

“Mindfulness is noticing your feelings”: The power of mind-body awareness in the early years

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Abstract

There has been a steady emergence of research on mindfulness during the early years. The purpose of this qualitative research meta-synthesis was to explore young children's first-hand experiences with practicing mindfulness in schools. Using a seven-stage meta-synthesis process, a collective body of qualitative studies was gathered on mindfulness from children's own perspectives. Data across the final pool of eight studies were organized, analyzed, and interpreted through original analyses. Five unique themes emerged about children's positive perceptions of mindfulness in school, including: acknowledging how good it made them feel, engaging in mindfulness at home, making connections between mind and body, using mindfulness in challenging situations, and recognizing numerous benefits of breathing. Implications from this research suggest that practicing mindfulness can promote a greater sense of self-awareness in young children, particularly managing feelings during the early years. Recommendations include infusing mindfulness into the school culture as a value, a commitment, and a way of life.

Keywords

early childhood education, meta-synthesis, mindfulness, well-being, young children

In the early 2000s, there was a growing interest in mindfulness and children as an emerging field (Burke, 2010; Hooker and Fodor, 2008; Zelazo and Lyons, 2011) with studies published from predominantly medical and mental health lenses (Diaz et al., 2012; Rosenblatt et al., 2011; Semple et al., 2005). As attention continues to expand about mindfulness and children, particularly in school settings and across multiple disciplines, much of what is known focuses on elementary-aged students and older. Within the past decade, research reviews examined the importance, implementation and outcomes of using mindfulness and contemplative practices in primary schools (Felver et al., 2016; Waters et al., 2015; Zenner et al., 2014). There is also an increase in mixed

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method or quantitative studies reflecting students' perspectives about the acceptability and feasibility of mindfulness-based interventions in schools (Bannirchelvam et al., 2017; Diaz et al., 2012; Keller et al., 2017), which are predominantly from psychology and mental health disciplines. Studies on mindfulness-based interventions and school-age children currently reflect an international gaze (Andreu et al., 2021; Crescentini et al., 2016; McCabe et al., 2017; Reindl et al., 2020; Tarrasch, 2018) from countries such as Australia, Italy, Israel, and the United States.

Over the past decade, studies on mindfulness and children continued to rapidly expand, yet far less is known about mindfulness in schools during the early years. As the research continues to emerge on mindfulness and the exclusive focus on children ages 8 years and younger, a large proportion of early years studies are quantitative (Bazzano et al., 2023; Berti and Cigala, 2020; Erten and Güneş, 2024). Many of these studies, which were published within the past 5 years, evaluated the implementation of an established mindfulness-based program in early childhood settings. Specifically, mindfulness and child-related outcomes have been examined from a cross-disciplinary lens such as behavior (Crooks et al., 2020; Erten and Güneş, 2024; Li-Grining et al., 2021), attention (Janz et al., 2019; Lim and Qu, 2017; Razza et al., 2015), and prosocial engagement (Berti and Cigala, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Sciotto et al., 2021), with positive and promising results. The enactment of these school-based mindfulness programs in early childhood was typically facilitated by adults who were well-prepared to do so. In most of these studies, mindfulness instructors, teachers, or researchers had mindfulness certification or training, which underscores an acknowledgment of the importance of having experience to lead young learners in mindfulness practices.

In addition to pre-established mindfulness programs, the knowledge base on early childhood settings reflects positive outcomes and opportunities regarding mindfulness classroom-based practices (Capel, 2012; Erwin et al., 2017; Lillard, 2011), and teaching mindfully and mindful teaching (Albrecht et al., 2012; Dachyshyn, 2015). Critical and systematic reviews (Bockmann and Yu, 2023; Flores, 2016; Holt and Atkinson, 2022; Nieminen and Sajaniemi, 2016; Sun et al., 2021) have also shaped an understanding that mindfulness in early childhood is indeed viable, valuable, and effective. Much of the body of research on mindfulness intervention and young children reflects quantitative methods; Sun et al. (2021) reported that the most frequently used method in the study of young learners and yoga, for example, was a quantitative randomized control trial.

Although still in its infancy, an evolving body of research on mindfulness during the early years focuses on self-regulation, and with good reason. There is recognition that self-regulation "is critical for success in almost every facet of life" (Bockmann and Yu, 2023: 694) and is attributed to "robust predictors of important outcomes across the lifespan" (Flook et al., 2015: 44). Despite widespread acknowledgment across multiple disciplines (i.e. education, psychology, counseling, family studies) about the significant role self-regulation plays in the lives of young children, it is not widely or explicitly taught in early childhood settings. So, then what is the connection between mindfulness and self-regulation? According to Bishop et al. (2006) "mindfulness can be defined, in part, as the self-regulation of attention, which involves sustained attention, attention switching, and the inhibition of elaborative processing" (p. 233). In other words, mindfulness can be thought of as regulating where we place our focus or attention.

More specifically, Bishop et al. (2006) suggested that noticing the present moment and becoming intentionally aware of our changing thoughts, feelings and sensations is how mindfulness starts. Numerous systematic reviews examining self-regulation and mindfulness interventions during the early years have been published since 2020, which reported positive and potentially long-term outcomes including academic, social, and emotional benefits, as well as overall well-being (Bockmann and Yu, 2023; Robson et al., 2020; Sop and Hancer, 2024) especially for young learners with higher support needs, such as children with disabilities.

Since mindfulness instruction during the early years may lead to beneficial outcomes now and for the future, and given that mindfulness is associated with regulating attention, we have been wondering how mindfulness supports young children in managing their attention. Toward that end, we were particularly interested in gaining an understanding of the body of early years research about mindfulness from first-hand perspectives of young learners. The purpose of this study is to examine young children's voices about their lived experiences with mindfulness in school. We decided that qualitative research meta-synthesis was the best and most natural way to study how the practice of mindfulness was perceived and experienced by young learners in educational settings.

Methods

Qualitative research meta-synthesis is an emerging and promising methodology in the field of education, particularly in early years research (Batz and Yadav, 2024; Brown and Englehardt, 2016; Douglas et al., 2022). There can be some confusion, however, about benefits and the purpose of a meta-synthesis. Just like a meta-analysis provides important, new information by conducting original analyses on a selected group of similar quantitative studies, a meta-synthesis is a similar methodology using qualitative studies to uncover new understanding and meaning, although there are differences. A meta-analysis utilizes statistical analyses to yield numerical conclusions from similar quantitative research, and a meta-synthesis uses interpretation to generate new understandings from a selected body of qualitative studies. Both methodologies aim to offer a unified, inclusive way of bringing together parts to form a new whole.

There may also be confusion about the difference between a systematic literature review and qualitative research meta-synthesis although they are also quite different. Ong et al. (2024) explained the purpose of a literature review is to offer a contextual understanding on a specific topic by summarizing research within a particular field of study whereas the aim of a meta-synthesis is to synthesize qualitative research to "arrive at new or enhanced understanding about the phenomenon under study, develop new theory, and unify the literature" (p. 18).

Specifically, a research meta-synthesis is a complex, purposeful methodology designed to carefully select qualitative studies on a specific topic, and to synthesize, analyze and interpret findings across this collective body of research to uncover new findings (Sandelowski et al., 1997; Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007). In essence, a meta-synthesis is "a complex exercise of interpretation" (Sandelowski et al., 1997: 370) rather than a review, summary or re-analysis of data. Further, "qualitative research synthesis is methodologically grounded and rigorous. It requires bringing out the qualities of meaning at a level higher from existing qualitative studies by combining them into a new whole" (Major and Savin-Baden, 2010: 10). In other words, meta-synthesis is not a re-presentation of findings but rather an indispensable, holistic, and in-depth qualitative analysis from an existing body of similar studies. This research method does not reflect a reiteration of the same data but rather engages in original qualitative analyses across study findings. As such, new meaning, interpretations and impressions are generated that contribute to a larger, collective understanding on a specific phenomenon. These novel findings can then guide future research agendas, offer important implications for policy, theory and practice, and benefit cross-disciplinary and international dialogs. So, instead of a labor-intensive reading of separate studies on the same topic, numerous advantages of a research meta-synthesis include eliminating or reducing duplication and fragmentation, providing a synthesis across findings from multiple studies, as well as generating new qualitative analyses. The cumulative outcome is brand-new meaning, fresh insights, and perhaps most importantly, the accumulation of many parts into a cohesive, collective and distinctive whole.

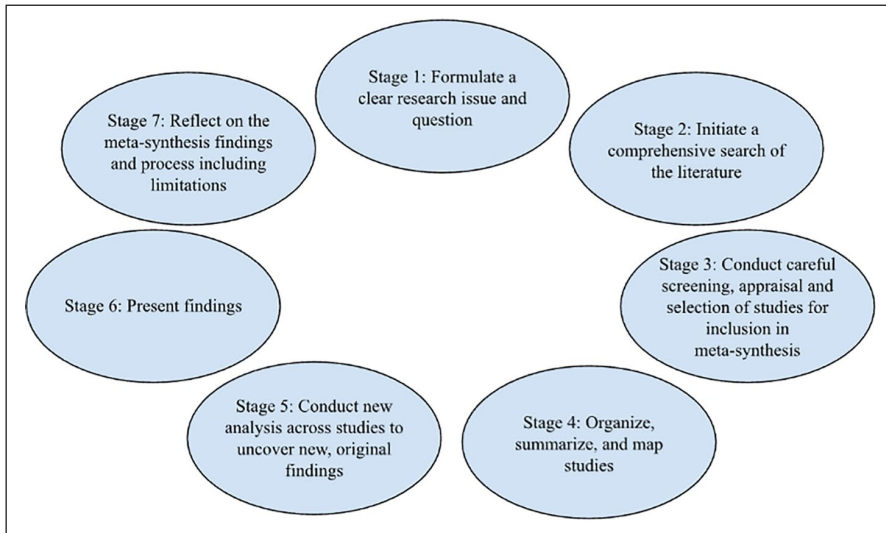


Figure 1. Seven stages guiding the qualitative research meta-synthesis process.

Source: Adapted from Erwin et al. (2011), Major and Savin-Baden (2010); Sandelowski and Barroso (2007), and Walsh and Downe (2005).

We created our own research meta-synthesis process, which was heavily influenced by qualitative meta-synthesis guidelines (Erwin et al., 2011; Major and Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007; Walsh and Downe, 2005). See Figure 1 for a description of the seven stages that shaped our qualitative research meta-synthesis process. In Stage 1 we generated a research question: what are young children's first-hand perspectives about practicing mindfulness at school? We then initiated an extensive search of the literature on young children's experiences with mindfulness at school, looking specifically for qualitative studies about their first-hand perspectives. See Figure 2 for an overview of Stage 2 involving the library and literature search process including our initial and advanced search criteria. In Stage 3 of the meta-synthesis process, we wanted to ensure the articles we selected for the final pool of studies all held up and represented trustworthy and rigorous qualitative research. Toward that end, we conducted a more robust eligibility screening and appraisal of each study based on these criteria: (a) includes a research problem, issue, and/or question clearly, (b) offers a relevant review of the literature framed within scholarly academic sources, (c) includes qualitative data collection and analysis methods, and (d) documents clear findings (e.g. themes) and reflections that were precise and well developed. We removed one study as a result of this appraisal. A total of eight qualitative articles ($n=8$) met the above criteria for inclusion in the final pool of studies.

In Stage 4, we created tables to organize and summarize each study's mindfulness framework, research methods, and findings. These tables helped us to make sense of contextual background and report findings across the eight studies which led to Stage 5. In this stage we engaged in an initial analysis to categorize and summarize the research methodology across studies, which was somewhat similar to a literature review. Our intention was to provide a contextual, holistic understanding of how these studies were conducted. Then we conducted a new advanced qualitative analysis of the findings across all eight articles to discover new meaning and impressions.

Data analysis was on-going as we met weekly to review data independently and collectively thereby identifying patterns, themes, and questions that were emerging across findings. As a result

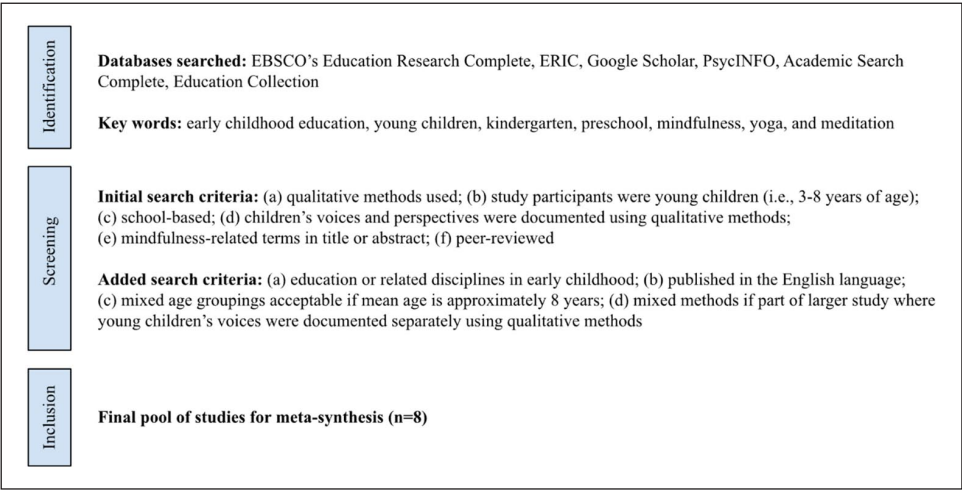


Figure 2. Stage 2: Library search and literature review process for meta-synthesis.

Source: This figure is adapted from the PRISMA diagramming method (Page et al., 2021).

of continuous analysis and discussion, we ultimately agreed on a set of five primary themes. In the final Stages 6 and 7, we arranged the findings as well as reflected on our qualitative research meta-synthesis process and outcomes. In the next section, we discuss findings on young children's lived experiences with mindfulness in school.

Findings

An initial summary of the research

We begin by presenting a synopsis of how studies about children's first-hand perspectives on mindfulness in early childhood settings were conducted to better understand the whole body of research on this topic. This qualitative meta-synthesis offers new understandings of demographics and research methods used to document young children's voices on mindfulness in schools. Across the eight articles that met criteria for this meta-synthesis, a total of 336 children participated, which provided a broader, cohesive, and collective understanding about listening to a of diverse children's voices rather than reading each study on its own. All youngsters were 8 years old and younger, with one exception. In Palgi's (2007) study children attended a kindergarten/first grade combined class, although one child participated from a grade 2-3 combined class; we made the decision to include this child. We found it significant that none of the eight studies provided racial, ethnic, or (dis)ability information on the study participants. Gathering and reporting study participants' identities must occur in early years research to ensure a full, accurate and inclusive representation of young children.

Out of eight studies included in this meta-synthesis, the majority ($n=5$) were conducted in the United States; other countries represented were the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada. Data were collected using a variety of methods to document children's voices revealing an assortment of rich data sources such as interviews (Rashedi et al., 2019; Stapp and Wolff, 2019), focus groups (Case-Smith et al., 2010), meetings with children (Palgi, 2007), student journals (Ager et al., 2015; Schrodt et al., 2019), and questionnaires completed by children (Holt et al., 2022).

Children's artwork, specifically drawing, was also gathered in half of the articles (Ager et al., 2015; Case-Smith et al., 2010; Palgi, 2007; Stapp and Wolff, 2019). While breathing was a primary practice with young children across all eight studies, other mindfulness practices included a combination of meditation, relaxation, yoga, and techniques to enhance stillness or focus through children's senses.

In five of the eight studies chosen for our meta-synthesis, young children's experiences or perspectives were specifically noted in the purpose of the study (Ager et al., 2015; Case-Smith et al., 2010; Rashedi et al., 2019; Schrodtt et al., 2019; Stapp and Wolff, 2019), indicating that more than half of the studies recognized the value and importance of documenting young children's voices about their lived experiences. See Table 1. A description of mindfulness was found in all eight articles reflecting several common threads across studies; attention or concentration was identified as an aspect of mindfulness or related terms (e.g. yoga) in all but Mochan's (2017) study. In five of the eight studies, there was a distinct mention of body and mind in the definitions (Ager et al., 2015; Case-Smith et al., 2010; Mochan, 2017; Palgi 2007; Rashedi et al., 2019) and half of all studies in this meta-synthesis identified breathing or breathwork as part of the definition of mindfulness (Case-Smith et al., 2010; Mochan, 2017; Rashedi et al., 2019; Stapp and Wolff, 2019). Four studies referred to self-control in the definition of mindfulness, which is associated with self-regulation; these same studies also focused on yoga (Case-Smith et al., 2010; Mochan, 2017; Palgi, 2007; Rashedi et al., 2019) suggesting that yoga was considered effective for young children to help manage their emotions, senses, and energy.

Despite the presence of a definition of mindfulness as well as a research question or purpose in all articles, only half articulated a theoretical framework for their research. Three of the four studies that provided a theoretical framing used the term "mindfulness" in their research question (Ager et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2022; Schrodtt et al., 2019). In these conceptual frameworks, three studies recognized children as experts of their own experiences (Ager et al., 2015; Rashedi et al., 2019; Stapp and Wolff, 2019), which underscored a growing understanding that very young children were trusted and deliberately sought out to learn about their first-hand experiences; half of all studies in this meta-synthesis focused solely on children's perspectives (Ager et al., 2015; Case-Smith et al., 2010; Rashedi et al., 2019; Schrodtt et al., 2019).

With the exception of one study (Palgi, 2007), all articles were published between 2010 and 2021, suggesting that the study of mindfulness and young children is indeed a new, emerging area of interest. All the studies took place in early childhood school settings and represented multiple countries as well as a variety of fields (i.e. psychology, education, occupational therapy, child and family studies, early childhood development) indicating that mindfulness research in the early years is growing internationally and across disciplines and fields. All these studies focused on young children's first-hand lived experiences demonstrating an emerging area of interest as well.

New and original findings

After the initial summarizing of the study demographics, we conducted a new, more advanced analysis of the findings across the eight studies to uncover original understandings regarding young children's perspectives about mindfulness in early childhood settings. Several themes emerged including how young learners consistently expressed exceedingly positive ideas about their experiences with mindfulness at school. Although the literature generally acknowledges mindfulness as being a positive influence during the early years, this meta-synthesis is the first to conduct qualitative analyses across multiple studies to discover a new, collective understanding about what young children reflect on and communicate related to practicing mindfulness at school.

Table 1. Final selection of qualitative studies included in meta-synthesis.

No.	Qualitative research study	Research question	Purpose
1.	Ager, K., Albrecht, N. J., and Cohen, M. (2015). Mindfulness in schools research project: Exploring students' perspectives of mindfulness. <i>Psychology</i> , 6, 896-914.	What are students' perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school?	Understanding elementary school students' perspectives of learning mindfulness for the first time.
2.	Case-Smith, J., Shupe Sines, J., and Klatt, M. (2010). Perceptions of children who participated in a school-based yoga program. <i>Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, and Early Intervention</i> , 3(3), 226-238.		The goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of third grade students from a low-SES neighborhood about their experience in an 8-week yoga program. A related goal was to understand the students' perceived meaning of the yoga program in the context of their home and school lives.
3.	Holt, S., Atkinson, C., and Douglas-Osborn, E. (2022). Exploring the implementation of mindfulness approaches in an early years setting. <i>Journal of Early Childhood Research</i> , 20(2), 214-228.	What are the facilitators and barriers when implementing mindfulness into an early years setting using an action research approach? To what extent are mindfulness approaches perceived to be beneficial by early years practitioners in promoting children's skills such as attention and self-regulation skills?	To explore how early years practitioners can effectively deliver mindfulness, understanding their perceptions of the impact, facilitators and challenges to successful implementation.
4.	Mochan, M. (2017). The benefits of teaching yoga to young children with special needs: developing an appropriate methodology. <i>International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education</i> , 6(2), 1161-1170.		The purpose of this study is to contribute to the research [on the effects of teaching yoga to young children] by implementing a more effective methodology.
5.	Palgi, I. (2007). Our story of yoga: Participatory learning and action with young children. <i>Children, Youth and Environments</i> 17(2): 329-340.		This article presents a case study of participatory work with children in special education who were involved in a school-based yoga program.
6.	Rashedi, R. N., Wajanakunakorn, M., and Hu, C. J. (2019). Young children's embodied experiences: A classroom-based yoga intervention. <i>Journal of Child and Family Studies</i> , 28(12), 3392-3400.	What physical, emotional, and cognitive benefits did the children perceive from participating in this yoga intervention? To what extent were the children able to express what they learned (if anything) from the yoga classes?	The objective of this study was to investigate pre-kindergartners' and kindergartners' experiences with yoga through a qualitative-exploratory approach.
7.	Schrodt, K., Barnes, Z., DeVries, M., Grow, J., and Wear, P. (2019). "I notice my feelings": Exploring mindfulness with 1st graders and their families. <i>Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research</i> , 21(2), 6.	How do first grade children respond to mindfulness training that includes exploring relevant children's literature, reading responses, and self-regulation techniques?	First grade students and their families explored relevant children's literature on mindfulness, practiced mindfulness self-regulation techniques, and wrote and responded to their experiences with both.
8.	Stapp, A. C., and Wolff, K. (2019). Young children's experiences with yoga in an early childhood setting. <i>Early Child Development and Care</i> , 189(9), 1397-1410.	What emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits do young children perceive from participating in yoga? To what extent are young children able to verbally, physical, and artistically express their perceptions about yoga?	The purpose of this study was to investigate young children's experiences with yoga through a qualitative approach.

The first theme demonstrated how much children liked or loved practicing mindfulness because of how good it made them feel. Mark stated, “I love breathing” to which his classmate, Sam responded, “I like breathing; it makes me feel good” (Palgi, 2007: 334). Similar remarks were made by Jon “I like the way it makes my body feel” (Stapp and Wolff, 2019: 1402) and others, “it makes me feel great” and “good, my heart feels so good” (Rashedi et al., 2019: 3397). Sarah summed up her experience as “I love everything about it. There’s nothing I don’t like about yoga” (Stapp and Wolff, 2019: 1403). Other words that also surfaced across children’s first-hand descriptions were how much “fun” practicing mindfulness was and how they enjoyed experiencing more “energy.” One child concluded in their journal entry, “I love mindfulness because it makes you [calm] and [honest]” (Ager et al., 2015: 908). Young children described their experience with practicing mindfulness at school as highly pleasurable, positive and enjoyable because it essentially felt good.

Digging a little deeper, we discovered a second theme related to how young children engage in practices at school as well as home, sometimes teaching a family member mindfulness. Kiara wrote in her journal, “I help dad to breathe when he is feeling stressed” (Ager et al., 2015: 907) and another child explained how her “mom got a mat to do yoga with me” (Rashedi et al., 2019: 3397). Other youngsters reported how they felt practicing yoga at home, “it makes me feel free” (Case-Smith et al., 2010: 233) and “I liked it when we go to write at home in our journals and take deep breaths together and listen. . . My sister and my mom and dad wrote, and it was peaceful” (Schrodt et al., 2019: 17). One child expressed how they practiced mindfulness at home, “I try at my house. I practice doing my mindfulness I do rainbow, windmill, leaves and flowers” (Holt et al., 2022: 9). Practicing mindfulness at school had a positive influence in young children’s lives so they transferred what they learned to their homes, often inviting other family members to practice mindfulness together.

In addition to enjoying mindfulness practices at school and home, a third theme emerged revealing young children’s practice of mindfulness and their self-awareness about the connection between mind and body. Shiloh observed, “Mindfulness is noticing your feelings. I notice my feelings. I am not stormy. I am calm and happy” and a classmate noted “when I am still, I can feel the light soaking into my skin” (Schrodt et al., 2019: 14). These reflections demonstrated children’s vivid understanding of tuning into the body and recognizing the connection between their body and mind. Similarly, youngsters indicated how using specific mindfulness practices led to experiencing a greater sense of inner peace and calm, “I learned that focused breathing and movement can help you relax” and another child who recognized the value of rest, “learned to stay calm. . .and [feeling] real rested from resting time because you need rest or you can’t do anything” (Rashedi et al., 2019: 3398). Young children understood the importance of rest and how to achieve it.

In a fourth theme, youngsters articulated the benefits of mindfulness to handle stressful situations “I learned that once you take time to do a stretch right then your impulse goes down” (Rashedi et al., 2019: 3398). During challenges, young children described how they used mindfulness practices to notice and manage big emotions, especially anger. Ahmed noted, “if I am not allowed to play on my PlayStation, I feel angry, so I press my pause button” (Ager et al., 2015: 909). Another child acknowledged, “it helped me with my anger problem because when people was rolling their eyes and stuff at me, I just fight, but now I tell the teacher” (Case-Smith et al., 2010: 233). This child articulated how practicing mindfulness helped identify an alternative solution to aggression (i.e. fighting). Through the regular practice of mindfulness at school, young learners reflected on and reported a sense of greater self-awareness and how to manage their feelings.

The significant role that breathing plays in young children’s lives emerged as a fifth and final theme related to mindfulness. Breathing seemed to simply make everything better for themselves and their classmates. Specifically, young learners noted situations at school *when* breathing

practices would help their friends. Eloise suggested that breathing would be useful, “when friends are crying”; Abdul wrote in his journal that breathing is beneficial “when friends are hurt” (Ager et al., 2015: 907). George suggested practicing mindfulness in “the hallway. . . because when we’re wild and we’re not ready, we can take yoga breaths” (Palgi, 2007: 334). Similarly, young children also articulated *how* breathing increased self-awareness and self-regulation, “I learned that your stress level can change once you try breathing in and out” and “I learned that my breathing and whatever I’m looking at effect my stress level” (Rashedi et al., 2019: 3398). Written in their student journal, one child noted, “when I feel stormy, I take a big deep breathe so I can calm down” (Schrodt et al., 2019: 9). Young children shared reflections not only about noticing and identifying their feelings, but also about knowing how to manage their emotions on their own to feel better.

The collective voices of young learners in this qualitative meta-synthesis consistently expressed highly positive experiences and insightful reflections regarding practicing mindfulness at school. Specifically, they reported numerous benefits, especially how good mindfulness makes them feel. Children also generalized and adapted mindfulness practices learned at school into their homes, and taught family members to use them. By practicing mindfulness young learners also had greater self-awareness to notice, identify, and respond to mind and body expressions in highly positive ways.

Discussion

This qualitative research meta-synthesis provided a unique, insider lens about children’s lived experiences using mindfulness in early childhood settings. Their first-hand perspectives about the process and outcomes of practicing mindfulness in school yielded positive, productive, and promising fresh understandings in early childhood education and related fields. Despite new findings from this meta-synthesis, there were also limitations. Although mindfulness research with an exclusive gaze on the early years is expanding, our meta-synthesis was limited to peer-reviewed journals only, and this decision may have excluded research from other platforms (i.e. dissertations, books). We also chose studies published exclusively in the English language, so research from refereed journals in languages other than English may have been overlooked, thereby limiting a richer array of geographical and cultural perspectives. Also, by extracting quotes from children across the eight studies, the original context in which they were documented was not fully known. It is important to note, however, that a broader, and more unified perspective of children’s voices about mindfulness in school was provided as a result of this meta-synthesis. Finally, we were a small team of researchers from similar backgrounds and interests, which may have influenced how we viewed social or cultural norms in our data analyses and interpretations. Notwithstanding these limitations, a prominent and perhaps unsurprising finding is the consistently positive impact mindfulness had on young children. Even though there is heightened interest in social-emotional learning in schools today, early childhood educators have always believed that in order to learn, children’s well-being must be a top priority.

We have presented a shared, collective understanding from young children themselves about how and why mindfulness helped them to feel good. When children at any age feel good, they are well-positioned to learn. Perhaps the question is not how to embed more mindfulness into schools, but rather how to eliminate the external pressures young learners face on a regular basis. Some of these school-based pressures might include, but are not limited to, restricted freedom and open-ended inquiry, inadequate time for fun and play, intensified teacher-directed instruction, lack of joyful learning, and significant reduction of art, movement, outdoor explorations, and nature-based discovery. As such, mindfulness must not become a solution to structural problems situated in educational or societal inadequacies. Mindfulness, however, can be conceptualized as a way of

being which naturally infuses a myriad of simple effective practices, such as breathing. If the practice of mindfulness is embedded into educational systems as a cultural norm, children learn at an early age essential ways of being and knowing that build a strong, healthy foundation to last a lifetime. When mindfulness is embraced as a teaching commitment, a sense of well-being is naturally situated in the policies, practices, and culture of the educational environment.

The findings in our research suggested that children experienced a sense of well-being as indicated in their expressions of feeling good and demonstrating competence to manage their feelings. In the majority of studies in our meta-synthesis, attention and focus were identified as essential aspects of practicing mindfulness, affirming the importance of concentration during the early years. Likewise, most studies in our meta-synthesis noted mind and body connections in their definitions of mindfulness, underscoring the significance of mindful awareness in young learners. In a systematic review on mindfulness interventions for children ages 3–10 years, the aim of practicing mindful awareness was “to enhance self-management of attention, to promote concentration, to increase emotional self-regulation and to develop social-emotional resiliency” (Nieminen and Sajaniemi, 2016: 2). In other words, teaching mindfulness to young learners is essentially about how to manage their attention which promotes a greater sense of self-awareness and resilience. Our meta-synthesis findings demonstrated that young children were able to manage or regulate their attention, often on their own. As a result, they increased focus, noticed connections between mind and body, and reported what they observed. Perhaps this is the essence of what mindfulness is all about: being consciously aware about where attention is placed. And by being mindful, there is an inherent understanding of reading and responding to messages the body is communicating. Children’s ability to first notice and then manage their attention, in essence being mindful, seems to play a significant role in understanding self-regulation during the early years.

There are positive, promising research findings on mindfulness interventions to promote self-regulation during the early years (Berti and Cigala, 2020; Flook et al., 2015; Razza et al., 2015; Viglas and Perlman, 2018), although there seems to be limited alignment between the scope and conceptualization of self-regulation. Muir et al. (2023) suggested there may be some misunderstanding and ambiguity, especially within and between concepts like executive functioning and self-regulation, perhaps because of their widespread application during the early years and across a variety of disciplines. What if the practice of mindfulness was a pathway to self-regulation, specifically to teach youngsters how the mind and body work together as one?

Teaching self-awareness to young children about how the brain and body work together can help them better associate how their thinking or feelings are naturally expressed in a physical sense. As young children become more aware and notice their thoughts (associated with the brain) and physical sensations (associated with the body), they can begin to name what they are experiencing to promote a greater understanding of this inseparable connection. By labeling their inner experiences such as feelings (scared, happy, mad, sad, frustrated), sensations (stress, peace, cold, calm, tired), and attention (engaged, confused, bored, concentrating), young children can consistently become more self-aware and regulate their overall energy.

Since many variables will affect a child’s energy such as contextual, temporal, biological, social, environmental, and physiological influences, it is important that young learners understand that their energy is an individualized experience and is constantly changing. One tool that helps children tune into their bodies is The Alert Program, which was created by two occupational therapists to increase attention and language about self-regulation using a car engine analogy (Williams and Shellenberger, 1996). Supporting children’s genuine curiosity about their energy can happen in naturally occurring ways (notice your breath during recess vs story time).

A future research agenda might focus on how to effectively embed the practice of mindfulness into the school culture or what strategies are most effective to improve children’s attention

throughout the school day. Young children are required to pay attention in school, yet they are seldom taught how to do so. Therefore, examining how the practice of mindfulness is realized as a shared school value can be one place to start.

In conclusion, this qualitative research meta-synthesis brought together a collective understanding and fresh insights about young children's lived experiences of practicing mindfulness in school settings. The findings demonstrated how young learners reflected thoughtfully about their experiences and reported highly positive results when practicing mindfulness. Breathing was especially helpful to understand brain-body awareness and manage stressful situations. Therefore, we recommend that the practice of mindfulness occurs naturally in each moment, and is embedded into the school-wide culture as well as ordinary routines, events, and activities that happen in everyday life. During the early years, practicing mindfulness may be a way to teach young learners how the body and brain work as one.

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