

Mental Health Awareness and Stress Reduction: MindUP

Action Research Project

PED3151

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Overview

During my initial September practicum and Wednesday visits to the school, I found that my students were antsy at the end of the day. I also noticed that at the beginning of the week they were sluggish getting started and not very motivated. Towards the end of the week they were easily excitable and not engaged in the lesson as they were looking forward to the weekend. I needed something that would help to calm my students so that we could achieve learning in the classroom each and everyday, despite the many distractions these grade 7 students have on a daily basis. My associate teacher introduced me to the MindUP Curriculum (intermediate level specifically) and I thought it was a perfect match for my classes. I wanted to have something to get the week going and off to a good start, as well as recap and consolidate the week. My initial research question was: *“How will the MindUP Curriculum affect my students’ level of productivity during class time?”*. I thought that the MindUP practices were also a good outlet for my students to share anything they were feeling with me, and that was kept confidential (unless their safety was in question). For this research project I had a few phases: planning, collecting data, reflecting and taking action. Each section will be discussed more in depth later on. I based my research mainly off of observations, as well as anecdotal notes, various assessments and a final reflection piece. Overall, I found that my students were more engaged in the lessons following a MindUP activity versus the days when we did not start the class with MindUP.

Rationale

One reason I chose this topic was because I wanted to promote mental health awareness in the classroom. I wanted to let my students know that our classroom was a safe space, and I wanted them to feel heard. I understand that every child comes from a different background and has a different story, so I wanted them to feel accepted and appreciated in this space. Another reason was that I wanted to reduce overall levels of stress for these students who are experiencing changes. I understand these intermediate years can be a difficult time for this age group. Students are coming to a new school, and are faced with the challenge of making new friends. Students at this age are constantly searching for their “identity”; they are trying on all of these different personalities (being a “sassy kid” or “smart kid” or “athletic kid”). They are trying to find out where they fit in in this new school environment, what they like, who

they like to hang out with, etc. while also having to deal with the new course load that comes with being in grade 7. I wanted to give my students some tools they could use to reduce their stress whenever they are experiencing it, or dealing with anxieties, so that they are able to succeed. Finally, I chose this topic because I thought that it would help to increase overall levels of productivity in the class. I was hoping that by achieving the two other goals (increasing mental health awareness and reducing stress), this would entail an increase in productivity in the classroom, and my students would be generally more on-task. Early on in my practicum experience, I found that towards the end of the day my students were easily excited, extra giddy, and were not super engaged in the lesson. I wanted to implement the MindUP practice so that they would have something to ground them before we started to do any other schoolwork I had planned for the class.

Research in Action

The Set Up

- Resources and documents provided by AT and numerous discussions with my AT (who was very helpful) about what direction I wanted this to go
- Implemented “Wellness Journals” - each student got their own, could decorate it as they saw fit, used these journals for activities as well as reflections/journal responses where they could share what they wanted with me
- Somewhat followed Mind Up lessons - incorporated videos and specific activities where I could - picked and chose from lots of lessons (based on what I wanted to accomplish)
- Focused on beginning and end of each week during practicum - good introduction back into school, and a good finish to the week
- Small activities (generally as a group or in pairs) and then went on to individual writing/journal response

Observations and Measures

- Observed student behaviours before, during, and after MindUP practice (and the days we didn't have any)

- Students were eager to do MindUP practices at the beginning and end of the week - they would take initiative in handing out journals
- Students more engaged in lessons following MindUP practice versus days we didn't have it
- Students more aware of their emotions and actions, more reflective overall

Baseline:

- First journal entry... some students experiencing stress, wide spectrum of responses
 - See what people want to get out of this minds up practice
 - What does "mindful" mean to you - does it help to focus in class, etc.

Other measures:

- Wellness journal responses - tracking progress (read over each journal after every MindUP)
- Check ins/feedback verbally
- Final written reflection
 - What did students notice (if anything) in regards to their own behaviours (emotional, social, etc.)?
 - What did they like or dislike about the practice?
 - Any suggestions...

What I learned...

Although I had somewhat of an idea, I learned that these kids are going through so much and have a lot going on in their lives, not only in school, but in their home and personal lives. I learned it is important to always be supportive and understanding, and to never assume anything about a student. This process solidified my knowledge of these things, but also opened my eyes to so much more than I knew grade 7 students could take on. I learned that some things that you plan go great and students really love it, and others really do not like that activity/lesson you had planned out. You really cannot please everyone no matter how hard you try. I learned that being the positive but realistic person in the room will help your class tremendously. By this I mean that a lot of times students would come into class with a negative

attitude, and instead of absorbing those tendencies, I instead put on a happy face and tried to influence them positively. I was realistic during the MindUP practices by being open, vulnerable and honest with my students about some of my struggles and tools that I use to cope with stress, etc. I learned this helped my students because they were more open to communicating their own struggles and were more honest with themselves as well. Being that person in the room who is able to articulate and share their own experiences I think allowed my students to be able to do the same and get the most out of the experience. I learned that sometimes you just need to listen. Since you don't know what your students are going through, you need to be able to understand them and that involves listening to what they're going through to see if you are able to help with anything. I learned that in conjunction with the global read aloud our class was doing, my students were more motivated to achieve their goals and take action in the world. One of the themes in the novel we read was social justice activism, it was relatable to other kids, and I found that my students were inspired to be a leader. All of the links from MindUP and the novel inspired the students positively, and after finishing the book and examining each part (as well as watching ted talks during MindUP) students were encouraged to take positive action in the world.

Enhancing Professional Practice

I thought that one way to get suggestions and strategies that will enhance the MindUP practice was to get student feedback, which I incorporated into their final reflection. Some of the results included:

“I thought the mind up was really helpful. It helped me learn a lot of ways to calm down when I'm anxious/stressed. It also taught me a lot about being positive/having a positive mindset.”

“I think that Mind Up has allowed me to reflect on my actions more. I liked how it was very peaceful and calming. I suggest you should play more peaceful and calming music (jst like the purple glowing one) to make a calming atmosphere.”

“I wish you would have included more facts about the brain.”

“MindUp always made me feel calm and relaxed, and I thought that it was amazing to do, especially after recess!”

“I liked how it was at the start of class because it got our minds thinking and we could also clear our minds depending on how we were feeling that day. I would prefer to do more hands on activities instead of lotf of writing.”

In regard to my professional practice, I will take these suggestions from students to alter my future MindUP practices. I am also taking into account the research that has been presented and summarized here:

- Teachers using “Time In” - a time to check in on yourself (without having to take a lot of time out of your lesson/class time) (Ager, Albrecht & Cohen, 2015)
- Importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) in pre- and early adolescence periods (Maloney et al, 2016)
- Mindfulness awareness helps students learn to accept and tolerate distress in order to function effectively; should be practiced in short intervals; implemented alongside yoga (Bostic et al, 2015)
- “Real world, every day experiences helped students understand the difference between mindful and unmindful.” - Eighth Grade Teacher, Coatesville Area School District (<https://mindup.org/resources/coatesville-area-school-district/>)

Discussion

One major downfall that I noticed throughout this research process was the lack of mental health awareness and support in schools. My placement school in particular had no designated support counsellor for the intermediate grades. They did have the Learning Resource and Support staff, as well as the Vice Principal. However the VP was not there 100% of the time, and spent the majority of his days dealing with several behavioural issues, and did not necessarily have time for other student issues. Another thing that I noticed was the lack of resources in the classrooms for mental health awareness. I was lucky enough that my AT was on the same page as me, and already had some resources to use in her classroom for the students to promote mental health awareness, and I’m sure other teachers implement their own initiatives, but as a whole I found this aspect was lacking in the classrooms.

From the other research I was reading through, there are still elements that are lacking that pertain to student perspectives on mindfulness, and how children perceive these mindful experiences (Ager, Albrecht & Cohen, 2015). Additionally, when completing my research, there were limitations such as students not completing the journal responses, or students not fully engaging in the MindUP activities. I believe that sometimes the students were not investing in this process, and as a result they did not get everything out of it that they could have. Some other suggestions from the research indicate that these mindfulness practices should be integrated into classrooms where teachers have already started a mindful program of sorts. Moreover, there needs to be more research conducted in this field as to how mindfulness practices help to nourish and sustain student well-being.

Overall, I do plan to use the MindUP Curriculum in the future, whether it is in the Physical Education setting, or in a normal classroom. I would make some changes to the lessons so that they are more active, as this was an integral part of the MindUP for my students over the past few months. Moving forward from this research, in the future I would like to incorporate more body breaks for all students in my classes right from the beginning of the year and see first hand how that affects grades and off-task behaviour. I would also include more drawing in the wellness journals (instead of all the writing I had my students do), because I also have found this to be a good alleviator of stress and anxieties. For example, I would have students draw representations of body feelings (stress, happiness, etc.), as well as illustrate feelings and thoughts about our mindful sessions. In conclusion, I believe the MindUP practices benefitted the students who were engaged emotionally, socially and academically. These practices resulted in an increase in student productivity, as well as heightened self-awareness and self-reflection in the classroom.

Resources

- Ager, K., Albrecht, N. & Cohen, M. (2015). Mindfulness in Schools Research Project: Exploring Students' Perspectives of Mindfulness, *Psychology, Scientific Research Publishing Inc*, 6(7), 896-914.
- Bostic, J. Q. et al. (2015). Being Present at School: Implementing Mindfulness in Schools, *Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics*, 24(2), 245-259.
- Maloney J.E., Lawlor M.S., Schonert-Reichl K.A., Whitehead J. (2016). A Mindfulness-Based Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum for School-Aged Children: The MindUP Program. In: *Schonert-Reichl K., Roeser R. (eds) Handbook of Mindfulness in Education*. Mindfulness in Behavioral Health. Springer, New York, NY.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-being.
- The Hawn Foundation. (2003). The MindUP Curriculum: Brain-Focused Strategies for Learning-and Living, Grades 6-8. Scholastic PDF.

Websites:

MindUP Case Studies: <https://mindup.org/resources/coatesville-area-school-district/>