The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Using Mindfulness as an Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline Practices

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Abstract

Since the implementation of zero tolerance policies, school suspensions have significantly increased, particularly for students of color. The likelihood of a student entering the criminal system once they are forced out of school also has risen dramatically, forming a system that is now referred to as the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The purpose of this study was to look at alternative methods to exclusionary discipline practices like suspension. The focus of this study was on the implementation of mindfulness techniques in one elementary school. Existing literature established that mindfulness techniques can be beneficial for student’s academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes. This study expanded on the existing literature through interviews with school personnel, who included the principal, school counselor, and a teacher. The teacher also was the parent of a child who was part of the school’s mindfulness program. Additionally, the study included an observation of a mindfulness lesson at the school. The participants in this study shared their beliefs that when mindfulness techniques were implemented in this school, they found students are empowered and engaged, gain life skills, and are better able to regulate their emotions. The results also showed that mindfulness can easily be implemented, as the core components align with essential standards that school counselors are required to follow. Interviewees suggested strengthening the program by collaborating more with teachers to use mindfulness techniques as part of the daily routine in their classrooms. It is suggested that future research should be conducted to find out more about how mindfulness can be incorporated in schools, but the results of the current study have implications for the field demonstrating that mindfulness has positive benefits for elementary students.

Keywords: mindfulness, school-to-prison pipeline, alternatives to suspension, meditation, school
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Beginning in the 1990s, school discipline in the United States changed, resulting in serious repercussions that are apparent today (McCarter, 2016). Schools began to enforce strict policies, particularly, “zero tolerance” policies, that were originally meant “to provide uniform discipline for certain behaviors that jeopardized school safety,” (Townsend Walker, 2014, p. 345), by enforcing compulsory suspensions or expulsions in response to weapons and drugs on school property. These policies do not take into consideration any underlying circumstances, situational aspects, or the purpose of the behavior when it comes to deciding what disciplinary action should be taken (American Psychological Association [APA] Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). As implemented, zero tolerance policies became especially dangerous because school administrators around the United States broadened the offenses to include vague and subjective behaviors such as bullying, disrespect, and insubordination (Townsend Walker, 2014). Townsend further explains that school administrators criminalized these small offenses by increasing police involvement in their schools, leading to more juvenile arrests. Since the implementation of zero tolerance policies and police involvement, suspension rates have increased at an alarming rate over the last decades, and every year there are over 3.25 million students suspended in K-12 schools at least once (Losen, 2011).

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The use of exclusionary discipline policies can be detrimental to students. These policies are associated with negative student outcomes, such as performing poorly in school, higher drop-out rates, lower school engagement and participation, and a greater chance of encountering discipline in the future (Acia, 2006; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) is the metaphor used to describe the policies related to school
discipline that “decrease the probability of school success for children and youth, and increase the probability of negative life outcomes, particularly through involvement in the juvenile justice system” (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014, p. 546). Particularly, black students are the most at-risk for being forced into the “Pipeline” and out of schools as they are expelled three times more than their white counterparts (Losen, 2011). This aspect of the STPP is commonly referred to as the racial discipline gap (Curran, 2016; Gregory et al., 2016), which emphasizes that black students are more likely to be suspended for trivial things, like insubordination and disrespect, and are more likely to receive longer and harsher punishments for these smaller offenses, whereas white students are more likely to be suspended for non-discretionary offenses (Losen, 2013).

There is no evidence to support that black students are misbehaving more often than white students (Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016). In fact, McIntosh et al. (2014) created the Vulnerable Decision Points (VDP) model, a theoretical framework used to assess when racial bias influences school disciplinary practices and intervention methods to look at why this disproportionality occurs. Smolkowski and colleagues (2016) used this model in their research to highlight the role implicit bias plays in school discipline disproportionality. Implicit bias “...can be conceptualized as inappropriate stimulus control over an individual’s responses to others’ behavior that is based on irrelevant features of the behavior, as opposed to an objective view of the behavior” (Smolkowski, et al., 2016, p. 179). Implicit bias is seen in the classroom when students of color are harshly disciplined for small offenses.

Smolkowski et al. (2016) observed patterns in school discipline data to identify which disciplinary decisions are influenced more by implicit biases and to see whether the VDP model would be sustained or refuted by the data. Their methods included obtaining 483,686 office discipline referrals (ODRs) from 1,666 elementary schools across the United States
and using multilevel logistic regression models to analyze the relationship between ODRs and implicit bias. The models used specific predictors of the likelihood of a subjective ODR, where the findings supported the VDP model and suggested that implicit bias increases the likelihood of a teacher issuing an ODR (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Other research also claims that “such biases in perceptions of student behavior likely contribute to differential selection for office referrals and racial disproportionalities in the distribution of referral reasons,” (Anyon, Jenson, Altschul, Farrar, McQueen, Greer, … & Simmons, 2014, p. 380) making ODRs subjective, inconsistent and unsystematic.

**Alternative Discipline Methods**

Instead of issuing ODRs, detentions or suspensions, and expulsions, some schools in the United States are using alternative discipline methods that do not involve exclusionary practices. These methods range from meditation (Khorsandi, 2016), teacher-coaching programs (Gregory et al., 2016), and multi-tiered behavioral intervention strategies (Allen & Smith, 2015), to restorative justice centers (Ashworth, et al., 2008) and student led accountability committees (Hantzopoulos, 2011). Some of these methods involve creating culturally competent teachers and reducing implicit racial bias (Gregory et al., 2016), while others strengthen teacher and student relationships to promote a welcoming classroom (Allen & Smith, 2015), teach students how to regulate their behaviors and emotions through breathing exercises (Khorsandi, 2016), or let them take part in discussing their own disciplinary consequences (Hantzopoulos, 2011). The goal of each of these programs is to keep students in the classroom and not force them out of school and into the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Mindfulness techniques, in particular, are relatively new methods being used in schools to help reduce the risk of students being forced into the STPP. To understand why mindfulness techniques could be beneficial in the classroom, it is important to know what
exactly mindfulness is. According to Schonert-Reichl, et al., (2015), mindfulness “...refers to an ability to focus on thoughts, feelings, or perceptions that arise moment to moment in a cognitively nonelaborative, and emotionally nonreactive, way” (p. 3). In other words, mindfulness is focusing on what feelings and thoughts occur in the present moment in a calm and systematic way. Mindfulness training is a broad method that is not defined by a specific routine or movements, and can be applied to a variety of daily activities (Lyons & DeLange, 2016). Using mindfulness techniques encourages students to focus on inner experiences, including, their thoughts, emotions, breathing, and other physical states, to promote a greater sense of self-awareness and control of attention (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2009).

For example, The Holistic Life Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded in 2001 by two brothers in Baltimore, uses mindfulness and yoga to help K-12 students of underserved communities regulate their emotions and problem-solve (Holistic Life Foundation, 2016; Khorsandi, 2016). The program consists of two parts: Holistic Me, an after-school program that provides enrichment activities, teaches students yoga and mindfulness practices to peacefully resolve conflicts, and offers tutoring in various subjects to 120 students after school, as a replacement for detention. The second part is the Mindful Moment Room, a place for disruptive students to go and practice breathing exercises and talk to a counselor about how to regulate their emotions (Holistic Life Foundation, 2016; Khorsandi, 2016). The program is currently being implemented at Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore. According to the Holistic Life Foundation website (2016), the program serves 4,500 students per week, serves more than 14 Baltimore schools, and has trained 30 Baltimore youth in mindfulness leadership. Most importantly, these schools have had zero suspensions within the 2015-2016 school year and only four within the 2013-2014 year (Khorsandi, 2016).
There has been little research on the effectiveness of mediation and mindfulness based interventions, as used by the Holistic Life Foundation, and the research available seems to indicate that some of these interventions are beneficial to schools while others need to be revised to account for differing populations and settings (Semple, Droutman, & Reid, 2017). Semple et al. (2017) further explain that each mindfulness program incorporates and implements different elements so that there is not one uniform practice, which could influence how effective they are. Programs seem to be more effective when they are easy to implement, inexpensive and long term, teachers incorporate the program into their curriculum, teachers and students participate in the programs together, and when a trained instructor is involved (Semple et al., 2017). In a recent study with teachers and students, findings show that when mindfulness-based programs fit these criteria, both teachers and students report liking the program, and teachers report intentions to use the program’s techniques in the future as well as gaining personal benefits with their own mindfulness (Semple et al., 2017). The use of mindfulness based techniques as alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices has grown rapidly in the last few years, but there is still a large amount of missing research, such as what techniques are most beneficial, how they should be implemented, and how effective they are in relation to suspension rates. This needs to be accounted for to increase the quality and effectiveness of implementing these programs in schools.

**Purpose of the Current Study**

This study seeks to look at the relationship between alternative forms of school discipline, that do not involve exclusionary practices, and student outcomes in relation to the racial discipline gap and the STPP. It will help to answer several questions about alternative disciplinary practices, including, (a) How can the disproportionality of school discipline be addressed so that students of color are not at greater risk for exclusionary practices?; (b)
What are the alternative methods to exclusionary discipline and are they effective in reducing suspension rates?; (c) Does teaching mindfulness techniques, including meditation and self-regulation, to students reduce suspension rates?; and (d) Are certain mindfulness techniques more effective at helping students regulate their emotions? The study will be qualitative in nature and include interviews with a school counselor, a principal, and a parent of a student, who is also a teacher, at a public elementary school in central North Carolina. The school incorporates alternative methods, particularly meditation and mindfulness programs, into their curriculum. Observation of actual meditation techniques used will be done, and the suspension rates of this school before and after the implementation of the program will be compared. The data collected will be used to make suggestions for further research and for methods that elementary schools can incorporate into their curriculum as alternatives to typically used exclusionary discipline practices.
Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to discuss the literature on the implementation, methods, and effectiveness of alternative disciplinary practices in the form of mindfulness based programs and techniques. A variety of mindfulness techniques are reviewed in this section, including, meditation, breathing exercises, attentive listening, relaxation, mindful movement exercises, body scans, mindful circles, and lessons on perspective taking and conflict resolution (Black & Fernando, 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Semple et al., 2017). The mindfulness based programs in this section focus on strengthening self-awareness, stress regulation, improving school climate and student well-being, strengthening self-regulation, social-emotional regulation, empathy, and improving self-confidence (Lyon & DeLange, 2016; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Semple et al., 2017). All of the programs are implemented in a school setting and the instructors vary for each program. The instructors include the regular classroom teachers, mindfulness meditation teachers, trained facilitators, and recorded lessons (Bakosh, et al., 2016; Black & Fernando, 2013; Lyon & DeLange, 2016; Mendelson, et al., 2010; Parker et al., 2014; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Semple et al., 2017). Both qualitative and quantitative research is included to see the effectiveness of the mindfulness programs on student behavior and school climate. Several methods were used to evaluate the success of the programs, including, teacher-ratings of student behavior, self-report and peer behavioral assessments, stress physiology, and school performance (Black & Fernando, 2013; Lyon & DeLange, 2016; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Semple et al., 2017).

MindUp

Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015), conducted a randomized controlled trial study to see the effects of a social and emotional learning (SEL) program that uses mindfulness techniques on the executive functioning (EF), school achievement, social-emotional competence, and stress regulation of fourth and fifth grade students. The program used, MindUp, is a mindfulness-
based intervention taught to students by their teachers that incorporates twelve 40 to 50 minute lessons, one lesson every week (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). The central mindfulness techniques in the MindUp program focus on breathing and attentive listening, and were practiced three times a day, for three minutes each, every day in addition to the one lesson per week (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Other lessons use techniques like mindful smelling and mindful tasting to encourage executive functioning and self-regulation, some lessons work on social and emotional awareness through using texts that focus on perspective-taking and empathy skills, and others promote positive mood through learning about optimism and practicing gratitude (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Some other components of the MindUp program are lessons that focus on kindness and community, with students collaborating on activities such as community service learning and kind acts for each other (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Teachers then take the skills from the lessons and incorporate them in the classroom throughout the school day to encourage students to use these skills and create a supportive and positive classroom (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) randomly assigned students to participate in the MindUp program or a social responsibility program, a business as usual (BAU) control group that did not incorporate mindfulness exercises. The groups were then compared and the children’s outcome were measured in a variety of ways, including behavioral evaluations of executive functioning, testing the student’s salivary cortisol levels, having the students report on their well-being and prosociality and nominate others on prosociality and peer acceptance, and math grades on end of year tests gathered from school records (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Through their analysis of the data, Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that on the tasks used to test executive functioning, there were no significant differences between the MindUp group and the BAU group in terms of accuracy on the tasks, but the MindUp group had faster reaction times on these tasks, meaning that they were better at selective attention.
and inhibiting distractions. When they analyzed the salivary cortisol, they found that there was little change in the slope of the MindUp group from pre- to posttest, and the slope of the BAU group became flatter. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) also found no significant differences between the MindUp group and the BAU group at the posttest for cortisol secretion, except the MindUp group had significantly higher levels in the morning than the BAU group did.

For student self-reports, they found differences between the two groups in relation to prosociality and well-being outcomes, which include empathy, optimism, perspective-taking, school self-concept, emotional control, social responsibility, mindfulness, and depressive symptoms (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that children in the MindUp Program displayed significant improvements in empathy, optimism, perspective-taking, school self-concept, emotional control, and mindfulness, as well as a significant decrease in depressive symptoms from the pre- to the posttest. By contrast, the children in the BAU group had significant decreases in all of these measures. For the peer nominations of prosociality and aggressive behaviors, Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that the children in the MindUp Program were also more likely than the BAU group to show increases from the pre- to posttest in all but one of the prosocial behaviors, including sharing, trustworthiness, helpfulness, and taking others’ views, while the ratings for kindness were not significant. They also displayed significant decreases in aggressive behaviors, including, breaks rules and starts fights, and they were liked more by their classmates. When they looked at end of year math grades, Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) also found that there was a trend for higher end of year math grades for the students in the MindUp Program than for the children in the BAU group. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) also reported interesting group differences when percentile ranks were examined. For students who participated in the MindUp Program there was a 24% gain in positive social behaviors that were peer-nominated, there was a 15% gain in student’s math achievement, a 20% gain in student reports of prosociality and well-being.
outcomes, and a 24% reduction in aggressive behaviors as indicated by peer nominations (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015, p. 17). In other words, the students who participated in the MindUp Program were more likely to have increases in academic, social, and behavioral outcomes, measured by math grades and peer nominations of student behavior, than students in the BAU group. These students were also less likely to be aggressive than the students in the BAU group, meaning that mindfulness in schools can lead to improved student behavior, academic performance, and emotional control.

Using a rigorous research design, Schonert-Reichl and colleagues presented evidence that mindfulness techniques, combined with factors such as practicing optimism, practicing gratitude, being kind to others, and taking other’s perspectives, can improve cognitive abilities and create significant gains in emotional and social well-being and competence for students in elementary school classrooms (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). However, there were limitations to this study. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015), randomized the experiment on the classroom level, but then conducted analyses on the individual level, limiting causal inferences that can be drawn from the results. In addition, because the sample size was small, there were baseline differences found between the MindUp and comparison group of students (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Another limitation is that students and teachers were not blind to the treatment condition when they were completing their assessments and rating students (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Finally, the program was evaluated by its developers, rather than independent evaluators. Therefore, additional research needs to be done to see how much of a role mindfulness actually plays in this process, but the findings are promising that mindfulness techniques can add significant benefits to SEL programs and school curriculums (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Based on Schonert-Reichl et al.’s (2015) findings, mindfulness techniques can provide students with academic, emotional, behavioral, and social benefits, when they are used in combination with other social and emotional learning factors.
Mindful Schools

Black and Fernando (2013) conducted a study on a mindfulness field intervention trial of a five-week mindfulness-based program, Mindful Schools (MS), on how teachers rated student behavior in the classroom of a public elementary school in California in Kindergarten through sixth grade. They also analyzed if there was any extra benefit for student outcomes if additional lessons were provided. This program focuses on two methods of training, The Development of Mindfulness, which encourages awareness of the environment, our emotions, sensations, and thoughts in each moment, and The Development of Heartfulness, intentionally focusing on positive states of mind such as kindness and compassion (Mindful Schools, 2017).

The MS program is designed for public schools that are under-resourced and struggle with a stressful school environment, and the program provides easy-to-administer skills that help educators focus on self-care, connect with their students, and implement mindfulness techniques that can be integrated in the regular classroom (Mindful Schools, 2017). The MS program consists of three, fifteen-minute sessions every week, lasting a total of five weeks (Black & Fernando, 2013). For the curriculum with extra classes, MS+, the intervention lasted a total of twelve weeks, with the first five weeks consisting of the regular MS sessions and in the next seven weeks the group received one fifteen-minute extra class every week (Black & Fernando, 2013). The additional lessons in MS+ reviewed the content learned in the first five weeks of the original MS sessions (Black & Fernando, 2013). There were two teachers that implemented these lessons, both mindfulness meditation teachers who had formal experience with the program, one had three years and one had twenty years of practice (Black & Fernando, 2013). Regular classroom teachers participated in the mindfulness activities with their students, and they participated in a one hour overview session on mindfulness. On the days the MS instructors were not present in the classroom, regular
classroom teachers were instructed to implement a two-minute practice lesson with their students, and students were instructed to incorporate all of the mindfulness skills in their daily activities, in the classroom, at home, on the playground (Black & Fernando, 2013).

The lessons in this study varied from week to week and included a variety of mindfulness activities and discussions. Some of the skills that were taught included practicing sitting still and focusing on posture, sending kind thoughts to people the students care about, focusing on listening and concentration on a specific sound, conducting whole body scans while concentrating on one’s feelings, and discussing ways to be generous. Other skills included discussing thoughts and how they relate to actions, mindful breathing and observing one’s surroundings, looking for things that have not been noticed before, discussing emotions and where they are felt in the body, increased awareness of movement, practicing gratefulness, slow mindful walking, mindful eating, discussing feelings that accompany tests, before, during, and after, and how mindfulness can be used during tests to overcome these feelings. All classrooms in the school participated and were randomly assigned to participate in the MS program or the MS+ program, so all students participated in the initial five week MS program. Teachers were asked to rate student classroom behavior and four categories of student behavior were assessed based on the ratings. The categories included paying attention (if the student is able to pay attention the entire time), self-control (does the child display calmness and self-control), participates in activities (engages physically in all activities), and shows respect and cares for others (the child is respectful to teachers and other students) (Black & Fernando, 2013).

The researchers assessed teacher ratings using the four categories and found that from pre- to posttest, the student behavior scores improved for all four categories, and that the improvements persisted up to seven weeks after the intervention ended for both groups and for all outcomes. They also found that in the additional lessons of the MS+ group, teacher-
rated attention scores continued to increase (Black & Fernando, 2013). However, there are
several limitations to this study. There was no control group blind to the MS curriculum, so
there could be other explanations for the effects of the mindfulness techniques. Black and
Fernando (2013) also explain that teachers were also not naïve to the intervention so their
responses may be influenced by expectancy effects due to their participation in, or
observations of, the mindfulness techniques. Multiple methods and a validated scale of
measurement need to be used to evaluate student behavior in future studies. Despite the
limitations of this study, the data indicates that the mindfulness intervention may lead to
enhancements in student classroom behavior, particularly in schools with low-income and
ethnically-diverse students, and this could lead to improving school environment and learning
(Black & Fernando, 2013).

**Inner Explorer**

In a study conducted by Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan, and Barbosa-Leiker (2016),
the mindfulness-based program, Inner Explorer (IE) was evaluated in four third grade
classrooms from two public elementary schools in Chicago, Illinois. This program focuses on
helping students improve their self-awareness and encourage managing one’s emotions
(Semple et al., 2016). The study lasted eight weeks and each session consisted of an audio-
guided lesson, that was influenced by the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)
protocol created by Kabat-Zinn and colleagues (1979), that was pre-recorded and lasted ten
minutes per day (Bakosh, et al., 2016). Teachers in the IE group received a one-hour training
session the day before the program began. Central concepts to the program were awareness of
one’s senses, emotions, and thoughts, and these were incorporated in the exercises along with
moments of silence, breathing techniques, and relaxation (Bakosh et al., 2016). Body scans,
mindful movements, identification of thoughts and emotions, values like gratitude and
kindness, and self-reflection through journaling were also included in the IE exercises.
Bakosh et al. (2016) looked at student grades and classroom behavior to see the effectiveness of the IE program, and found significant enhances in science and reading grades for students in the IE classroom as opposed to students who were not. They also believe that the easy-to-implement format of the program could be helpful in establishing widespread use of mindfulness programs in schools, but that more research needs to be done to account for bias stemming from non-randomization and teacher-reported measures (Bakosh et al., 2016).

**Master Mind**

In a study conducted by Parker, Kupersmidt, Mathis, Scull, and Sims (2014), they evaluated the effectiveness and feasibility of a mindfulness-based program, Master Mind, aimed at substance abuse prevention for fourth and fifth grade students in two public elementary schools in a southeastern state. The program is comprised of four sections, Awareness of the Body, Awareness of Feelings, Awareness of Thoughts, and Awareness of Relationships. Awareness of the Body teaches students to be cognizant of their bodies and sensations and to focus on breathing, the whole body, and the present moment. Awareness of Feelings incorporates teaching students to recognize their emotions, to learn how to express their emotions in an appropriate way, and how to cope with both negative and positive emotions. Awareness of Thoughts focuses on teaching students how to calm one’s mind, to learn how thoughts work, and how to let go of one’s thoughts, while Awareness of Relationships teaches students how to communicate with other people, especially in stressful situations, and to be compassionate to others and oneself. In each section throughout the program, students are given many opportunities to have conversations about how to use mindfulness techniques when making difficult decisions or in uncertain situations where risky activities are involved, for example, using breathing exercises when one is under stress or experiencing negative emotions. There are five central components embedded in each
section of the program: mindful breathing, mindful journeys, mindful movements, real-world applications, and daily practice (Parker et al., 2014).

Trained teachers implemented the program in the classroom once a day, every day, over a four-week span, each lesson lasting around fifteen minutes and with a total of twenty lessons taught. Each day focused on one of the four main components mentioned above, with the fifth lesson of the week focusing on real-world application. Students were either in the Master Mind program or were part of the wait-list control group, where they received the regular school curriculum and no mindfulness-based program. After eight weeks, the program was assessed to see how it influenced student outcomes on executive functioning, intentions to use substances, emotional and behavioral regulation, and how feasible it was as a program.

To examine impact, Parker and colleagues used a pre- and post-test design. At posttest, the researchers found that students in the Master Mind program had higher executive functioning skills, lower teacher-reported social problems and aggressive behaviors than the students that did not participate in the program. There were no differences between the groups for teacher-reported attention problems or student intent to use substances found at posttest. Parker et al. (2014) also found at posttest that girls in the Master Mind program had lower teacher-reported anxiety than girls in the control group, while boys in the Master Mind program had better teacher-reported self-control than the boys in the control group.

Both teachers and students reported enjoying the program and teachers reported that it was easy to use in the classroom. Parker et al. explained that a limitation to this study is that many of the student outcomes were based on teacher reports and some reports could have been biased. Another limitation is that a one-day mindfulness training session for teachers could have changed their behavior in general, which could be responsible for a better
classroom environment which would influence student outcomes. To expand on this study, the researchers recommend a longitudinal, randomized, controlled trial study be conducted.

**Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Curriculum**

As mentioned in the introduction Chapter, the Holistic Life Foundation (HLF) has several programs and services that focus on mindfulness and meditation techniques. Mendelson, et al., (2010) conducted a study to evaluate the Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Curriculum (SRMC) with fourth and fifth grade students in four urban public elementary schools. The program was designed specifically for underserved, inner-city youth, and works to create a state of awareness and calm attention to “...counter the psychological and neurocognitive effects of chronic stress exposure” (Mendelson, et al., 2010, p. 987). The program lasted twelve weeks and occurred four days per week, with each lesson lasting 45 minutes. There were two male HLF instructors per class who taught each lesson, who were similar to the students in terms of race and ethnicity, one Latino instructor and three African-American instructors, and all lessons were taught in spaces convenient for physical activity. The central components of the program include yoga-based exercises, breathing activities, and directed mindfulness activities, accompanied by discussions on forming positive relationships, staying healthy in mind and body, and using mindfulness techniques to cope with stress. Questionnaires and focus groups were used to assess the feasibility of the program and the effects on student outcomes.

Analysis of the data showed that the student reports displayed significant improvements, overall, on the Involuntary Engagement Coping Scale for students in the SRMC group as opposed to the control group. There were no significant differences between the groups in terms of changes in positive affect or relationships with other students and teachers, but there was a pattern of students not in the SRMC group to report more trust in friends. The researchers explain that their findings provide support that mindfulness-based
interventions show potential in reducing problematic responses to stress, physiologically and
cognitively, in youth. More research needs to be conducted, however, because the sample
size was small, and recruitment methods could bias the results because those who participated
were students who brought back consent forms within a certain time period, and the youth
self-reports could be biased due to social influences.

Several of the programs previously mentioned, such as Mindful Schools, Inner
Explorer, Master Mind, and Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Curriculum, were reviewed by
Semple, Droutman, and Reid (2016) along with five other school-based mindfulness
intervention programs, Mindfulness and Mind-Body Skills for Children, Resilient Kids, Still
Quiet Place, Wellness and Resilience Program, and Mindful Moment, to provide a
consolidated overview of the research conducted to support each program and provide a
discussion of the effectiveness, feasibility, and efficacy of the programs, along with strengths,
limitations, and suggestions for improvements that can be made. Semple et al. (2016),
analyzed the current research on each program and interviewed at least one of the developers
of each program to accompany their review of the literature. The program had to meet certain
criteria to be reviewed in the study, including mindfulness as the central component of the
program, the program was ongoing and had been in use for over a year, the program had been
implemented in more than one school, were used in regular classroom settings, could be
replicated, and there was little research, or none at all, published to support the program
(Semple et al., 2016).

There is a gap in the literature on the effects of mindfulness techniques in an
educational setting and how this relates to student behavior, because not much evidence-
based research has been done. The remainder of the articles in this literature review are from
the previously mentioned study conducted by Semple et al. (2016), because they are either
unpublished manuscripts, not peer reviewed, currently undergoing research, or are have not
been tested in an educational setting, and the research is, therefore, nonexistent or unobtainable.

**Mindfulness and Mind-Body Skills for Children**

This program aims to increase self-awareness, enhance resilience and self-efficacy, increase learning potential, stop risky behaviors, and develop social and emotional skills and is designed for students from ages six to thirteen. The sessions are once a week for 45 minutes and both teachers and students attend, and teachers receive training once a month on how to incorporate MMBS into the classroom. There is a two-year minimum duration of the program and the lessons are taught by trained instructors, who incorporate mindful circles, awareness of one’s breathing and body, and yoga into the lesson. Regular classroom teachers incorporate mindfulness techniques into the classroom, and mindfulness workshops are available for parents and other school staff. After the one year pilot of the program, students and teachers from the Golomb School were asked to fill out an open-ended questionnaire about their experience with the program. Qualitative analysis suggested that the program may enhance coping skills and improve self-image, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and friendliness.

**Resilient Kids**

This program works to teach students emotional balance and self-regulation, enhance self-confidence, make school communities strong and healthy, and reduce violence, bullying, and behavioral problems. The program is taught for 32 weeks by trained instructors, usually in two 30 minute lessons per week. This program was originally designed for elementary school classrooms, but it can be implemented in K-12 classrooms. The lessons include yoga, mindfulness practices, breathing exercises, personal journaling, and discussions. Regular classroom teachers are encouraged to participate as well. There has been one internal evaluation of the program, but it has not been peer reviewed (Semple et al., 2016).
Quantitatively, “Some schools reported 30% to 50% reductions in behavioral referrals, with students self-reporting reductions in stress. One school reported an 83% decrease in incidents of violence” (Semple et al., 2016, p. 43). Qualitatively, through student and teacher reports, the findings suggest that the RK program improved self-confidence and emotional-regulation, and created a better community climate in the school. Two studies, started in 2014 and 2015, are gathering more information on the effectiveness of the RK program.

**Still Quiet Place**

This program focuses on teaching children skills that enhance well-being and self-regulation to help counter the effects of everyday life stresses. The lessons are designed to be age appropriate, for example, using breathing exercises last about one minute per year of how old the child is. The program is designed for students from ages five to eighteen. Trained instructors teach the lessons and lessons occur eight times per week. Each lesson lasts between 30 minutes to an hour. There are body scan and breathing exercises, mindful eating, kindness activities, and mediation. A body scan is an activity where the student sits still and quietly while the teacher helps the student focus on being aware of different parts of their body, so that they can learn to regulate their emotions and think about their experiences in their body (DeUrquiza, E. F., 2014). There has not been research conducted on the school-based SQP program, but research on the family-based intervention found that those who participated in the program displayed significantly less emotional reactivity than those who did not participate in the program and children in the program were more likely to be compassionate and less judgmental of themselves than those who were not (Semple et al., 2016).

**Wellness and Resilience Program**

This program works to teach students, from prekindergarten to twelfth grade, mindfulness practices for relaxation, to focus on inner events, and to reduce stress with
contemplative techniques. The program requires intense teacher trainings and retreats, and the level at which the program is implemented into the classroom is up to the teacher. The program consists of body scans, breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, music, stress relief activities like squeezing toys, and “peace corners” used to calm students. The program, however, has only been examined in one unpublished study. Findings from this study show that the WRP supported improvements in mindful awareness and reducing stress. As the program has only been implemented in Vermont thus far, more research needs to be conducted (Semple et al., 2016).

**Summary**

Each study discussed provides evidence of the positive benefits of mindfulness programs for students, such as increased emotional regulation, better grades, decreased suspension rates, and greater self-awareness. However, the techniques of implementation varied widely, as did the methods of measurement of these techniques. Further research needs to be conducted to observe what core values of mindfulness are most influential for students, how they should be implemented, and what benefits are most prevalent across the board.
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how mindfulness techniques influenced student behavior at one elementary school. The researcher used a qualitative research design by conducting interviews with school faculty and parents, and an observation to gain insight into their perceptions of, and experiences with, the mindfulness program. This chapter outlines the research design, study participants, interview and observation procedures, the role of the researcher, and data coding procedure.

Role of the Researcher

I am a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, majoring in Human Development and Family Studies. My educational goal is to obtain a Masters of Arts in Teaching for Elementary Education and become an elementary school teacher. Throughout my education courses at UNC, I became passionate about social justice in classroom environments and was especially inspired by my Social Justice in Education class. My professor was a member of the NC House of Representatives and he was the first to expose me to the concept of the School to Prison Pipeline and systemic racism in schools.

Additionally, my own experiences as a student also exposed me to the inequalities and injustices apparent in the school systems. For example, I remember several times when some of my white classmates would skip school or be disrespectful to a classmate or teacher and should have been suspended, but because they were “good students” they were only given minor consequences and still allowed to participate in school clubs and events. I knew this would not have been the case if they were not white, so this led me to want to challenge and change that system. Furthermore, my beliefs that education is a right for all children, and that no child should be sent away from the classroom, drove me into looking at alternative options to suspension. I decided to look into mindfulness techniques in the classroom because of social media posts I saw, and conversations I had with current educators, particularly when I
saw a video about how the Holistic Life Foundation was working with the Robert W. Coleman School in Baltimore and with the program suspension rates dropped significantly and then disappeared altogether. My faculty advisor and I talked about this and it made me want to research more about mindfulness. I felt that a qualitative research design would be the best way to gather information because every school is unique and qualitative research allows the participants’ voices to be heard and access those differences.

**Research Design**

Mindfulness practices at one elementary school in rural North Carolina were explored to see why they are beneficial. The study involved the observation of a counselor-led mindfulness lesson, and included interviews with the school principal, one parent, and the school counselor. The school in this study was purposefully chosen due to their incorporation of mindfulness lessons into their school curriculum. Additionally, a factor for selection was the proximity of the school to the researcher and the consent of the school principal and counselor to participate in the study by allowing face-to-face interviews and an observation. The principal also gave permission to recruit parents/guardians of children who had been part the school’s mindfulness program. The school is a Title I school and serves students (n = 513) from kindergarten to fourth grade, where the student population is 58.3% white, 18.1% black, 15.2% hispanic, 6.4% two or more races, and 1.9% asian (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The school counselor started conducting mindfulness lessons with a group of students in a program called “Zen Kids.” The program lasted seven weeks and included a group of six to seven students who, based off of the previous year’s discipline data, had three or more office referrals. After this program ended, the counselor began implementing mindfulness lessons into her general curriculum provided to all student students in kindergarten through second grade, while the third and fourth grade students worked on test taking skills. The school counselor would meet with the students every other
week for a 30-minute lesson. Although the counselor has no formal training on using mindfulness techniques in the classroom, she used her own experience with yoga and gathered her own research on mindfulness to conduct the lessons.

**Interview Participants and Setting**

Initial contact with the principal was through email to inform him about the research and ask if he would like to voluntarily participate in the study. While he was interested in participating, there had to be approval from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (UNC-CH, IRB) and the local school board of the elementary school before beginning. Once approval was obtained by both UNC’s IRB and from the school board, the school counselor was contacted through email to inform her about the research and to ask for her voluntary participation in the study, to which she agreed. The counselor and principal agreed to inform parents of the study and get a group of students together for a mindfulness lesson that could be observed. The principal and counselor also asked parents whose children participated in mindfulness techniques at the school if they would like to participate in an interview. All student and parent participants had to sign a consent form that was approved by UNC’s IRB, which was given to them by the school counselor. The counselor and principal also had to sign a permission form before being interviewed.

Once all permission forms were signed, the interviews were conducted. There were three interviews, one with the school counselor, one with the principal, and one with the parent of a student, who also happened to be a teacher at the school. Each interview was conducted one-on-one in a private office, and each lasted about 30 minutes. The participants were allowed to respond, or not respond, to any of the questions, and each participant was asked questions specific to their role in the school. The finalized list of interview questions
can be found in Appendix A. All of the interviews were recorded, and the recordings were kept in a file on the researcher’s password protected computer.

**Observation Participants and Setting**

After the interviews were conducted, the school counselor conducted a mindfulness lesson with a group of six selected students. The lesson began in the school counselor’s office, where the researcher observed in a corner separated from the students and the counselor to keep the lesson as authentic as possible. The lesson then moved outside where the researcher remained with the school counselor while the students completed the activity given to them. The activity consisted of a worksheet that can be found in Appendix B. The entire lesson lasted about 45 minutes. During the inside lesson notes were taken on the computer and notes about the outside lesson were taken after returning to the classroom. An observation guide was created to organize the lesson based on the counselor’s actions, the student’s reactions, the setting, and the specific techniques used during the lesson and a finalized copy of the observation protocol can be found in Appendix C.

**Data Coding Procedure**

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher downloaded the documents, and the observation notes, to a coding program called ATLAS. The responses and observations were grouped into common themes that were used to find patterns and similarities across responses and how they related to the mindfulness lesson and the existing literature.

**Obtaining Institutional Review Board Approval**

This study was approved by the non-biomedical University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (IRB) on April 21, 2017. The IRB number is 17-0649. Both the faculty and the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training
Initiative’s Group 2 Social and Behavioral Research training along with the requisite conflict of interest disclosures.
Results

The purpose of this study was to observe how one school used mindfulness techniques with their students and to ascertain how parents and school personnel believed mindfulness techniques influenced student behavior. The findings from the interview sessions and the school faculty’s comments are presented in this chapter.

Specific research questions guiding the study were:

1. How can the disproportionality of school discipline be addressed so that students of color are not at greater risk for exclusionary practices?

2. What are the alternative methods to exclusionary discipline and are they effective in reducing suspension rates?

3. Does teaching mindfulness techniques, including meditation and self-regulation, to students reduce suspension rates?

4. Are certain mindfulness techniques more effective at helping students regulate their emotions?

Three interviews and an observation session were conducted to collect data, and the results are presented in this chapter. Each interview participant, and the school itself, have been given new names to provide anonymity in order to meet the UNC Institutional Review Board guidelines that were approved for this study. The first interview participant was Ms. Monroe, a white teacher at Panther Elementary, with 11 years of teaching experience, and also a parent of one of the students who received the mindfulness lessons. The next interview participant was the school counselor at Panther Elementary, Ms. Sharp, who has 14 years of experience in school counseling and is also white. The last interview participant was Mr. Potter, the principal for the last 5 years at Panther Elementary, who has 20 years of experience working as both a teacher and a principal, and is black.
Each participant was asked questions about program implementation and student response to the program. Participants described the mindfulness program as a way to address the overrepresentation of minority students in their discipline system. They also described the specific mindfulness methods used in the program, which included breathing, being present, having a mindful body, and being calm. Some of the core ideas behind the program mentioned by all of the participants were student empowerment and engagement, and emotional regulation. The participants also explained the perceived benefits from the program as the students having life skills that can transfer to other academic and social aspects of their lives. Participants were asked for suggestions on how to improve the mindfulness program and what future plans for the program looked like. The suggestions included more communication with teachers and parents, overcoming misconceptions about mindfulness, and incorporating mindfulness into more lessons and aspects of the school day. Based on the participants’ experiences and perceptions with the mindfulness groups, the data shows nine major themes that are discussed below: 1) Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline; 2) Essential Standards; 3) Mindfulness Techniques; 4) Emotional Regulation; 5) Student Engagement; 6) Student Empowerment; 7) Benefits; 8) Suggestions for Program Improvement; and 9) Future Plans.

**Theme 1: Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline**

Throughout the interviews, each participant mentioned some aspect of discipline in relation to why the mindfulness program was implemented, what their own personal beliefs on discipline are, or what the school is doing in regards to discipline. Many of the conversations revolved around the overrepresentation of minority students in the discipline system at Panther Elementary and also discrepancies in discipline at the school. Ms. Monroe, coming from a teacher and parent perspective, expressed her concerns with school discipline, “But what I’ve noticed recently is there’s such a discrepancy in what I think is a major
offense versus what another person might feel and I guess that if I could change anything just more consistent expectations about behavior school-wide would be my goal.” Ms. Monroe continued by explaining a situation where there was a discrepancy in discipline relating to disrespect. She described:

> For example, I share a room with a teacher and one of my kids was using like street language with me and I used it back and that’s how I relate to my kids and when they left she said “I just can’t believe you let them talk to you like that, that seems so disrespectful” but I didn’t see it as being disrespectful, and she was like “I would’ve wrote them up for that you know” and I was like well I wouldn’t, so it’s just things like that.

When explaining how the program began, Ms. Sharp, the school counselor, emphasized that the program was a response to the overrepresentation of minority students in their discipline system and that she was looking for alternatives to In-School Suspension (ISS) and Out of School Suspension (OSS). She commented:

> If you were to look at our discipline data, our highest discipline area is boys and then after that it is African-American boys and our biggest problem is physical aggression so to me that made a lot of sense and I’ve also been interested in the concept of just emotional regulation in general with our kids. It made a lot of sense that if we can regularly help our students learn how to regulate their emotions we might have a chance.

Ms. Sharp also explained how her interest in yoga and her excitement about mindfulness led her to create lessons based off of books she read and other lessons she found from different resources. She began these lessons by starting the “Zen Kids” group, and she commented:
But we have seen an improvement with the kids in that group but we also did some more wrap around services so it wasn’t just a mindfulness group it was some mentoring, it was some um really intentional relationship building with their classroom teachers there was just a couple other things plus the mindfulness concepts.

Ms. Sharp also explained some frustrations she has with school discipline, describing how there has been much blame placed on teachers for the overrepresentation of minority students in the discipline system, but resources are constantly being cut and teachers are not being taught the skills that they need to work with the students they currently have. She described:

I understand the pipeline to prison, I’ve seen it, I know what people are talking about, but when you tell teachers don’t suspend, and don’t do office referrals, and don’t bring them out of their classroom, if you give them no techniques and no skills on how to handle that you’ve done nothing.

Ms. Sharp explained that if teachers were given the proper training and if discipline is more focused on restorative justice and educational, there would be long term benefits in middle and high school. According to the Edutopia website, restorative justice works to empower students to solve conflicts with others and also on their own, by giving them problem-solving skills and encouraging communication between students (Davis, 2013). However, Ms. Sharp did say that there had been a decrease in discipline, measured by office referrals, within the last two years.

Mr. Potter, the principal, also commented on alternatives to discipline that are implemented at the school and how they are trying to change discipline. He said, “We have a person that’s responsible for like ‘Chill Out’ is what we call it and so that’s been really nice to say ‘hey Johnny before you escalate you know we want you to take a chill out and just have five minutes to walk around the school with another adult’ and so I think that has really
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helped.” He described supporting students in a positive way and providing them with alternatives instead of just office referrals. Another example he gave was, “I would say eight to 10 kids at our school where they have a contract with their teacher if they need a break they can show a break card to their teacher and they can go to Ms. Sharp’s office, or they can go to another teacher’s classroom and that’s been really helpful.” Mr. Potter also mentioned that they use Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) as part of their instruction and work on being respectful and showing loyalty in the classroom. When asked if he thought Ms. Sharp’s lessons could relate to this or be incorporated more, he replied, “Absolutely, absolutely for sure.”

**Theme 2: Essential Standards**

All of the participants explained that the mindfulness lessons were incorporated into the lessons Ms. Sharp was already doing with the students; lessons that she referred to as her essential standards. When asked if she had to give permission for the program to start, Ms. Monroe, the school teacher, stated, “I think it was just part of the lessons she was doing with the classes.” Ms. Sharp elaborated on this and explained, “I have essential standards as a school counselor, NC school counselors have essential standards that we need to be teaching, and so we do a curriculum map,” and she had a few extra weeks so she decided to do schoolwide mindfulness lessons. She also commented on the feasibility of implementing the program into other schools and said, “Oh I think it’s very feasible and it completely aligns with our essential standards so I mean you can definitely do it.”

Mr. Potter described Ms. Sharp’s program implementation and her connections to her typical lessons:

So she incorporated some mindfulness into her lessons and so I think she really does a great job of just thinking about all of the political ramifications of all of the things that she implements through her kind of standard course of study and how it can connect.
Mr. Potter also explained how they talk to their students about the concept of a growth mindset, and how powerful it has been to think about the interconnectedness of mindfulness and growth mindset. Although Mr. Potter did not expand on the interconnectedness of mindfulness and growth mindset, future studies should explore this idea as growth mindset is a framework used by school counselors. According to the Mindset Works website, growth mindset is the understanding that intelligence and abilities can be developed (Dweck, 2017).

**Theme 3: Mindfulness Techniques**

Participants were asked to describe what the students were learning, what they thought the students liked most about the program, and what they thought the biggest takeaways for students were. Based on their interactions with the students in school and at home, they explained several core elements incorporated into the mindfulness techniques that they observed or discussed with the students. These included: being present, breathing, calmness, and mindful body and coloring.

**Being Present.** Ms. Sharp was the only one to mention being present as one of the core concepts of the mindfulness techniques that she taught. She explained, “We’ve learned about being present, controlling our mind, and just thinking only about what’s going on right now,” in reference to the skills the students use to regulate their emotions. This was especially emphasized in the observation session, when Ms. Sharp reminded the group to focus on being in her room, and being present. She also explained that in a previous class the students had read a story about being present, noticing what is going on around them, being observant, and thinking, which led into a nature walk activity. Before going outside, Ms. Sharp really emphasized that she wanted the students to notice the outside and the animals, really hear the sounds, things they never noticed outside of the school, and then to write a thought or feeling that they had while observing. During the activity, Ms. Sharp commented,
“I had a misconception that it was about keeping still and quiet, but it’s about being in the present moment and noticing the environment around them.”

**Breathing.** All three participants expressed breathing as one of the main parts of the mindfulness techniques that they observed, taught, or talked about with the students. An example of this was when Ms. Monroe explained, “She mostly just talks about the deep breathing,” when asked if her daughter talks about the mindfulness techniques at home. Mr. Potter also commented that the students like the breathing aspect of the mindfulness techniques. He described, “Some of our fourth graders, I mean they saw just some of the breathing exercises that Ms. Sharp did, they saw it as kind of empowering you know.” Ms. Sharp explained that some of her lessons with the students included learning how to breath in different ways, and using breathing as a way to focus on what is going on in the moment. She mentioned, “They know if they breath they’re going to feel better, they’re not resistant to it,” in reference to the biggest takeaway from the mindfulness techniques for students. In the observation session, Ms. Sharp began the lesson by reminding students what mindfulness is and by playing a video found on YouTube called “Mind in a Jar.” During the video, the students are asked to breath whenever the bell “dings” so that they can settle their thoughts and minds.

**Calmness.** Both Ms. Monroe and Ms. Sharp expressed being calm and calmness as central ideas incorporated into the mindfulness techniques. Ms. Sharp expressed one of the important aspects of calmness when she said, “We’ve practiced it when they’re calm so when they’re not calm they can recall so it’s not new.” This was seen in the observation session when Ms. Sharp explained that mindfulness is feeling calm and safe, and talking about why they use mindfulness: to feel happy and calm. Ms. Monroe described an example of when her daughter recalled the mindfulness skills saying, “Like she was just so calm.” Ms. Sharp mentioned some other feedback she had received from parents saying, “One mom said ‘I had
to play her some spa music like all the way to the mountains this weekend because you played it and it like calmed her down,”” referencing her daughter who received mindfulness lessons from Ms. Sharp.

Ms. Sharp also explained other things that they do to regulate their emotions, saying:

We’ve learned to you know do something calming, so if that’s listening to music, if that’s going to get a drink of water, if that’s my skill groups have learned wall pushes, stretches, … just little things that they can do in the classroom.

Ms. Monroe demonstrated an example of this by explaining that Ms. Sharp had given her a glitter jar to use with her daughter at home. When asked how the jar worked she replied:

Well really I think they just look at it and just the whole process of watching the glitter fall and settle, it’s kind of a metaphor, too about your emotions needing to calm and settle, and just the whole idea of looking I think that calms them down.

During the observation session, Ms. Sharp used the Mind in a Jar video which gave a visual representation of what Ms. Monroe was describing - a jar filled with sand that students were asked to watch as the sand settled to the bottom of the jar, while breathing and thinking about what happens to our minds when we meditate and have a mindful body. Ms. Monroe described an example of when she observed this in an afterschool setting, saying,

I did help with the tutoring after school and Ms. Sharp came every day and did thirty minutes of like mindfulness with them; it’s to prepare them for end of grade tests, and just from the techniques that I could see, it’s like the kids instantly calm down and it just creates this really nice classroom environment.

**Mindful Body and Coloring.** Ms. Sharp also explained that many of her lessons began with focusing on having a mindful body and then the students would do an activity. When asked what a lesson would look like in the classroom, she replied:
They’d come in, we’d review what mindfulness was, what a mindful body looks like, we’d do our mindful sound work then we would do another practice so we might do some cards and I give them directions on what to do. We might do mindful coloring, they love that, and I made a big deal about how slow and how their brain has to be focused only on the coloring and they really have to pay attention to what their thoughts are. So that was really fun, and then we did that over some time because I kept telling them “you’re not going to finish because this is something you’re doing slowly and so intentionally.” So we did that for a little while.

Having a mindful body was one of the main focuses of the observation session. Ms. Sharp asked the students what a mindful body looked like and then led them in stretches, which included stretching their arms up high, bringing them down slowly, tilting their heads and stretching, giving themselves a massage, circling their heads, twisting their torsos, and doing a forward fold for five seconds and rolling up slowly, to get their bodies loose and ready to be still and quiet. After the stretches, the students practiced having a mindful body. They sat for five minutes listening to music and Ms. Sharp told them to pick one thought to think about, to sit really still and quiet, to close their eyes if they want to, to try to keep their backs straight, rest their arms on their legs, and she adjusted students where they needed to be and told them how proud she was of them for having a mindful body.

**Theme 4: Emotional Regulation**

One theme that appeared across all of the interviews was how the mindfulness techniques relate to the students being able to regulate their emotions. Ms. Sharp explained about the Zones of Regulation that they use at school:

There’s blue, green, yellow, and red, and blue is slow, green is calm, focused ready to go, yellow is anxious, worried, maybe silly, and red is out of control yelling and
screaming, so we learned about those and we learned techniques to help us stay in the green zone so that’s what we did.

Ms. Sharp also mentioned the Zones of Regulation when discussing what she believes are the central components of the mindfulness program. Ms. Sharp said, “Okay so I think the main things are recognizing your emotions, not judging, not getting angry with yourself because you’re in the red zone or you’re in the yellow zone or even the blue zone.” Ms. Sharp also mentioned how students benefit from the mindfulness techniques by describing how society has become more “stimulation heavy” and how expectations of students have increased. She explained, “So teaching them how to recognize these emotions is valuable in letting them know that these emotions are okay.” Ms. Sharp explained that emotional regulation was one of the main focuses of her group, “Zen Kids.” She described what she told the students’ teachers, “I really want to try honing in on their emotional regulation. I think it’ll help them with their focus and behavior; these are skills I’m going to try to teach them, and it was just part of our intervention model.” Although Ms. Monroe’s daughter was not in the “Zen Kids” group, she was able to provide an example of how she saw her daughter take control of her emotions. She mentioned:

She got in trouble yesterday at school for talking, imagine that I know you’ve met her, and usually she would’ve just broken down, but she was able to like walk me through it, what happened and at the end she was like “So what will my punishment be at home?” Like she was just so calm. And all I could think of was like this is like a 360 from before you know? And I think that being able to regulate her emotions has helped her with that.

Ms. Monroe continued by explaining specific benefits for her daughter that she sees from the program. She described:
I think for her, like she has a hard time, like she gets really worked up and has a hard time coming down from that, and since beginning the mindfulness techniques at school I have noticed that that kind of like hasn’t been happening at all. She hasn’t gotten to that point anymore, she’s able to regulate her emotions, I guess better and have more self-control over them which has been really exciting.

Ms. Monroe further described that the strategies are ones that the students can use “throughout their life as a way to regulate their emotions and their stress and just to be a more confident human.”

Mr. Potter also provided an example of emotional regulation, in terms of student maturity, in a classroom he observed. He commented, “They really responded well, and you saw it in their like movement around the room, like almost it was like a heightened maturity in there because like the expectation is there and so I think that’s important.” Mr. Potter also explained how Ms. Sharp helps students control their emotions. He mentioned, “She did a good job of kind of like comparing our PAWS ‘positive attitude, always be respectful, work hard, stay safe,’ and thinking about how kids can control themselves to do that.” During the observation session, Ms. Sharp used different resources to help the students learn ways to regulate their emotions. In the Mind in a Jar video, there were two different pictures of the jar: one with a tornado in it and the sand swirling around, and one without the tornado and just the sand. The tornado picture represented anger or frustration and the other represented being calm. Ms. Sharp explained that the students “can calm our bodies and brains whenever we are having yucky feelings,” and that they use mindfulness to get back to the green zone, and to help them sit still and be focused.

Theme 5: Student Engagement

Ms. Sharp, Ms. Monroe, and Mr. Potter all mentioned some aspect of student engagement when discussing the mindfulness techniques and Ms. Sharp’s lessons. Ms. Sharp
explained, “They enjoy that, they enjoy just being able to be and I think they enjoy the coloring a lot, and anytime I can give them a manipulative to do they seem to respond really well to that,” and “we do mindful coloring, they love that.” Mr. Potter gave an example of this when he described student response to one of the lessons he observed, saying, “Yeah they were really engaged and I think they really thought about Ms. Sharp’s lesson and just how thoughtful it was.” When asked if her daughter talks about the mindfulness lessons at home, Ms. Monroe was also able to provide an example of her daughter’s engagement outside of the classroom. She explained, “She said something yesterday but I can’t remember what it was but you can tell that she knew exactly what had been taught in class.” Student engagement was evident in the observation session, when Ms. Sharp asked the students if they wanted to do two minutes of the mindful body exercise or if they wanted to do more, and all of the students agreed that they wanted to try five minutes because other classes were doing longer than two minutes. Student engagement was also evident during the nature walk exercise when one student found a four-leaf clover and Ms. Sharp commented, “I love that you guys are noticing outside.”

**Theme 6: Student Empowerment**

One of the most interesting themes that appeared in the data was student empowerment. All of the participants mentioned some aspect of student empowerment in their interview. Ms. Sharp explained, “I think it makes them feel like a grown up and, you know, like I can do this,” in response to being asked what she thinks the students like most about the techniques. She further explained what she thought were the biggest takeaways for the students: “I think just the feeling empowered and feeling like I’m in control of my emotions and I know what to do if they get to a certain level I know what to do.” Ms. Sharp also described the central components of the mindfulness program. She mentioned that one of
the components is “Learning strategies and techniques to, and be, feeling empowered to get back to the green and to get your brain and your body calm.”

Mr. Potter also discussed a lesson that he observed and some of the things he took away. One of the things he mentioned was that Ms. Sharp focused on “Really kind of empowering our students to be more controlled and to be more thoughtful about their interactions.” Mr. Potter further explains that oftentimes, students will place blame or responsibility on someone else instead of taking responsibility for their actions. When it comes to the mindfulness techniques, he said:

What I’ve seen from Ms. Sharp’s work with kids is that it really empowers them to be responsible for their own actions and really be and to think about that they’re the catalyst for change like and so it’s not so much the teacher’s responsibility or it’s not so much their peer’s responsibility on how they treat or respond to others but just believing that they you can do this to you can be empowered to make good choices and so that was the nice part.

Mr. Potter also described empowering students as the goal, and that Ms. Sharp works to show students “how strong they are.”

On the other hand, Ms. Monroe did not explicitly use the word empower to describe the mindfulness techniques, however, she commented “Well I think, just, I think it makes them just be more aware and cognizant of their feelings so that they can express themselves in a more productive way.” She also described how the techniques have been helpful for her daughter in controlling her emotions, as she struggles with anxiety. She mentioned, “I know for my daughter, she would really go from like 0 to 60, like calm to a tantrum, and like I’ve said I’ve noticed now that she’s better about explaining herself.” Student empowerment was also evident in the observation session, as Ms. Sharp asked for student input on the activities.
She even allowed them to be independent and explore on their own while they were outside conducting the nature walk, to give them a chance to not be led by her.

**Theme 7: Benefits**

All of the participants described benefits that they believe the students gain from engaging in the mindfulness lessons. Ms. Monroe commented on multiple ways that mindfulness can relate to other aspects of students’ lives:

I just think it’s great for those kids especially the kids that struggle with anxiety or you know emotional issues or maybe attention issues that can really help them refocus and stay more on track and I think just overall that it’ll translate over into better academic performance and you know just better home life and just all around real positive things.

She provided an example by explaining, “My daughter has some anxiety issues and so we’ve talked a lot about it at home,” referring to conversations around the mindfulness techniques that her daughter is learning. Ms. Monroe even expressed that she would have liked to have a program like this growing up, because she believes you can learn so much from it. She commented, “Like I said earlier I just think the mindfulness techniques are truly life skills that all kids need to have.” Ms. Sharp also said she had seen students taking these skills back home with them. She explained, “When it comes to this particularly parents have come to me and then been really appreciative and have said like ‘wow their kids are coming home and talking about it and they’re learning.’”

Another benefit of the mindfulness program involves the sustainability of the program. When asked a question about the sustainability of the program, Ms. Sharp replied:

I think it is. I think it could be sustainable you know again it so aligns with the school counselor’s essential standards that you could incorporate this into everything that you do. Cause even if you’re talking about academic skills, you know what I mean,
you could reflect that back to getting calm and being focused, well being focused is being mindful, so you know what I mean? You can really hone in.

Similarly, Mr. Potter mentioned that, for the students, the lessons “Help them think about themselves as learners and students and again to kind of reflect and pause.” He also explained how Ms. Sharp’s lessons led to other benefits for the students. He commented, “helping students become more aware of themselves and taking some time to be more reflective and really realizing that I think in our society, and I think in our schools, that we don’t really have a lot of time just to be quiet and just to really pause.”

Ms. Sharp did give the students a chance to pause during the observation session, and she related what they were doing in the lesson to student’s lives outside of the classroom. While watching the Mind in a Jar video, she explained that sometimes in real life a friend might be mean to the students, or they might get scared, or they might have a bad dream, and their feelings might look like the tornado in the jar where they feel angry or frustrated, but that they can calm their bodies and minds just like they do when they watch the sand settle to the bottom of the jar.

**Theme 8: Suggestions for Program Improvement**

When asked about suggestions to improve the program, each participant replied that there needed to be more communication with teachers and parents regarding the program. Ms. Monroe believes that the program is awesome, but also said,

I guess the only thing I would like to change is maybe get more, to be provided with more information about specific things that she’s providing the kids with in class so that we could reinforce them better at home, that would probably be helpful.

Ms. Sharp also mentioned communicating more with teachers and providing them with more information. She mentioned, “Yeah maybe reaching, and this is my bad, and not that my staff would not be into it, maybe reaching out more to the staff, having the staff
incorporate some visuals into their own classroom.” Mr. Potter also expressed concern for reaching out more to the staff. He commented, “I think thinking about how we can, we haven’t done a lot of work with our teachers at all, and so I think having some conversation with our teachers.”

Mr. Potter and Ms. Sharp also mentioned overcoming misconceptions of mindfulness as another way to improve the program. Ms. Sharp suggested:

Really just mindfulness in general I think can blend itself to some controversy, you know what I mean? I think just framing it under the umbrella of emotional regulation, I don’t think you’re going to have too many issues with parents and teachers who are like “What are you doing? Like are you starting a cult?”

Mr. Potter also suggested ways to introduce the mindfulness material to teachers and get “adult buy-in.” He mentioned:

I always think the “why” “why are we doing this” and “why it’s important,” and then I also think it’s important to kind of have some kid testimonies. I think it would be nice to have some videos of kids working in school, I mean working in their classroom. Like Ms. Sharp, when I observed her in kindergarten, she, like having some videotaping of that and seeing the kids respond, seeing the faces you know. So I mean I think those are the things that really hook, you know hook teachers and say “Oh this is really real” and it’s not just something spooky you know this is helpful you know so I think that’s really thoughtful.

When asked about working with students from vulnerable populations, Ms. Sharp explained, “I think there’s gonna have to be a, if you have students who have gone through trauma and who live in persistent chaos all the time, sitting still and focusing I think makes them feel like they are at potential for harm.” She continued by saying that you have to express to the students what situations are okay for them to sit still and be focused and give
them “a lot of security before they can really learn that it’s okay, this is a safe place, and it’s fine for you to sit and breath, and it’s okay for you to close your eyes, and if you’re not comfortable with closing your eyes right now then maybe you can learn to just look down.”

Another suggestion Ms. Sharp had was in relation to the implementation of mindfulness. She explained, “you would need to make sure that when you did, especially if you were having teachers to do it, that … they use this in a compassionate and productive way and not ‘That’s it you’re going to the calm corner!’” She emphasized that it needed to be executed in a compassionate way, but that we are all human so teachers should really be taught to use this in a productive way.

Theme 9: Future Plans

Both Mr. Potter and Ms. Sharp mentioned what they would like to do to move the program forward, and where they saw the program heading, in the future. Ms. Sharp described her future plans, “To infuse this in all of my lessons, some aspect of this in all of them.” She also explained some other examples of how she would implement this more in the classroom. Ms. Sharp added, “We’ve talked about having a calm corner in every classroom with some manipulatives and visuals so I’m excited to hopefully integrate that.” Mr. Potter described the mindfulness techniques as “the perfect transition” for the students who were in tutoring after school. He explained,

Because what we saw in them during the day was sometimes ramped up yeah but I think it was really important for them to transition to some like quiet thoughtful techniques and then move to an afterschool session so I feel like we will definitely do that in the afternoons if we have kids.

He also expressed that he could see the techniques being implemented into the school’s morning meetings, and during some of the school day transitions. The morning meeting consists of every student being acknowledged and allowed time to share something
personal, in order to build community in that classroom. Mr. Potter explained that mindfulness could be incorporated within this as “I think an opportunity to build community and also an opportunity for the person to, that to kind of carry it out to have a good relationship with people.”

Summary

The purpose of this study was to observe how mindfulness techniques are implemented at one elementary school and how they influence student behavior. Through the interviews and observation session, information was gathered on program implementation, specific techniques, student response, benefits, and ideas for program improvement. The perceptions and experiences of the participants established that mindfulness can be used as an alternative for exclusionary discipline, and can align with a school counselor’s essential standards, making mindfulness easy to implement. They also established what mindfulness techniques are especially helpful for students, and how important emotional regulation, student engagement, and student empowerment are when teaching mindfulness. Finally, participant perception and experience were important in understanding what benefits students can receive, how to improve the program, and what future plans should look like.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to observe how mindfulness techniques influence student behavior at one elementary school. Based on school faculty perception and experience, as well as the perception of one parent, the results show that the mindfulness techniques have positive benefits for students and on student behavior. Several themes that emerged from the results are consistent with existing literature, especially in terms of mindfulness techniques that are used as core components of the programs. Several elements of the mindfulness program were not mentioned in the literature discussed previously, but provide important insight into the implementation of mindfulness programs. In this section, the results of the interviews and observation session are discussed in relation to the research questions and existing literature, followed by the implications for the field of education, limitations of the current study, and considerations for future research.

1. How can the disproportionality of school discipline be addressed so that students of color are not at greater risk for exclusionary practices?
2. What are the alternative methods to exclusionary discipline and are they effective in reducing suspension rates?
3. Does teaching mindfulness techniques, including meditation and self-regulation, to students reduce suspension rates?
4. Are certain mindfulness techniques more effective at helping students regulate their emotions?

Research Question 2: Alternative to Exclusionary Discipline

When discussing discipline, Ms. Monroe mentioned her frustration with the discrepancy in discipline. She gave an example of when a student used “street language” with her, which she then used back to the student, and the disagreement she had with another teacher over whether or not the student was being disrespectful and should be written up.
This is consistent with previous literature discussed, where zero tolerance policies have been applied to subjective behaviors, such as disrespect (Townsend Walker, 2014). Ms. Monroe and Mr. Potter both expressed supporting students and creating a positive school environment. This finding is consistent with Schonert-Reichl et al.’s (2015) study of the MindUp program. They found that the MindUp program uses mindfulness skills to create a positive classroom environment that is supportive for students. While Research Question 3 was not directly addressed, Ms. Sharp mentioned that Panther Elementary had seen a decrease in school discipline within the last two years, which could be due to the implementation of the mindfulness techniques into her curriculum. This is consistent with the literature on the Resilient Kids program, where schools reported reductions in behavioral referrals, a decrease in the number of incidents of violence, and students reported a reduction in stress (Semple et al., 2016).

**Research Question 1: Essential Standards**

Ms. Sharp explained that mindfulness could be implemented in other schools, especially because it so easily aligned with the essential standards that school counselors are required to address and because it was easy to incorporate into the classroom. This is consistent with Parker et al.’s (2014) study of the Master Mind program, where they found that, based on teacher reports, it was easy to use in the classroom. Bakosh et al. (2016) also found that the format of the Inner Explorer program made it easy to implement in the classroom.

**Research Question 4: Mindfulness Techniques**

The mindfulness techniques incorporated into Ms. Sharp’s lessons were also considered to be the core elements of many of the mindfulness programs examined in the existing literature.
Being Present. Ms. Sharp mentioned a misconception she had of mindfulness was that students had to be quiet and still, but that it is actually about focusing on the present moment and the environment around them. During the nature walk, Ms. Sharp especially emphasized being present and being aware of the surrounding environment. This finding is consistent with Black and Fernando’s (2013) study of the Mindful Schools program. They found that The Development of Mindfulness, one of the methods of training in the program, encourages students to focus on their thoughts and emotions in each moment, and awareness of their environment. During the observation sessions, Ms. Sharp encouraged the students to just think about what was happening right now in her room. Being present is also a core element that Parker et al. (2014) found in the Master Mind program as part of the Awareness of the Body section, where students are taught to be aware of the present moment.

Breathing. Throughout the interview, each participant mentioned breathing as one of the core components of Ms. Sharp’s lessons. Interestingly, the use of breathing as a core practice in mindfulness techniques is seen in every program mentioned in the Literature Review. The central mindfulness techniques in the MindUp program focus on breathing and attentive listening (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Ms. Sharp explained that the students learned different ways to breathe, and during the observation session the students practiced breathing with the Mind in a Jar video and talked about how this made them feel in terms of their emotions. This is consistent with the Black and Fernando (2013) study where they found that in the Mindful Schools program that the curriculum consisted of mindful breathing, noticing your surroundings, noticing things you have not seen before, discussing emotions and how mindfulness can be used in different situations. The literature shows that Inner Explorer, Master Mind, Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Curriculum, Mindfulness and Mind-Body Skills for Children, Resilient Kids, Still Quiet Place, and Wellness and Resilience
Program also all incorporated breathing techniques into their program curriculums (Bakosh et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2014; Mendelson et al., 2010; Semple et al., 2016).

**Calmness.** Ms. Sharp explained that the students learn how to do activities that will calm their minds and bodies and help them get back to the green zone, and Ms. Monroe gave examples of how her daughter would remain calm in situations that she previously would not have been calm in. This is consistent with some of the existing literature. In the Master Mind program previously mentioned, they have a specific section called Awareness of Thoughts that focuses on calming one’s mind, and the Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Curriculum program works to create a calm awareness for students (Parker et al., 2014, Mendelson et al., 2010). Black and Fernando (2013) also found that in the Mindful Schools program, teachers were asked to rate student self-control by expressing if the child displayed calmness.

**Mindful Body and Coloring.** Ms. Sharp expressed beginning many of her lessons with students practicing having a mindful body, and having a mindful body was emphasized during the observation session. Ms. Sharp encouraged students to really be aware of their bodies, consistent with the Mastermind and Mindfulness and Mind-Body Skills for Children programs, which both expressed awareness of the body as central to their program curriculum (Parker et al., 2014; Semple et al., 2016). For some of the other programs, such as Mindful Schools, Still Quiet Place, and Wellness and Resilience Program, they all incorporated body scans into their program curriculum as part of having a mindful body (Black & Fernando, 2013; Semple et al., 2016).

**Emotional Regulation**

In every interview, and in the observation session, emotional regulation was mentioned or displayed as a central component to the mindfulness program. Interestingly, every mindfulness program mentioned in Chapter 2 expressed emotional regulation or some aspect of controlling emotions as part of their curriculum. Ms. Sharp used the Mind in a Jar
video, the mindful body exercise, and the nature walk to show students different ways to handle their emotions. In the MindUp program previously mentioned, the curriculum is meant to encourage self-regulation, where some lessons use texts to promote social and emotional awareness, while others work to promote having a positive mood (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). The Still Quiet Place and the Resilient Kids programs also focus on skills that teach students self-regulation, emotional balance, and that help them cope with their stress (Semple et al., 2016). Ms. Monroe explained how her daughter was better able to regulate her emotions since beginning the mindfulness techniques. This is also consistent with the Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) study on the MindUp program, as they found that students in the program displayed significant improvements in emotional control and mindfulness and that mindfulness techniques, combined with other factors, can create significant gains for elementary school students in emotional and social well-being. Research presented by Semple et al. (2016) on the Still Quiet Place program also found that participants in the family-based intervention had significantly less emotional reactivity than those who did not participate in the program. Ms. Sharp also described the Zones of Regulation and how the students learn to not judge themselves for whatever level they are at. In the Still Quiet Place program, the research found that those who participated in the family-based intervention of the program displayed significantly less emotional reactivity than those who did not participate in the program and the children who participated in the program were more likely than children who did not participate to be less judgmental of themselves (Semple et al., 2016). Ms. Sharp explained that part of the techniques was to help students recognize their emotions and knowing that those emotions are okay to have. This is consistent with Bakosh et al.’s (2016) study of the Inner Explorer program that focused on helping students become aware of their senses, emotions, and thoughts. The Master Mind program takes this a step
further and helps students learn how to appropriately express their emotions and how to cope with positive and negative emotions (Parker et al., 2014).

**Benefits**

The benefits mentioned by the participants were consistent with benefits mentioned in the existing literature. Those benefits include academic, home life, student behavior, reducing stress, and life skills, and are discussed in further detail below.

**Academic.** All of the participants mentioned one of the benefits of mindfulness as having a positive impact for the students academically and as learners. This is consistent with Schonert-Reichl et al.’s (2015) findings in the study of the MindUp program, which show that there was a trend for students who participated in the program to have higher math grades at the end of the year, compared to students not in the program. There was also evidence that mindfulness techniques, in combination with other factors, can improve cognitive abilities for students (Schonert-Reichl, 2015). Bakosh et al. (2016) found similar results which included students who participated in the Inner Explorer program had significant increases in reading and science grades as opposed to students who did not participate in the program.

**Home Life.** Ms. Monroe and Ms. Sharp both commented that they had seen the mindfulness techniques incorporated in student’s home life. This was encouraged in the Mindful Schools program, where Black and Fernando (2013) found that students were taught to use the mindfulness skills in other aspects of their life, including at home and other places outside of the classroom. In each section of the Master Mind program, there is also an emphasis on real-world applications and daily practice (Parker et al., 2014).

**Student Behavior.** Another benefit Ms. Sharp believed would come with the mindfulness techniques was better student behavior. Black and Fernando (2013) found that
the Mindful Schools program intervention could lead to improvements in classroom behavior for students, especially in low-income schools.

**Reducing Stress.** Ms. Monroe also mentions that the mindfulness skills can help students regulate their stress, which is consistent with the findings that the Wellness and Resilience program supported students in reducing stress (Semple et al., 2016).

**Life Skill.** Ms. Monroe specifically mentions that the program is a “life skill” that students can use to increase their confidence and regulate their emotions. In the Resilient Kids program, Semple et al. (2016) explained that the results suggest that the students in the program had improved self-confidence and emotional regulation and that the school had a better community climate. The findings in the Mindfulness and Mind-Body Skills for Children program also suggested that the program might help students improve their self-image.

**Suggestions for Program Improvement**

All of the participants explained in their interviews that they would like more collaboration with teachers and parents about the mindfulness program. This was noted in the Mindfulness and Mind-Body Skills for Children program, as Semple et al. (2016) explained that there are mindfulness workshops for parents and school staff, and that regular classroom teachers implement the mindfulness techniques in their classrooms. Bakosh et al., (2016) also suggested that the easy implementation of the Inner Explorer program could be helpful in establishing mindfulness as a tool used in many schools.

**Future Plans**

Both Mr. Potter and Ms. Sharp mentioned incorporating the mindfulness techniques into more parts of the school day, with Mr. Potter suggesting morning meetings and Ms. Sharp hoping to integrate them into all of her lessons. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that teachers in the MindUp program take the mindfulness skills that they learn and
implement them throughout the school day. Ms. Sharp also mentioned that in her Zen Kids group, she worked on building relationships between the students and their teachers and that she would like to start giving the teachers the mindfulness techniques she is using with the students so that they can incorporate them into their own classroom. This is consistent with Black and Fernando’s (2013) study of the Mindful Schools program that provides skills for educators to help connect with their students, and integrate the mindfulness techniques into their regular classroom. Semple et al. (2016) also found that the Resilient Kids program encouraged regular classroom teachers to participate in the mindfulness lessons. Ms. Sharp mentioned that one of the things she had thought about incorporating into the classroom was a “calm corner.” In the Wellness and Resilience Program, Semple et al. (2016) found that the program includes “peace corners” that are used to calm students.

**Student Engagement and Empowerment**

Interestingly, most of the literature on the mindfulness programs did not address specific aspects of the level of student engagement in their review of the programs. In the Master Mind program students reported that they enjoyed the program, but the research does not elaborate on student engagement (Parker et al., 2014). They also did not discuss student empowerment as part of the programs. Parker et al. (2014) described the students were given the chance to have conversations during each part of the Master Mind program to discuss how to make tough decisions, but only mentions this briefly. The Resilient Kids program and the Inner Explorer program also both use journaling and discussions as part of their curriculum, but do not specifically mention student empowerment (Bakosh et al., 2016; Semple et al., 2016).

**Implications for the Field of Education**

Through the interviews and the observation session, it was apparent that mindfulness could lend itself to positive benefits for students in many aspects of their lives, and could be
beneficial for the field of education. Some of the implications for the field of education include no formal training needed for the program, the program aligns with essential standards, the lessons should be implemented in a classroom context, students should be empowered, programs should overcome misconceptions of mindfulness, discipline discrepancies should be addressed, and the program should be context specific.

**No Formal Training Needed.** First, mindfulness techniques can be used even without a formal program or formal training. Mr. Potter and Ms. Monroe both described examples of how they saw the students benefitting from the techniques even though Ms. Sharp did not have any formal training.

**Aligns with Essential Standards.** Next, Ms. Sharp created lessons that aligned with her essential standards, and when the techniques are easy to implement, they can be incorporated regularly into the student’s day. Many of the same core elements for the programs were the same, with most of them discussing breathing, having a mindful body, and emotional regulation, which seem to be especially helpful for students. This is also important for teacher and counselor training programs because they can teach future teachers and counselors how to incorporate mindfulness as part of their essential standards.

**Implemented in Classroom Context.** Another contribution to the field of education is that mindfulness should be implemented in a classroom context. All of the participants mentioned that there should be more collaboration with teachers and that mindfulness could be incorporated into their lessons, during transitions, or even during the morning meetings. When students are exposed to the techniques more regularly, and teachers are able to implement the techniques themselves, this could provide students with greater, and lasting, benefits.

**Empowerment.** One element not mentioned in the existing literature is the idea of student empowerment. This study contributed to the existing literature through the finding
that empowering students is essential for them to take responsibility, to control their emotions, and to feel good about doing it. Ms. Sharp also explained that there had been a decrease in discipline at Panther Elementary and that they had seen improvements in the students in the Zen Kids group. While other factors might have influenced this, it still shows that mindfulness can lead to improvements in student behavior.

**Overcome Misconceptions.** Another important contribution to previous literature is to overcome misconceptions about mindfulness. It is easier to get parent and teacher approval and support when they understand what mindfulness is and what benefits it can provide the students.

**Discipline Discrepancies.** Another consideration to make is how to overcome discipline discrepancies in schools and to provide teachers with the resources and skills on how to handle discipline in their classrooms. This is especially important because, as Ms. Sharp explained, just telling teachers that they are doing something wrong and not giving them the skills to change what they are doing, is not helpful in dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline. In addition, a danger of mindfulness programs is that the responsibility is put on the children to change and not the teachers or school faculty and administration. Teachers, and other school personnel need to be taught to recognize what biases and stereotypes they have, unpack what privileges they hold, and learn skills to overcome their implicit biases. This is crucial because it is important to recognize that the overrepresentation of students of color in discipline is a systemic issue that requires holding school faculty accountable and giving them the tools necessary for overcoming biases and handling discipline.

**Context Specific.** Finally, as Ms. Sharp pointed out, a one-size-fits-all discipline system will not work. Mindfulness programs and techniques should be adjusted to meet each school’s individual needs. Also focusing on the individual needs of the students, and
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remembering to provide students from vulnerable populations with the resources on when and where it is safe to practice these skills.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, only one school was recruited to participate in the study, making the sample size small and affecting the generalizability of the results. More schools need to be recruited to compare mindfulness techniques and implementation in different types of schools, in order to generalize the findings.

Second, the group observed at the school was a select group of students who were chosen because of the school counselor’s access to getting parental permission due to the fact that the children’s parents work at the school. The school was recruited later in the school year, so the counselor had limited time to explain the study to parents and get their permission for students to participate in a lesson. The Zen Kids program had ended by this time, and the observation was not conducted in a classroom lesson, so the counselor had to adjust the lesson to fit this selected group of students.

Third, the researcher did not conduct any follow up interviews or observations due to time constraints with the school year ending. The initial results were not corroborated with further questioning, but rather display the thoughts based on the researcher’s original questions that were approved before the research began and questions that occurred during the interview.

Additionally, only three participants were interviewed for the study. None of the regular classroom teachers were interviewed, as the one teacher who was interviewed was a reading specialist and works with a selected group of students.

Next, this was the first year the school implemented the mindfulness program and the mindfulness techniques into the classroom. It is harder to see the long-term implications of the techniques on student behavior and student outcomes because it is so new.
No students were interviewed for this study due to challenges including students in research and the time constraints of the school year ending. Student input and response to the techniques are an important piece missing from this study.

Both Zen Kids and the classroom mindfulness lessons were not solely focused on mindfulness, but rather in combination with other areas of focus, such as mentoring, emotional regulation, and relationship building. The results could have been influenced by the other techniques the students learned that were part of Ms. Sharp’s general curriculum.

Finally, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the results which can create bias because analyzing and interpreting the data is subjective. Based on the limitations of this study and the results from the interviews and observation, there are several suggestions for future research that have emerged.

**Future Research**

The results of this study have provided more insight into the implementation of mindfulness techniques into schools and how this influences student behavior. However, more research needs to be done to examine how different schools implement mindfulness into their curriculum. The way they implement mindfulness, how much they implement mindfulness, how long they have implemented mindfulness, and what central components they use in the program, may provide different results. This may give more information on whether or not mindfulness by itself is sufficient or if mindfulness in combination with other services is more beneficial for students.

Additionally, future research should be long-term and in-depth, with multiple interviews and observations, and follow-up interviews and observations. This could give more insight into what specific and long-term benefits there are for students and on student behavior. Another consideration for future research is to use mixed methods, because both participant voices and discipline data are important in getting a full picture of how
mindfulness can be used in schools. Future research should also be concerned with gaining more student input and observing student response to see what techniques work best for students and to find out how the programs can improve.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to look at mindfulness as an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices, particularly suspension, by conducting interviews and an observation session at one school in North Carolina. Based on this data, and the existing literature, the implementation of mindfulness techniques in schools appears to be beneficial for students and can improve academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students, and seems to be helpful in reducing suspension rates.


Appendix A

Teacher/Counselor Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your educational background? (Degrees with dates)
2. What is your official title at the school? How long have you had this role?
3. Have you been at this school the entire time you’ve had this role?
4. What other school experience have you had before taking this job?
5. How many years combined do you have working with children?
6. How was the mindfulness program started? Whose idea was it?
7. Did you have to get permission to implement the program from the principal? Can you tell me more about that?
8. Did you have to get permission from the parents to implement this program? Can you tell me more about that?
9. When did this program begin?
10. What are the mindfulness techniques that you incorporate in your classroom?

   a. Can you walk me through a recent class where you used one of these techniques?

11. What are the children taught? How do the children respond to the techniques?
12. Do you think the children benefit from them?

   a. If so, what benefits do you see?
13. How do these exercises help the children?
14. How do these exercises relate to the child’s behavior?

   a. What about their emotions?
15. What do the children seem to like the most about it?
16. What do you think is the biggest thing children should/do take away from these exercises?
a. Do all children get to participate?

b. Can you tell me more about that?

c. If not, can you talk about which children participate?

17. What do you think it’s like for them?

18. How often do they engage in these mindfulness exercises?

19. What, if anything, would you like to change about the program?

20. How often do you use the mindfulness techniques?

21. What were the suspension rates at your school before the program began? And after?

22. Are there certain qualifications for teaching these exercises? What training did you receive?

23. What do you think is the best part of the program?

   a. What are some challenges with it?

   b. What, if anything, could be done to improve the program?

24. Were there any challenges with implementing the program? What were they?

   a. How did you overcome the challenges?

25. What were the parent reactions to the program?

26. Can you share a positive parent reaction and a negative parent reaction?

27. What are your opinions on current discipline practices?

28. Do you think disproportionality exists between Black students and other students when it comes to school discipline, referrals, and suspension rates? If not, why? If so, why?

29. What, if anything, would you like to change about discipline practices?

30. If you were going to advise teachers/counselors in other schools to implement this program, what would you tell them?
Principal Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your educational background? (Degrees with dates)
2. What is your title at the school? How long have you had this role?
3. Have you been at this school the entire time you’ve had this role?
4. What other school experience have you had before taking this job?
5. How many years combined do you have working with children?
6. How was the mindfulness program started? Whose idea was it?
7. Did you have to give permission to implement the program? Tell me more about that.
8. Did you have to get permission needed from parents? Tell me more about that.
9. When did this program begin?
10. What are the mindfulness techniques that are incorporated in your school?
    a. Can you walk me through a recent class where you used/observed of these techniques?
11. What are the children taught related to mindfulness? How do the children respond to the techniques?
12. Do you think the children benefit from them?
    a. If so, what benefits do you see?
13. How do these exercises help the children?
14. How do these exercises relate to the child’s behavior?
    a. What about their emotions?
15. What do the children seem to like the most about it?
16. What do you think is the biggest thing children should/do take away from these exercises?
    a. Do all children get to participate?
    b. Can you tell me more about that?
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   c. If not, can you talk about which children participate?

17. What do you think it’s like for the students?

18. How often do they engage in these mindfulness exercises?

19. What, if anything, would you like to change about program?

20. How often are the mindfulness techniques used?

21. What were the suspension rates at your school before the program began? And after?

22. Do you think disproportionality exists between Black students and other students
   when it comes to school discipline, referrals, and suspension rates? If not, why? If so, why?

23. Are there certain qualifications for teaching these exercises?
   a. What do you think is the best part of the program?
   b. What are some challenges with it?

24. What, if anything, could be done to improve the program?
   a. Were there any challenges with implementing the program?
   b. What were they?
   c. What happened next?

25. What was parent reaction to the program? Can you give me an example of this?

26. What are your opinions on discipline practices? Can you share an example of one of these practices?

27. What, if anything, would you like to change about discipline practices?

28. If you were going to advise principals/teachers in other schools to implement this program, what would you tell them?

**Parent Interview Questions:**

1. How was the mindfulness program started? Whose idea was it?
2. Did you have to give permission for this program to be implemented or for your child to participate in the program?
   a. Can you tell me more about that?
3. When did this program begin?
4. What are the mindfulness techniques that are incorporated in your child’s classroom?
   a. What are the children taught?
5. How do the children respond to the techniques?
6. Do you think the children benefit from them?
   a. If so, what benefits do you see?
   b. How do these exercises help the children?
7. How do these exercises relate to the child’s behavior?
   a. What about their emotions?
8. What do the children seem to like the most about it?
9. What do you think is the biggest thing children should/do take away from these exercises?
   a. What do you think it’s like for them?
   b. How often do they engage in these mindfulness exercises?
   c. How do they use these at home?
10. What, if anything, would you like to change about program?
11. What do you think is the best part of the program?
   a. What are some challenges with it?
12. What, if anything, could be done to improve the program?
13. Were there any challenges with implementing the program? What were they? What happened next?
14. What was your reaction to the program?
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a. Can you give me an example of this?

15. What are your opinions on discipline practices in schools?
   a. Can you share an example of one of these practices?

16. What, if anything, would you like to change about discipline practices in schools?

17. If you were going to advise parents in other schools to advocate for the implementation of this program, what would you tell them?

Additional Interview Questions:

1. What research support is available for these programs?

2. What are the central components of each program?

3. How feasible are these programs to implement in school settings?

4. Which program components may be the essential contributors to the positive outcomes reported by students, teachers, and parents? Which components may be less essential?

5. What frequency, intensity, and duration of mindfulness training are necessary to achieve the desired aims?

6. What degree of teacher training and/or personal commitment is required to implement these programs?

7. What do all these programs have in common and how do they differ?

8. How sustainable are these programs for the long term?

9. What potential negative effects of mindfulness with youth are being considered or evaluated?

10. What protections should be considered when working with potentially vulnerable child or adolescent populations?
Appendix B

Objectives:
Students will practice being aware of what is around them.
Students will use their five senses to practice mindfulness.

What’s Included:
p.2: "Mindful Nature Walk" Recording Sheet
p.3 "Mindful Cloud Observation" Sheet

Directions:
In this activity, instructors will take students outside to experience mindfulness. While students are outside, they should be encouraged to silently explore their surroundings. They can use the recording sheet on page 2 to help guide their observations. Prompts on the recording sheet encourage careful observation of what is happening externally and internally for the students.
After the nature walk, if weather permits, encourage students to spend some time looking at the clouds and observing how the clouds change. Use the “Mindful Cloud Observation” sheet on page 3 to guide this activity.

Discussion Prompts:
-What was the nature walk like for you?
-Did you notice anything that you had not noticed before?
-Was it challenging to stay focused? If so, why?
-How did your body feel during this experience?
-How do you think that being more aware of ourselves and our surroundings can be helpful?

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Name: __________

**Mindful Nature Walk**

Mindfulness is being aware of what is happening in and around our bodies. Sometimes these things can be hard for us to notice, so it is a good idea to stop and be aware of our surroundings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animals I see:</th>
<th>Plants I see:</th>
<th>Colors I see:</th>
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<th>Sounds I hear:</th>
<th>The air feels:</th>
<th>Scents I smell:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts I have:</th>
<th>Feelings I have:</th>
<th>Things I have never noticed:</th>
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Appendix C

Date and Time of Observation: ______________________________

Grade Level Observing: ______________________________

Number of Students in Class: __________________________

Whole Class or Selected Group of Students?: ________________________________

Is the Instructor a Teacher or Counselor?: ________________________________

Teacher/Counselor Dialogue:
  1. What is the instructor saying to lead into the exercises?
  2. What is the instructor saying during the exercises?
  3. How does the instructor end the exercises?
  4. How does the dialogue relate to the exercises? Is it just direction on how to do the exercise or more in-depth dialogue?
  5. Do they answer questions?

Mindfulness Techniques:
  1. What techniques is the instructor using?
  2. What do the techniques involve?
  3. Do the techniques focus on one aspect
  4. Are there many techniques or are a few repeated?

Student Response:
  1. Do the students participate?
  2. Do the students seem like they want to participate?
  3. How are the students reacting to the exercises?
  4. How engaged are the students?

Teacher/Counselor Demeanor:
  1. What is the demeanor of the instructor? Are they calm?
2. How do they address each student?
3. What kind of tone do they use?
4. Do they act the same way the entire time?

Classroom Setup:
1. Do the techniques utilize the whole classroom?
2. Are there certain objects required to complete the exercises?
3. Do students move around when doing the exercises? Is there room for students to move around?
4. Where does the instructor stand/sit? Do they stand/sit?
5. Where are the children in relation to the instructor?
6. Is the classroom silent? Are there any noises or music?
7. Are the lights on or off? Is the door open or closed?
8. Do they rearrange the room for these exercises?