper will be focused on elementary-aged children. This age range is traditionally six through eleven years of age. Children at this age are in need of mindfulness-based practices in their daily lives to help support, grow, and improve their social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive development. Classrooms across the country are experiencing a rise of anxiety, depression, and bullying in their students. Mindfulness can be an important tool to counteract the rise of negative school culture. Incorporating mindfulness into the classroom can have a ripple effect on these issues seen in schools today.

John Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (as cited in Purser, 2015). Mindfulness is cultivated by the practice of paying attention and it is rooted in the Eastern tradition of Buddhism. In the early Buddhist context mindfulness holds a great connection with the mind in

that of recall and memory as well as an evaluation of the way the mind sees and holds its thoughts. This is practiced in a non-judgmental and un-biased fashion to support non-clinging while putting an emphasis on the present moment. Trained awareness challenges the individual to recognize one's body, emotions, and mind without becoming distracted or losing focus. Here the mind begins to develop insight, or to see things as they are. This state is "characterized by what the Buddha calls the three marks of existence; all reality is characterized as impermanent, selfless, and conducive to suffering" (Lobel, 2017, p. 217). When reality is viewed through this lens the individual can then begin to let go, accept, and live in the present moment. Accepting impermanence and that suffering is a part of life is when non-suffering begins. This is what roots the individual in existence.

Mindfulness is also known as the path to liberation and awakening. The Buddha states "this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of *nibbana*, namely the four foundations of mindfulness" (Goldstein, 2016, p.xv). It is the pathway we may all walk down to land in self-knowing and grow our capacity for awareness. Mindfulness liberates and clears the mind to greater knowing.

When integrated mindfulness can function effectively on various developmental categories. Mindful individuals live fully in the present, and in doing so become more engaged with the reality around them. "When cultivated and refined, mindfulness can function effectively on every level, from the individual to the corporate, the societal, the political, and the global" (Zinn, 2005, p. 11). Mindfulness directly impacts the child by cultivating them into an individual who is aware of themselves and others, accepts change and shifts in their world, and carries out their actions based on a foundation of love and kindness. It has the capacity to directly impact

cognitive function, physical development, and social-emotional skills. The shift of children practicing mindfulness in early adolescence ignites a domino effect that can be seen spreading across schools, changing the culture and environment to become more accepting, compassionate, and safe as children are taught to view their peers through a lens of connectivity. Living in unity and interconnectedness causes issues such as bullying, depression, and anxiety to decrease.

Integrating mindfulness into the daily lives of children is an important part of their development.

Zinn (2005) states,

The world needs all its flowers, just as they are, and even though they bloom for only the briefest of moment, which we call a lifetime. It is our job to find out one by one and collectively what kind of flowers we are, and to share our unique beauty with the world in the precious time that we have, and to leave the children and grandchildren a legacy of wisdom and compassion embodied in the way we live, in our institutions, and in our honoring of the interconnectedness, at home and around the world (p. 16).

It is the job of educators and parents to teach children the value of their special gifts and the unique beauty they bring to the world. Through the unity and connectivity mindfulness brings to the community children will grow in an environment of compassion that supports the child in their home life, classroom, and more.

### **Categories of Development**

The three developmental categories that will be evaluated are social-emotional development, physical development, and cognitive function as they pertain to the period of early adolescence. This section will explain the importance of each developmental category to children's development and the role of relevancy it plays in their lives.

## **Social-Emotional Development**

Social-emotional development can be described as “the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action” (Salovey, 1997, p. 22). It is an intelligence that allows the child to experience empathy and control one's own habitual emotional responses. Supporting children's social-emotional health is the cornerstone of success in school and in life. Children with higher emotional intelligence are better able to pay attention, are more engaged in school, have more positive relationships, and are more empathetic (Tominey, 2017). Social emotional health can be seen through building positive skills and capabilities such as resilience, confidence, social skills, and self-esteem. The importance of cultivating social emotional learning in children first came into consciousness in the academic field in 1990 when psychologists releases a series of research and papers that examined people's abilities to deal with emotions (Watson, 2012). Watson (2012) notes that “Emotional intelligence may be the best predictor of success in life, redefining what it means to be smart” (2012, p. 2). The first integration of social emotional learning incorporated directly into schools generally follows three categories; wellbeing and conflict resolution, peer meditation or buddying, and anti-bullying initiatives. These were done by educators in the environment of the classroom to help their students grow their own social emotional intelligence (Watson, 2012).

Well-being and conflict resolution prevent problematic behaviors in children such as bullying, violence, and aggression. Cultivating their social emotional intelligence helps children understand and comprehend the impact bullying and aggressive tendencies has on those involved in an attempt for a more positive outcome. Through heightened awareness of other emotions children are available to put themselves in their peer's shoes for better understanding of their

emotions and the situation itself. Peer meditation also known as “buddying” is a peer system to alleviate conflict between children. Older children are paired with younger children to help work out various problems and issues. Watson (2012) states it is done to “set an example and encourage children to make positive behavioral choices” (2012, p. 3). Through buddying older children become more aware of their actions and how they impact the younger child. The younger child then has a peer they are able to look up to that is relevant and relatable to their life. Anti-bullying initiatives are traditionally combated by restorative approaches. This can include the building blocks of empathetic bridges seen through activities such as circle time and think / pair/ share groups. “Restorative approaches are to challenge those who behave inappropriately to find a solution that is meaningful and meets the needs of those who are harmed” (Watson, 2012, p. 58). These restorative approaches put the child in situations where they are free to express their emotions while also having the opportunity to hear others. In this way children are able to start to make connections while also healing their relationships with others. As social emotional intelligence grows, the child becomes more aware of themselves and their surroundings as they grow into empathetic and emotional stable young adults.

### **Physical Development**

All domains of development in the child are equally important and connected to one another. What happens in one area of development can trigger a domino effect, impacting the others. Physical development is no exception. Supporting this domain through is necessary for normal growth and development of the skeleton, musculature, and oxygen-carrying organs. “Compared with the adult, the child can have poor maximal strength and low anaerobic capacity. The growth period appears to be particularly favorable for learning new movement patterns” (Meen, 1982, p. 124). During growth the physical proportions of the child experience a dramatic

change and the center of gravity shifts as they grow. Due to this rapid time of growth staying physically sound and active is important to obtaining and growing the coordination of movements. A healthy child in adolescence transfers to a healthy life in adulthood.

Proper nutritionally based diets and consistent movement can directly impact the body development of children as well. It is estimated that “10-15 percent of children in North America are sustainably overweight and the prevalence of this disorder is on the rise” (Brody, 1997, p. 133). Regular and consistent opportunity for movement in children encourages proper muscle development and function. Research tells us that a poor malnourished diet also “has a negative effect on children’s cognitive and social development” (Marcon, 2003, p. 80). Malnourished can not only refer to children who do not eat enough food but also children who do not eat the right kinds of food, therefore do not receive the vital nutrients their bodies need in order to grow properly. When a children’s physical growth is slowed due to malnourishment in any capacity it “may reduce their social and exploratory activity to conserve energy – they just don’t have the energy to play” (Marcon, 2003, p. 84). These children experiencing lagging in physical development are less likely to engage in play through activity and therefore miss out on vital opportunities to grow their social and cognitive skills. In this way, they fail to acquire new skills across various developmental domains that are necessary to their function.

Proper physical development is also directly linked to growing cognitive function. Children who are “more physiologically mature have a cognitive advantage over same-age peers whose physical development is lagging” (Marcon, 2003, p. 80). Although this is embedded in an environmental context, such as socioeconomic factors, there is still a correlation between cognitive function and physical growth. Research states that “nutritional supplementation has the greatest positive effect on cognitive development of children whose families are the poorest”

(Marcon, 2003, p. 82). The more nutritionally sound consumption the child is offered the more likely they will be able to succeed in proper physical development, resulting in heightened advantage and support across developmental all domains. A healthy growing body in adolescence supports the child's learning and cognitive skills and socially with their peers.

### **Cognitive Development and Function**

Cognitive function can be described as the ability of an individual to perform the various mental activities most closely associated with learning and problem solving (Malik, 2019, p. 1). Jean Piaget, an important figure in the field of developmental psychology, modeled four stages of mental and cognitive development in children and youth. The four stages are the sensorimotor stage; birth to two years, preoperational stage; two to seven years, concrete operational stage; seven to 11 years- and formal operational age; ages 12 and up (Malik, 2019, p. 2). For the purpose of this review the cognitive function that is appropriate for the age range of elementary school children is the concrete operational stage. This is where most elementary aged school children fall developmentally. In this stage “the child uses logical operations when solving problems, including mastery of conservation and inductive reasoning” (Malik, 2019, p. 4). Cognitive functions in this stage that need to be developed, as described by Piaget, are memory development and recall, sustained attention and processing skills, and receptive and expressive language.

### ***Memory Development and Recall***

Memory development and recall are located in the hippocampus area of the brain. The hippocampus is the area of the brain which forms memories and is also associated with learning and emotions. It is a part of the limbic region and spans across both sides of the brain. The left side of the hippocampus works with facts while the right side “organizes the building blocks of

our life story according to time and topic” (Siegel, 2011, p. 155). This is where memory recall and development can be developed. Siegel states, “With the maturation of the part of the brain that is required for explicit-memory encoding – the hippocampus – we are able to begin to create our factual and episodic memories. The hippocampus grows across the lifespan as it continues to lay down the explicit memory that enables us to know about the world and ourselves” (Siegel, 2011, p. 160). It requires focused attention to activate and simulate this part of the brain. It is the process of connecting together the “neutrally distributed puzzle pieces of implicit memory” (Siegel, 2011, p. 166).

### ***Sustained Attention and Processing Skills***

Sustained attention and processing skills are dependent upon children using and connecting the right and left side of their brain. These two sides are the right and left hemisphere of the brain. The right hemisphere dictates individual’s emotional responses. The left hemisphere is more logical, and analytically driven. A high functioning brain is one that exercises the two sides frequently. Siegel (2011) states that the “integration of both sides of the brain are essential to cognitive development” (p. 84) noting that studies show that when youth practice mindfulness the whole brain system “calms down.” Mindfulness cultivates awareness of the mind which builds connections between the two hemispheres. Siegel (2011) writes “We have discovered that our early adolescence shapes not only how we narrate the stories of our lives when we reach adulthood but also how our minds develop in infancy and childhood” (p. 176).

### ***Receptive and Expressive Language***

Receptive language is the ability to understand words and language. Expressive language is the ability to relay meaning or intent to another person. Underdeveloped receptive and expressive language skills can affect children’s behavioral issues, attention, literacy, sensory

processing, executive functioning, planning and sequencing, and auditory processing skills (Sigafoos, 1995). To develop receptive and expressive language the mindful practice of communication can support the growth in young children.

From the perspective on research of neurodevelopment of self-regulation, mindfulness training has considerable potential as an intervention because it targets both top-down and bottom-up influences on self-regulation. That is, mindfulness training may provide practice in reflective reprocessing (and exercise the pre-frontal circuits on which its reprocessing depends) while also minimizing influences that interfere with prefrontal cortical function (Sigafoos, 1995, p. 330).

Mindfulness practices support and grow these areas in children helping their cognitive development progress.

### **Mindfulness Practices**

There are three main mindfulness-based practices this section will cover: meditation, mindful communication, and mindful movement. These sources will show how these specific mindfulness practices can cultivate the growth of children's social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development while being easily implementable and accessible for all educators and parents to teach. Lobel states, "Mindfulness is a versatile mental quality that can be developed in a variety of ways" (Lobel, 2017, p. 220). Mindfulness is not limited to one practice or activity, but instead offers many different pathways towards liberation, awareness, and a mindful way of existence.

#### **Meditation**

Meditation can be easily mistaken as only a technique for dealing with stress. It is instead a way of being. Mindfulness meditation is embracing of all mind states, both good and bad. It is

not a quick road to relaxation, although that is often a common result when entering a meditative state. Meditation works towards teaching the individual how to accept and experience chaotic, painful, confusing, and frustrating thoughts. Meditation does not magically make them disappear; it is a natural part of life they are present. Instead meditation is a state of mind that approaches these thoughts in an intentional way. Meditation helps us accept the reality of suffering and change and encourages the non-clinging to both good and bad. It teaches us to cut ties with habitual reactions and emotions in order to see clearly. “We do not have to get so caught up in those thoughts that they color our capacity to receive the full extent of what is going on and what we called for” (Zinn, 2005, p. 59). It is the act of non-clinging to habitual emotional reactions, which brings a clear perception to reality. Regardless of the circumstances, meditation allows the individual to be exactly where they are and be exactly who they are while finding peace in the moment. “Awareness itself is the teacher, the student, and the lesson” (Zinn, 2005, p. 62). The more we practice focused and centered awareness the more sustainable it becomes off the meditation cushion. Awareness is the bridge built by mindfulness that brings meditation in our daily interactions.

“Meditation education aligns with the 21<sup>st</sup> century notion of schooling that which views learning as a holistic process that seeks to education students academically, emotionally, socially, ethically, and spiritually” (Waters, 2015, p. 123). Although complete educational practices have not been integrated into the school curriculum in the western world, mindfulness practices like meditation can be seen as an upward trend being incorporated with school aged children for the purpose of regulating attention through the observation of thoughts. Meditation refers to the deliberate act of focusing your awareness and attention on your own thoughts, emotions, and bodily states without judgment or clinging. Waters states, “The mental training of

mediation is fundamentally no different than other forms of skill acquisition” (Waters, 2015, p. 117). Just like anything else a flourishing meditation practice is achieved by steady and consistent practice. Everyone has the power to tap into their awareness and learn the art of meditation.

### ***Meditation and Social Emotional Development***

Starting as early as elementary school there is a rise in anxiety, stress, and depressive thoughts and actions in the classroom. Children are creating habits at this development stage that will follow them throughout their academic career and into adulthood. If not faced head on stress and anxiety can cripple students’ self-esteem, create physiological issues that break down their social-emotional well-being, and impact a student’s academic standing. Silverman states, “Children also self-reported feeling more general fearfulness anxiety around testing anxiety in school” (Silverman, 1991, p. 342). Testing anxiety is on the rise and is a present problem in school environments. Silverman (1991) also notes that “Behavioral strategies to treat anxiety, fearfulness, and stress in children include self-control strategies” (p. 353). Meditation is a strategy that directly teaches self-control and often results in a reduced level of stress in both children and adults.

Social-emotional intelligence results in developed empathy in children. Empathy rests on understanding. It equally rests on the ground of inner stillness. The practice of meditation teaches children how to calm their mind and rest in the inner stillness. Feldman states, “We learn with mindfulness what it means to be present in the presence of all things” (Feldman, 2017, p. 65). Meditation practices teach the child how to rest the mind in order to let go of emotional clinging. In children this concept may be beyond their mental bounds, but that does mean they cannot practice what they cannot conceptualize. When children are able to use meditation as a way to

re-focus their thinking and let go/move past current emotional turmoil, they are better able to think clearly and better communicate why they are feeling their current state. This is invaluable to emotional intelligence development and better helps the child understand themselves to reach reasonable solution. Mindsight, the focused awareness of one's own mental processes in order to correct undesirable behaviors, is a practice that can be learned by anyone at any time. When the individual develops mindsight they in turn developing their social and emotional intelligence. "It is the basic skill that underlies what we mean when we speak of having emotional and social intelligence. When we develop the skill of mindsight, we actually change the physical structure of the brain" (Seigel 2011, p. 3). As Seigel noted, this self-awareness is a learnable skill, for both the adult and early adolescence.

Meditation is a self-control strategy that can directly combat the habitual reactions of stress or anxiety in childhood. A number of studies have incorporated meditation and mindfulness into the classroom to improve the student's social emotional health. A study incorporating mindfulness was done in an elementary school in Massachusetts for the purpose of seeing its effects on anxiety and stress. A short 6 to 8-week study was done with a group of elementary school students. A mindfulness-based training was delivered by a trained educator who introduced and completed exercises with the students. Activities included meditations, body scans, gentle yoga, and mindful targeted experiences (such as walking or breathing mindfully). Children in this study showed signs of the ability to accept and tolerate stress more efficiently (Bostic, 2015). Children were able to learn from their stress rather than feeling controlled by it. This shows direct progression of social-emotional development through the mindfulness-based practices in this study.

Cheek (2017) integrated mindfulness-based practices into the elementary school setting. This was done to specifically counteract the lack of social and emotional well-being of the children. The author looked at effective means of implementing mindfulness practice into the classroom. This was tested out in a fifth-grade classroom by a teacher trained in mindfulness. The experiment was done with hundreds of students all at different points of time throughout the school day by the same instructor. This way the instructor was the same throughout the experiment in delivery and manner. The teacher and students participated in mindful activities such as daily body scans, eating mindfully, walking mindfully, meditating, and gentle yoga practices. The way impact was measured in this study was reflective. Students wrote reflection letters throughout their time in the program and this way the way progress was tracked. The reflection and feedback from the participants was organized into five common themes seen in the letters. They read as follows; (1) Importance of a sense of place; (2) We are more of a community; (3) Actively taking it on; (4) How I relate to others; and (5) Getting in touch with the inner self (Cheek, 2017).

The children and the instructor in the study both had a positive experience in the mindfulness-based stress reduction practices that were incorporated in the classroom, shown by the response in the letters and reflection. The integration of mindfulness practices showed a deeper understanding of their own social-emotional intelligence. Teachers reported improved focus and mindful socialization through conversation among their students. This study showed directly how mindfulness practices put in place at schools will impact social and emotional wellbeing in the children. "Mindfulness has lasting implications including children's school performance and their social emotional development" (Zelazo, 2001, p. 63). Over time

meditation will have long lasting effects of a child's social-emotional intelligence, therefore improving their personal performance and the emotional environment.

### ***Meditation and Cognitive Development***

Davidson and Lutz's (2008) research shows that meditation can induce plasticity in the brain that assists learning. In their educational psychology review they discuss the wellbeing in schools and its impact on student's academic achievement. Using a combination of mindfulness-based practices such as body scans and meditations a study was conducted to determine the results on a group of third graders anxiety, stress, academics, self-care, self-acceptance, and optimism. After ten weeks of implementing the mindfulness-based curriculum the student's scores showed significant reduction of stress, lower states of anxiety, and improved academic standing in school. General stress and coping mechanisms showed steady improvement. In additional, "48% of students mentioned that learning meditation at school had led them to practice meditation outside of school when they were stressed" (Waters, 2015, p. 117). When meditation was taught in school it stuck with the children and taught them how to take their meditation practice off the cushion and use their critical thinking skills to incorporate it into real life circumstances.

A study from the *Mindful School Program* offered a 5-week course in mindfulness-based meditation instruction. This was conducted during the school day resulting in three sessions a week for 15 minutes per session. The study investigated the incorporation of mindfulness at the elementary level and its effect on attention development. Data was collected on the participating children before the mindfulness program was implemented to track growth. With regard to

attention, most children in the study were slightly below levels in attention skills. The study stated this as “normal” for the age group and classroom setting. After the mindfulness-based program reached its completion, the scores of attention skills statistically increased dramatically. Slightly over 64% of students that participated showed a 20% increase in attention skills which were measured by the computerized Attention Network Test child version (ANT-C). This test measures three aspects of attention, including a child’s executive control performance. This is key to decision-making and is correlated with academic success (Biegel, 2010). The findings showed a direct correlation between mindfulness and student’s attention increase. Development in increased attention skills can be supported through the practice of mindfulness, as shown in this study.

### **Mindful Communication**

Gregory Kramer’s Insight Dialogue and David Bohm’s Bohmian Dialogue are two philosophies that both strive to achieving mindful communication. Kramer states that “an interpersonal meditation practice that encompasses verbal communication” (Kramer, 2007, p. 10) is insight dialogue in the shortest of explanations. Mindful communication helps us all to understand one another, and ourselves, more intimately. Communicating mindfully requires the individual to take approaches used with the practice of meditation into collaboration with others. It is a mindfulness practice that is actively used in the interaction with others.

Right Speech assumes imperfection. Our “mistakes” are a vital part of our learning. We need to lie, exaggerate, embellish, use harsh and aggressive speech, engage in useless banter, and speak at inappropriate times, in order to experience how using speech in these ways creates tension in the body, agitation in the mind, and remorse in the heart. We also discover how unskillful speech degrades personal relationships and diminishes the possibility of peace in our

world. Mindful communication teaches the practice of skillful speech and the power harmful speech can impact those around you. To learn right speech is to take our misspoken mistakes, mindfully address them, and respond from a place of lovingkindness.

A quote from Kramer reads, “When the practice is embedded in life, the meditation instructions function as guidelines for wakeful engagement with others. In both cases the practice leads to the fading of hunger and ignorance” (Kramer, 2007, p. 105). Insight Dialogue, as Kramer states, are the guidelines to leading the self to the path of wakeful engagement. This wakeful engagement that he speaks to not only impacts our ability to communicate mindfully but also the people and relationships we have in our lives and our environment that we effect. Formal practice may be where the individual hones in on their skills and cultivates an awareness of intention to stopping interrupting automatic habit, but day to day life is where our practice becomes a reality. It is not enough to use mindfulness in self-isolation, such as the practice of meditation, but to also grow the skill of communicating mindfully. Which in itself is a commitment to re-wire the way we approach and think about communicating with others and ourselves. This pushes the individual into a new level of compassion, patience, understanding, and practice. When we achieve personal freedom and harmony, we no longer have to pursue these traits, they come naturally. As communicating mindfully deepens through the practice of Insight Dialogue the individual will begin to see over time large shifts in communication with others.

Kramer states that “Tension distorts the lens through which we see the world by framing everything in terms of that which makes us tense. Without tranquility the mind cannot dwell with any experience, we are unlikely to abandon self-centered fabrications, and we cannot be fully compassionate to others or to ourselves” (Kramer, 2007, p. 100). The absence of Insight

Dialogue brings stress and tension, clouding our grounding and holding us back to be fully compassionate with others. When Insight Dialogue is being used intentionally when communicating it brings compassion towards others, directly affecting and deepening our relationships with those around us and with ourselves. The inner dialogue that plays out in our day to day life starts to shift as well. When practicing and incorporating these qualities with those surrounding us, the inner dialogue has the capacity to shift towards the positive as well. Healing from the inside out allows us to project love and kindness more freely, letting us deepen the pause and heal from understanding. We see the world more clearly this way, shedding away the fluff for what it is at its core. Kramer states, “When mindfulness is touched by any level of activity, the experience is known as it is, clean and simple. In that moment we stop building the world.” (Kramer, 2007, p. 118). Through communicating mindfully children can begin to see situations as they are.

### ***Mindful Communication and Social Emotional Intelligence***

Communicating mindfully is an extension of the practice of meditation. In meditation the individual turns inward, whereas mindful communication the practice is then relayed into conversation. Social-emotional intelligence of children is increased because it challenges the individual to build empathy, attention, and builds positive relationships with their peers. It is a practice that directly impacts the child’s peers and their environment, whether that be the classroom or otherwise. Bohm states, “People say, “All we really need is love” If there were universal love, all would go well. But we don’t appear to have it. So, we have to find a way that works” (Bohm, 1996, p. 257). When we listen and communicate to understand, we take a step toward universal love. Teaching a universal love to children’s builds their ability for connection and understanding, therefore developing their social-emotional intelligence. We strive towards

communication that flows into a meditative experience, allowing us to stay aware and present while speaking in day to day life. “Love will go away if we can’t communicate and share meaning” (Bohm, 1996, p. 28). When we speak in communication with the intention of a mindfulness we must first listen to respond, rather than speak to respond. Wise speech in children puts mindfulness into action in the classroom and at home, igniting a chain reaction that impacts our world one conversation at a time. Mindful communication can also directly support the restorative approach within the social emotional initiative directly supporting anti-bullying initiatives. Watson (2012) states, “The restorative approach becomes a way of being once all members of the school community see incidences where harm has occurred as “teachable moments” to be learnt from and seek opportunities to facilitate conversations in which harm can be repaired, thus empowering all those involved to own the situation and find the solution” (p. 140). Watson’s findings support that the restorative approach is a way of life that empowers positive and meaningful conversations, just as mindful communication does. Communicating mindfully is also a way of being which challenges the individual to learn from, grow, and find solutions through a lens of self-awareness. As the child learns to communicate mindfully, a more empathic and understanding environment that promotes positive social emotional health is the result.

### **Mindful Movement**

Qigong is a mindful movement impacting the body and the mind. It is an exercise dating back 1500 years that strengthens the immune system, mitigates the effects of chronic illness, and reduces stress (Frantzis, 2008, p. 1). Qigong also regulates the function of the body and promotes emotional stability. Not only is it an exercise that improves general health, but also is a meditative practice that brings awareness to the mind. The practice is made up of seven

movements done in fluid succession of one another. Dragon and tiger qigong helps to find your personal chi or energy, enters the individual into a meditative state of movement, incorporates the 70% principal, and brings awareness to the body. According to Goldstein, “The closer we can get to viewing the body in terms of elements helps the “I am” begin to fall away” (2016, p. 14). Through awareness of the body, qigong supports the sense of “I am” therefore enhancing more presence in the moment to moment awareness during the movements.

### ***Qigong and Physical Development***

The practice of Qigong has many elements that regulate and improve the physical body. Two of the most important factors in Qigong is to feel the “chi” or energy and to then bring awareness to the physical body. Through Qigong the individual can practice regular exercise, reduce stress, and regulate the functioning of the body (Frantzis, 2008, p.ix).

“One of the most important things in Dragon and Tiger Qigong is to feel the chi of your body” (Ryan, 2019, p. xxii). According to traditional Chinese medicine that state of chi determines the state of your health. When one has a healthy and flowing chi you will remain in good health. If your chi is blocked or imbalanced in some way, illness will follow (Frantzis, 2008, p. xxii). Finding the chi is done by small movements such as wiggling the fingers and the toes. Here individual can start waking up the physical chi and start to bring awareness to the physical presence. This opens the chi of the body to the door of connections present within us. After waking up physically, we turn the attention to the palms, bringing awareness and energy to the finger pads and the hands as the individual takes in deep breaths to help direct the “chi” or energy” In the text *Roots and Branches* the author states, “By cultivating quiet relaxed breathing chi accumulated and solidifies making the body feel stable and balanced. Then the chi “sprouts”

that is, moves through the whole body, from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, creating vitality and long life” (Cohen, 2014, p. 3).

Body awareness is another lesson present in Qigong. From the article *Making your Body Conscious* it quotes, “We are born with the natural ability to directly experience our bodies and the internal sensations through our minds and emotions” (Frantzis, PDF). The practice of dragon and tiger qigong brings a new level of awareness and perception to the physical body. The practice of body awareness, essential to participating in Qigong successfully, encourages the individual to notice the body and its functions as they happen. The movements of Qigong follow the acupuncture meridians, or the physical channels through which your body energies flow. “During fetal development these channels develop first and then the energetic interactions between these primary channels create the acupuncture meridians as well as other energetic channels” (Frantzis, 2008, p. xxvi). Qigong works with the energetic layers of the body created during this fetal development to directly stimulate the flow through the energy channels which improves the relaxation of muscles, tendons, and ligaments.

Body awareness, resulting from a deepened Qigong practice, also lets the individual deepen their practice in embodiment. Embodiment is the connection between your physical body, the spirit, and the mind. When unified they serve one another, impacting each other to a higher degree of awareness of the self. Embodiment is also becoming aware of these elements of the body and beginning to view them as a whole, rather than separate entities. Integration of the energy's we hold create a harmonious tune allowing us to achieve greater tolerance of patience, less judgment for ourselves and others, and more acceptance in our day to day lives. The way to accepting ourselves as we are organically, and others, is born out of an intentional embodied life.

When emotional reactions to any given situation occur, positive or negative, it does not stop at just effecting our emotional realm. It effects all parts that make us whole; our energy, our physical body, and our spiritual plane. Humans are truly connected beings where one element will always impact and have a reaction to the others. Our energies that we project have the ability to change the environment we reside in. When we feel another's energy it has the ability to affect our environment as well. Embodiment is to recognize and become aware of these energies and how they impact the body and mind. It is a reunion of the true self and seems to be the pathway towards ascending the soul, mind, and body to a higher level of awareness. "Body sense is the ability to pay attention to ourselves, to feel our sensations, emotions, and movements on-line, in the present moment, without the mediating influence of judgmental thoughts" (Fogel, 2009, p. 1). Through Qigong, the energies of the body can be focused to improve embodiment, therefore impacting physical health and emotional health.

"Dragon and Tiger Qigong is a Chinese form of exercise that has been specifically designed to improve health" (Frantzis, 2008, p. ix). Qigong shows improvements in digestive and respiratory functioning, circulation, and strength and fitness. It is also known to decrease the risk of countless medical problems such as heart disease, obesity, colon cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, and high blood pressure. Qigong is a mindful practice that brings one back to the life force, the breath, and shows a heightened awareness of the bodily planes. It is a mindful practice because it empowers the individual to slow down, connect with their own chi, and become aware of the body in many capacities. Taking the opportunity to slow down heightens the senses and helps to maintain a happy and healthy life. These individual practices pave the pathway to a more mindful existence while also improving the development of physical health.

### ***Qigong and Social Emotional Development***

While qigong is an exercise that directly impacts the physical health and development of the body, it is also a mindfulness-based exercise that can regulate emotional stress. The ability to “let go” and relax – emotionally and mentally – is at the heart of the practice of qigong.

Although a physical exercise it is one rooted with elements of meditative qualities, which impact emotional development. “The physical stretches presented in qigong are accomplished by release, relaxation and letting go tension and nerves rather than relying on physical force or willpower to push the muscles” (Frantzis, 2008, p. xxxvi). This process of releasing, relaxing, and letting go helps to cultivate the mind to do the same in emotionally charged situations. Through those steps, we are teaching the mind through the body to overcome emotionally charged situations and meet them with a mindful approach. “Qigong increases emotional intelligence as well as promoting good health” (Frantzis, 2008, p. 3). Many patients report that their emotional baggage seems to drop away, and that they feel more joy in their lives – patients who practice qigong are calmer (Frantzis, 2008).

“Mental disorders linked to emotional distress are reported to be more debilitating than most chronic physical conditions” (Abbott, 2013, p. 2). A study done in 2013 tracked the impact qigong had on depression and anxiety. In a series of tests, Qigong showed to improve stability in chronic depression and anxiety. “Qigong appears to be associated with improvements in psychological well-being including reduced stress, anxiety, depression and mood disturbance, and increased self-esteem” (Abbott, 2013, p. 4). Emotional healing and improvement in emotional health can be cultivated by the meditative movements offered in qigong.

Qigong is also a mindfulness-based practice that improves cognitive function over an extended period of time. A study done in 2011 randomized over 300 participants with a mild cognitive impairment to participate in a qigong training. Over the course of training three times a

week for five months the group met to practice. After the five months qigong showed improvements in cognitive function and more specifically delayed recall, directly related to issues with memory. It also reported improving motor skills and focused attention (Abbott, 2013, p. 6).

### **Rationale for Creative Project**

The literature review discusses how mindfulness-based practices and activities cultivate the growth of children's social-emotion, physical, and cognitive development. I choose to create a creative project through a children's picture book entitled "The Speck." It is a book geared towards elementary aged school children in the same developmental age range as the thesis targeted. The book introduces the concept of mindfulness to children by weaving in an array of practices surrounding mindfulness that addresses the three developmental categories covered: social-emotional development, cognitive development, and physical development. The book touches on three different mindfulness practices including meditation, mindful communication, and mindful movement. "The Speck" itself is my artistic symbolization of mindfulness. Having a visual representation of such an abstract concept was an important element of the book. This gives children something concrete and simple to follow throughout the story and beyond the book into their lives. The speck floats around the story touching the lives of many people in different situations that are age appropriate and relevant to children in order to trigger a mindful response. The speck does not have a name or a word to describe its visual form. It is represented by a floating light in order for the child to grow its own conclusion or form a word to the art. The speck touches the children in different situations that are developmentally appropriate to their

lives but delivers the same message of mindfulness to each one. It is intentionally done to leave room for an array of interpretations and conclusions that the child may have.

At the conclusion of the story the people search for the speck, but they cannot find it. It is written as a small introduction lesson of impermanence, the thread of change experienced and felt by us all shown by the anxiousness and eventually peace that they cannot find the speck. The story ends with the boy seen sitting peacefully, showing the town white light inside of him. A harmonious realization settles on the group as they see the speck never disappeared, but was carried inside of them all along. No one really needed the speck, they only needed themselves. The book ends with the people holding hands with their personal “specks” shining brightly. “It was then that they knew / They had been searching all wrong / The speck couldn’t be found / It was inside all along.”

The first mindfulness-based practice introduced in the book was meditating. It was demonstrated in the book by an example of meditative silence replacing an angry emotional response. The second mindfulness-based practice introduced in the book was mindful communication. This was modeled in “The Speck” by demonstrating a brief version of Gregory Kramer’s steps to insight dialogue. Kramer’s steps are deeply intricate for such a young audience, so an adaptation of the process was displayed within the story. At the back of the book readers will find a brief outline of the steps to communicating mindfully I have created based off of Kramer’s book, Insight Dialogue. Gregory Kramer’s Steps are as follows; Pause, relax, open, trust emergence, listen deeply, and speak the truth. Child Friendly Steps: SBLS – Stop – Breath – Listen – Speak. 1- Stop (pause, look, and listen before you start talking). 2 – Breath Deep (fill up your belly like a balloon and let your breath out like a lion and count backwards from ten using your fingers (relax and open). 3 – Listening Ears (Turn the volume on your ears up!). 4- Speak

honestly (tell only the truth, even if it's hard). The third mindfulness-based practice in was mindful movement. It was modeled in "The Speck" by an introductory practice of Qigong. This mindful movement specifically supported the physical development of the child.

There are countless studies and research that show how mindfulness directly impacts executive functions, emotional intelligence, and self-regulation. However, more research is needed to show the effects mindfulness interventions have on behavioral outcome measures and tendencies that lead into adulthood. More experimental control is needed such as "random assignment of both trainers and trainees, active control conditions, efforts to equate both student and teacher expectancy effects across conditions, and validated behavioral measures administered by researchers who are blinded to the experimental condition" (Zelazo, 2011, p. 63).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, mindfulness-based practices can support children's social-emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive development. Through mindfulness-based practices and activities such as meditation, mindful communication, and mindful movement the whole child can be supported developmentally. As a result of this integration of mindfulness, inner peace, stillness, increased attention, love, support, reduced anxiety, calmness, emotional regularity, social success, and physical health can be cultivated in children. Mindfulness is the tool in which parents and educators from all backgrounds can bring to their children to support their growth. Olendzki states that, "Our psychological self-understanding may even be a pivotal factor in determining which future we come to live" (Olendzki, 2010, p. 1). Each moment where we teach and guide children's intentions to be pure, a pure action will result. This determines the world

and future we create for ourselves and the people around us. Through mindfulness, children slowly are molded into the best version of themselves to create a kinder and gentler world.

“Let us dedicate our efforts and projects to the healing, the peace, the transformation, the liberation, and the awakening of all beings!” (Rothberg, 2006).

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