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Winter 12-1-2019

## Mindfulness-Based Practices for School Aged Children with Anxiety

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Running head: MINDFULNESS-BASED PRACTICES

MINDFULNESS-BASED PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN WITH ANXIETY

Bethany Schmitt

A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education at

Winona State University

Fall 2019

Winona State University  
College of Education  
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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**Mindfulness-Based Practices for School Aged Children with Anxiety**

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Bethany Schmitt

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

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Approval Date: 12 December 2019

### Abstract

Anxiety is occurring at alarming rates in our school-aged children. The impact of the anxiety is affecting the students' social-emotional and mental well being in all settings. If the anxiety is left untreated it becomes more challenging and prevalent in the student's life leading to other concerning mental health issues such as depression and suicidality. A major role of a school counselor is assisting children in developing coping strategies. School counselors implement coping strategies through individual, group, and classroom lessons. A beneficial intervention for students with anxiety is mindfulness-based practices. These practices include meditation, yoga, guided imagery, breathing techniques, muscle relaxation, and many more relaxing and mindful techniques. The practice of mindfulness within the school setting can be useful if there are many stressors that students face personally and at school, including academic stress, social situations, personal self-esteem, along with other day to day challenges of being a school-aged child.

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### **Mindfulness-Based Practices for School Aged Children with Anxiety**

Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems affecting youth today and are occurring at alarmingly high rates (Farrell & Barrett, 2007). In 2015 it was estimated that 17.1 million youth have or have had a diagnosable psychiatric disorder (Child Mind Institute, 2019). Of the 17.1 million youth, 31.9% of them have an anxiety disorder and 8.3% are diagnosed with a severe anxiety impairment, resulting in anxiety being the most common psychiatric disorder in childhood as compared to attention-deficit/hyper-activity disorder (ADHD) and disruptive behavior, depression, bipolar, and eating disorders (Child Mind Institute, 2019). The median age of onset of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias, panic disorder, and separation anxiety disorder occur at age six (Child Mind Institute, 2019).

Untreated mental illness impacts everyone and costs society. Childhood anxiety predicts later psychiatric disorders such as panic attacks, depression, separation anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, social phobia, and suicidality (Child Mind Institute, 2019). One in five school children experience a mental health problem and most will not seek or receive appropriate interventions or services (Farrell & Barrett, 2007). According to the results from the 2015 Children's Mental Health Report, the most effective treatment for children with anxiety includes a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and antidepressant medication (Child Mind Institute, 2019). After 12 weeks of combination treatment there was an 81% rate of effectiveness as compared to 60% with CBT therapy alone or 55% with medication alone (Child Mind Institute, 2019).

School aged youth with high levels of worry often display impairment in all areas of their lives including school, social, community, and family. Youth with untreated anxiety often begin to develop poor coping skills and frequently turn to avoidance as a way to deal with their anxious

thoughts; however, this only provides a temporary relief and often times reinforces their anxiety instead of adjusting to it (Child Mind Institute, 2019). Untreated anxiety may also lead to low self-esteem, academic dysfunction, and self-medication through substance abuse (Child Mind Institute, 2019). Children living with anxiety for a long period of time are also at a higher risk of developing depression (Child Mind Institute, 2019). Early prevention within the school through mindfulness-based practices can assist the children with coping with daily life stressors and worries and can serve as a healthy intervention for those who are currently impacted daily by anxiety (Child Mind Institute, 2019). Current research on the effectiveness of mindfulness techniques has primarily focused on adults, however recent studies and research has also shown the benefit of mindfulness for children and youth as well (Child Mind Institute, 2019). By better understanding the impact of anxiety on school-aged children, what mindfulness is, how mindfulness based techniques are beneficial, how they can be implemented within the school setting, the role of the school counselor with mindfulness based practices, and the limitations and challenges of mindfulness, counseling practitioners can more effectively serve youth battling anxiety.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Anxiety in School-Aged Children**

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is the most common psychopathology of children and adolescents (Imran, Haider, & Azeem, 2017). It has been indicated that the overall prevalence of generalized anxiety disorder in children and adolescents is 10.8% (Benjamin, Beidas, Comer, Puliafico, & Kendall, 2011). School-aged children with anxiety display the inability to control their worry and may excessively worry about social interactions, family, health, safety, schoolwork, world events, and natural disasters for more than six months (Imran,

et al., 2017). Many children with anxiety disorders have poor emotion regulation skills and often have strong thoughts and feelings of impending threat, danger, or catastrophe, which promotes hyper vigilance and avoidant behaviors (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010). Generalized anxiety disorder in school-aged children is associated with poor academic achievement, social problems, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Benjamin, et al., 2011).

Worry in school-aged children is common; however, it becomes significantly problematic when it impacts their daily living (Jarrett, Black, Rapport, Grills-Taquechel, & Ollendick, 2015). Research has indicated that nearly 70% of children have reported that they worry every now and then and many children worry more frequently or to a point at which it becomes impairing (Jarrett et al., 2015). Having a small amount of worry can be healthy. However, if it occurs frequently or is prolonged it may be detrimental to the child's health and well-being (Jarrett et al., 2015). When the worry becomes difficult to control, children may experience difficulty sleeping, poor sleep quality, muscle tension, and increased irritability (Hoge et al., 2013).

Currently there are several different assessments to determine the impact that anxiety is having on the child, allowing treatment providers to have a better understanding of the severity, which will allow for more accurate treatment planning (Rasumussen & Pidgeon, 2011; McCurdy, 2013; Spies, Carlson, & Geisinger, 2008). The following three assessments listed are appropriate ways to assess anxiety in school-aged children. The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) is used to assess anxiety before and during social situations (Rasumussen & Pidgeon, 2011). This SIAS scale is completed by using a five-point likert scale (Rasumussen & Pidgeon, 2011). The Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (MASC 2), is designed as a comprehensive, multi-rater assessment of anxiety dimensions in children and adolescents (McCurdy, 2013). The MASC 2's purpose is to also assist with the early identification,

diagnosis, treatment planning, and monitoring of anxiety prone youth (McCurdy, 2013). The MASC 2 contains two forms, including a self-report form (MASC 2-SR) and a parent form (MASC 2-P) (McCurdy, 2013). Both the self-report form and parent form follow a 4-point Likert-type format (McCurdy, 2013). The Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale: Second Edition (RCMAS-2) is designed to assess the level and nature of anxiety in children and adolescents (Spies, Carlson, & Geisinger, 2008). RCMAS-2 is a paper and pencil 49-item self-report scale (yes or no answer) that takes respondents about 10 to 15 minutes to complete (Spies, Carlson, & Geisinger, 2008). These three assessments have different ways of measuring anxiety through self-reports, parent reports, yes/no answers, Likert scale ratings, and measuring anxiety before and during social interactions (Spies, Carlson, & Geisinger, 2008). All of these assessments have a common goal, which is to obtain more information regarding the level of anxiety in the school-aged children.

When generalized anxiety is prevalent in childhood and adolescence, there are substantial risks for adverse outcomes, which can lead to an increased risk of anxiety and depression in adulthood (Imran et al., 2017). Prevention strategies and learning how to manage worry at a young age will increase one's ability to control worry when one becomes older (Imran et al., 2017). Often times management of generalized anxiety disorder is best managed through a multi-modal approach including psychological and pharmacological treatment (Imran et al., 2017).

### **What is Mindfulness?**

Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (as cited in Semple, et al., 2010). Teasdale, Segal, and Williams describes mindfulness as being fully in the present moment, without judging or

evaluating it, without reflecting back on past memories, without looking forward to anticipate the future, and without attempting to problem solve or avoid the immediate situation (as cited in Lee, Semple, Rosa, & Miller, 2008). Approximately 50% of our awake life is spent mind-wandering, indicating the high need for mindfulness based practice (Marusak et al., 2018). The practice of mindfulness allows for the individual to feel more control of their lives and be in a facilitative state, which promotes creativity, flexibility, use of information, as well as memory and retention skills (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). Mindfulness-based interventions aim to help people bring their focus into the present moment and their awareness to different manifestations of stress in their life (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, Lacourse, Herba, Taylor, & Armor, 2017).

There are different ways to assess one's levels of mindfulness as well as different interventions to incorporate mindfulness into daily life (Rasumussen & Pidgeon, 2011). The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) is used to assess mindfulness (Rasumussen & Pidgeon, 2011). Participants are asked to rate 10 items on a six-point scale of almost never to almost always to indicate level of awareness (Rasumussen & Pidgeon, 2011). The Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children (MBCT-C) is a psychotherapy group for children ages 9-13, which was developed to increase social-emotional resiliency through the enhancement of mindful attention (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010). MBCT-C's focus is to reduce attention problems, anxiety symptoms, and behavior problems (Semple et al., 2010). Results of the MBCT-C have shown that it is a promising intervention for attention and behavior problems and may reduce childhood anxiety symptoms (Semple et al., 2010).

### **Benefits of Mindfulness**

The application of mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents is a newly evolving field; however, current evidence suggests that these approaches are feasible with

youth (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Research on mindfulness-based interventions have suggested that mindfulness provides various benefits for school-aged children including increased ability to tolerate stress, increased attention and awareness, as well as the ability to self-soothe, calm themselves, and become more present (Rempel, 2012). Mindfulness based practices have also demonstrated the ability to improve self-regulation, mood, and social-emotional development (Crescentini, Capurso, Furlan, & Fabbro, 2016). Evidence supports the idea that mindfulness is associated with high self-esteem and low social anxiety (Rasmussen & Pidgeon, 2011).

Randomized controlled trials with youth have indicated that mindfulness-based interventions can be helpful in decreasing ruminative and intrusive thoughts, depressive and anxious symptoms, stress and aggressiveness, and increasing empathy and optimism, all while working on emotion regulation skills (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, Lacourse, Herba, Taylor, & Armor, 2017).

### **Mindfulness and the Brain**

Within the brain there are three main areas that mindfulness can positively change including the amygdala, hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex. The amygdala is activated when detecting and reacting to emotions, especially fear or other strong emotions (Grant, 2018). The hippocampus is critical to a person's learning and memory (Grant, 2018). The hippocampus also helps to regulate the amygdala (Grant, 2018). Lastly, the prefrontal cortex regulates the emotions and behaviors and assists with making wise decisions (Grant, 2018). Following the implementation and training of mindfulness-based practices it has been indicated that these three areas of the brain are impacted positively (Grant, 2018). After consistent mindfulness interventions the amygdala became less activated and had less gray matter density (Grant, 2018). The amygdala is able to respond with a softer response when experiencing strong emotions compared to not having the mindfulness-based skills to implement (Grant, 2018). The results of

the hippocampus were also improved following mindfulness training including the ability to be more activated in assisting with regulating the amygdala and producing more gray matter (Grant, 2018). Following the mindfulness training the prefrontal cortex is able to be more activated and developed assisting with making wise decisions and regulating strong emotions (Grant, 2018). Utilizing mindfulness-based practices and training offers many positive effects on the brain that can assist the students with regulating emotions and making decisions in all settings of their life, including home, school, and community (Grant, 2018).

### **Mindfulness Based Practices in Elementary Schools**

Greater situational stressors, such as academic demands, coupled with greater awareness of those difficulties, such as being worried about school or having to pay attention in class, increase the levels of anxiety for many youth (Jarrett et al., 2015). With the increase in stressors within the schools, implementing mindfulness-based practices may be beneficial (Rempel, 2012). Introducing school-aged children to mindfulness may better prepare them for present and future challenges and learning these skills within the school environment will be an ideal setting as they spend a large percentage of their time at school (Rempel, 2012).

Similarly, MindUP mindfulness-based curriculum helps students focus attention, increase gratitude, empathy, and connection to others (Maloney, Lawlor, Schonert-Reichl & Whitehead, 2016). This curriculum consists of 15 easy to implement lessons that build awareness and self-regulation as well as improve the child's social-emotional and cognitive abilities (Maloney et al., 2016). Within the MindUP research it has indicated several benefits for teachers, schools, and students including being an adaptable program, improving school culture and climate, creating an optimistic classroom, and it is an evidence-based option for social emotional learning (Maloney et al., 2016). The lessons of MindUP can easily be integrated into the already built

content standards within the school system (Maloney et al., 2016). Mindful breathing is the core practice of MindUP and is practiced three times a day (Maloney et al., 2016). Teachers and students are reporting increases in pro-social behaviors and decrease in aggression (Maloney et al., 2016). The MindUP curriculum focuses on optimism, compassion and engagement, resilience, and expressions of gratitude, empathy, and connection to others (Maloney et al., 2016). Finally, there have been more than 10 years of independent research with four randomized control trials indicating MindUP's impact on students social and emotional learning and academics within the school system (Maloney et al., 2016). Evidence indicating MindUP's positive impact shows that 86% of children report being able to boost their well-being by using MindUP, 88% of children after learning MindUP use it at home, and 83% of children indicate improvements in pro-social behaviors (Maloney et al., 2016). Consistent reinforcement and practice of mindfulness activities within the classroom will allow for long lasting effects for the student (Maloney et al., 2016).

Currently there are several mindfulness-based programs being implemented in K – 12 schools (Semple, Droutman, & Reid, 2017). The primary focus of the groups include strengthening self awareness, promoting self management of emotions, mindfulness education, improving self-efficacy and resilience, developing social-emotional skills, improving self-regulation and empathy skills (Semple et al., 2017). Within the mindfulness-based programs there are several interventions and key mindfulness components including education, breath meditation, body scan, progressive muscle relaxation, personal journaling, guided imagery, yoga, and several other calming and present activities to encourage mindfulness (Semple et al., 2017).

### **Challenges of Mindfulness**

Despite the many benefits regarding mindfulness, there are also some current challenges of mindfulness. The first challenge of a mindfulness-based approach is the need for continued development and research on best practices for adapting well-established adult mindfulness training for the youth population (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). The adult mindfulness research has demonstrated positive results; however, limited research has been done to prove the effectiveness in youth (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). There are also challenges within the school system regarding mindfulness (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Motivating schools to participate in mindfulness-based interventions, finding experienced staff to teach and demonstrate mindfulness practices for the students and staff, as well as finding the time within the school curriculum to practice (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Learning and practicing mindfulness can be uncomfortable for some and may require youth to step out of their comfort zone, which can be difficult to do (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). Allowing students to see the benefits and continued support will be helpful in addressing this resistance to mindfulness. Currently, much of the research being done for school-based interventions are only occurring for five to eight weeks, resulting in the need for a longer duration of time to get best results (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). With continued research and improvements in the area of mindfulness for youth, it will increase the credibility and appeal of mindfulness-based interventions within the school systems (Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

### **Role of a School Counselor**

The use of mindfulness practices within the school setting has been noted to improve the child's cognitive, emotional, and social abilities (Crescentini et al., 2016). Currently within the school setting, many school counselors have an existing social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. However, the mindfulness practices could be an effective addition to the current

curriculum (Crescentini et al., 2016). Implementation of mindfulness-based teaching and practice during classroom lessons would be an effective way of ensuring that the teachers and the students are both understanding the benefits and uses of mindfulness (Kielty, Gilligan, Staton, & Curtis, 2017).

As a school counselor implementing mindfulness-based practices within the school it is important to be knowledgeable and well rounded with the practice, delivery, and benefits of mindfulness. The first step to implementing mindfulness in the schools is practicing mindfulness within your own life (Grant, 2018). As a practitioner of mindfulness one can experience the feelings and benefits from it before becoming knowledgeable and/or trained in various mindfulness-based interventions to incorporate with students (Grant, 2018). Within the school district a school counselor may need to advocate for implementing mindfulness-based practices at schools and present the benefits and knowledge of mindfulness to get the administration and school staff on board with implementing mindfulness within the classroom, small setting, as well as for individual students (Grant, 2018).

Some key considerations when teaching mindfulness-based practices with school-aged children include having short, simple, and concise lessons (Grant, 2018). Incorporating and allowing movement within the mindfulness-based practices will also be beneficial and remembering that the goal of mindfulness is not to command stillness (Grant, 2018). In response to students' experiences of stressors and emotional responses one can incorporate focused breathing, present-moment awareness, body scanning, and other mindfulness based responsive services to encourage calmness for student in the midst of crisis (Grant, 2018).

### **Discussion**

Anxiety among school-aged children is occurring and at alarming rates. The long and short term consequences of untreated childhood anxiety can impact the child within the classroom and social setting with the potential to lead to depression, suicidality, and other mental health concerns in adulthood if left untreated. Some minor worries and stress are healthy; however, when stress, worries, and anxious behaviors begin to take over it is important to have healthy coping skills to utilize including mindfulness-based practices.

Future research could focus on specific ways school counselors could implement these mindfulness-based practices into their curriculum, as many of the current interventions have the teachers implementing the mindfulness practices. Additionally, future research could focus on whether or not the mindfulness-based practices are retained short term or long term, potentially leading into adulthood. More in depth and longitudinal research would assist school counselors with promoting the use of mindfulness within their schools and be able to advocate for curriculum and resources within the classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

Although mindfulness-based practices for school-aged children appear to be promising, significantly more research is needed to examine its effectiveness within the schools. There is currently research indicating the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in adults; however, there is a gap in research to determine the effects on school-aged children. Moreover, there is a significant need for social-emotional support for school-aged children who have anxiety. There are many benefits and positive outcomes from students who practice mindfulness-based skills at a young age within their daily lives, which can lead to long-term benefits when they are adults. Incorporating mindfulness-based practices through the school counseling curriculum will benefit

the students and school system overall in improving the students' overall mental and emotional well-being.

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