

Facilitating Ownership in Social-Emotional Learning:

Grade 3 Girls' Co-Created Mindful Routines Foster Self-Regulation and Resiliency Skills

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Abstract

This action research project explores how 7-8 year-old girls co-created mindful routines as a strategy to foster self-regulation and resiliency. This research was conducted with a group of 14 Grade 3 students at an all-girls independent school in Toronto, Canada. The project examined how students could more independently access taught mindfulness strategies when faced with challenges throughout their day. While most research in this area focuses on the beneficial outcomes of participating in mindfulness practices and the long-term positive effects on academics and social interactions, there is less information on how students can more independently access these practices in their daily lives. In this project, the girls created a well-structured mindful routine that they practised each morning and had access to throughout their day. Students exhibited a sense of ownership in creating their unique mindful routine, which led to high levels of engagement and autonomy. The students used critical thinking skills to research various mindful practices and experimented, tested, and self-reflected to discern the practices that best suited them. Data were collected while the girls participated in their individual mindful routine each morning over a six-week period. Data collected were qualitative in nature and captured by questionnaires, interviews, observations and student journals. The results indicated that the students independently accessed this tool to support them through regular daily challenges, such as working through feeling frustrated or overwhelmed, resolving conflicts with peers at recess, and managing anxiety at competitive sporting events. The girls articulated the positive impact of using their mindful routine

and how they plan to use this tool in the future. These mindful routines were used as a tool for self-regulation and demonstrated the development of resiliency skills that students can access throughout their lives to enhance their well-being. Facilitating young students' creation of mindful routines to develop these skills and recognize their immediate positive impact will be key in the school's future planning of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

Glossary

LINCWell: a full-school approach at St. Clement's School characterized by **L**earning, **I**ndividualization, **N**urturing, **C**reativity, and **W**ell-being by developing Social-Emotional Learning curriculum and providing various supports for students.

Mindfulness: intentional ways of being present in the moment that can take various forms, including breathing, meditation, gratitude, positive self-affirmations and yoga-type movements.

Resilience: the process of being able to adapt well and bounce back quickly in times of stress or in challenging situations.

Self-Regulation: the ability to recognize emotions and use various strategies to manage emotions when necessary.

Social-Emotional Learning or SEL: curriculum and lessons that allow students to learn and apply strategies to help them develop ways to work with others, learn to recognize and manage emotions effectively, and make responsible and caring choices.

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In response to the 2022-23 action research topic, "The Global Reset," I reflected on my teaching of social-emotional skills after the pandemic. My experience of online teaching revealed that girls had difficulty using taught strategies, resulting in higher anxiety and a lowered ability to respond to challenging situations. I realized the need to adjust my teaching. Guided by this research, I focused on self-regulation and resiliency, which are teachable skills that are both measurable and highly effective in promoting student well-being. Therefore, I began creating a tool that would help the girls target self-regulation and resilience skill development.

This project is closely aligned with several St. Clement's School initiatives. Firstly, one of St. Clement School's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan's ways of achieving its goals is to "equip students to manage their self-development: provide resources and tools to cultivate self-awareness and support holistic development" (St. Clement's School, n.d., para. 4). Also, St. Clement's School LINCWell department set a goal to "provide each one of our students with key resources, or tools, as well as the ability to know when to use each tool according to individual needs and preferences" (St. Clement's School, n.d, LINCWell section, para. 2). Focusing on these goals, I recognized the importance of developing a tool that was not only highly effective for emotional regulation and resiliency, but also easily accessible for each girl.

Providing student voice and choice is key in ensuring that individual needs are met. The framework from New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL), an approach to learning adopted by St. Clement's School, was influential in the design of this project. Allowing for girls' voices to guide and shape this project was integral to the planning and implementation of this learning.

Keeping these factors in mind, I asked the question: how might co-creating a mindful routine improve the Grade 3 girls' self-regulation skills and build resiliency? Using the action research methodology for this project was ideal, as it allowed me to try a new teaching method that

was supported by research, and to examine how I could develop new teaching practices and improve the quality and effectiveness of their implementation (Mertler, 2020). This methodology provided an opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing research to inform the project while data collection and analysis guided the teaching practice and student experience. In identifying a need to foster self-regulation and resilience within my school, this action research methodology provides the opportunity for systemic improvements (Mertler, 2020), where this new teaching practice can be implemented more broadly and can lead to better instruction and learning within the school.

Literature Review

Over the past three decades, elementary schools around the world have implemented various forms of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into their daily curriculum to foster skill development that promotes positive academic, social, and mental health outcomes (Jones et al., 2017; Rosanbalm, 2021). The research highlights the strong connection between SEL training and immediate success in the classroom and the long-term impact these skills foster for success in the workplace and life (Cipriano et al., 2020; Rosanbalm, 2021). Therefore, when the COVID-19 crisis began, schools quickly turned to SEL to provide guidance in supporting their students by using various SEL strategies to foster school community wellness (Cipriano et al., 2020; Messano et al., 2020; Rosanbalm, 2021). Additionally, recent studies indicate that girls' mental well-being has been more seriously affected than boys' during COVID-19, with girls experiencing increased anxiety, depression and stress (García-Fernández et al., 2020; Suziedlyte et al., 2022). With this in mind, I recognized the need to develop a comprehensive SEL intervention with a specific focus on self-regulation and resiliency as an integral part of the global reset.

With a focus on implementing more targeted SEL programming as a response to the pandemic, it was essential to assess the needs of the students within my context. Research indicates that providing resilience training before girls experience physiological and hormonal changes in

puberty, fosters the skills to help them overcome challenges during their teen years. (Gadari et al., 2022). In light of these research findings, I explored and implemented activities and strategies that focused on building resiliency and self-regulation skills in girls aged 7-8 years-old.

I carefully considered how resiliency is a teachable skill learned through developing thoughts, behaviours and actions that help the students cope and recover from stressful events (Messano et al., 2020; Riopel, 2019). As a quantifiable skill, resiliency can be fostered with the proper programming that is rooted in cultivating a good support system, nurturing positive relationships, exhibiting a good self-image, and having a positive attitude (Gadari et al., 2022; Riopel, 2019). When planning this SEL programming, I included these factors to ensure that the lessons reflected ways to foster and develop resiliency.

Building resilience was the goal, so focusing on developing emotional or self-regulation skills was a key component in my planning. Self-regulation is the ability to recognize and manage emotions (Broderick & Metz, 2009). The ability to self-regulate one's behaviour is an important protective factor in relation to resilience (Artuch-Garde et al., 2017). Teaching strategies related to self-regulation during the childhood years is opportune, given the malleability and plasticity associated with brain development during this growth period (Flook et al., 2015). Thus, it was important to focus on the teaching of self-regulation skills to support the Grade 3 students' social-emotional development.

One effective way to teach self-regulation skills is through mindfulness-based practice (Zenner et al., 2014). Incorporating mindfulness practices into the Grade 3 classroom was a way to foster growth of self-regulation skills and build resiliency (Flook et al., 2015). Therefore, my focus was to provide mindfulness training that targeted noticing thoughts and feelings, regulating emotions, and stopping minds from wandering (Schrodt et al., 2019; Zenner et al., 2014). By engaging in various activities that included meditation, yoga movements and body scans (Zenner et

al., 2014), this mindfulness training could provide strategies to help the girls foster their resiliency skills (Schrodt et al., 2019).

Another essential component of the project was providing the girls with ownership of their learning. Fostering the girls' voices and choices provided an opportunity for greater autonomy, motivation, and engagement in their learning (Koeman, 2018). Providing a menu of mindful practices promotes autonomy and allows the students to apply their learning in different contexts and when the need arises (Thibodeaux et al., 2019). With a strong emphasis on providing more ownership and providing skills for girls' social and emotional development, students become empowered and display a vested interest in the learning experience (Thibodeaux et al., 2019). Providing more experiences for meaningful engagement in their learning of mindfulness, helped to promote resiliency and self-regulation skills, and encouraged the girls to implement this tool into their daily lives.

The literature shows that in this post-pandemic period, girls benefit from developing resiliency and self-regulation skills through targeted instruction that includes adopting mindful practices into their daily routines. The effectiveness of these practices is dictated by the level of the girls' ownership of their learning. With this in mind, I introduced mindful routines into the Grade 3 class, ensuring the students had a clear voice and choice in how these practices were implemented. I closely examined the effects of these teaching skills related to self-regulation and resiliency as the girls co-created mindful routines which they could independently access when needed.

Research Context

St. Clement's School is an independent school for girls located in midtown Toronto, Canada. Approximately 465 students aged 5–18 years old attend this school. St. Clement's School is a small and close-knit community where each student is known and valued.

My research project was carried out with a class of fourteen Grade 3 girls over the first term of the school year from September 2022 until January 2023. I worked with the class in the morning

during their Morning Meeting period for 20 minutes, four days a week, and during a 40-minute LINCWell class, once a week.

The Grade 3 students were ideal participants, as they were a highly motivated group who were consistently open to new ideas. I had worked closely with this group in previous years as the primary Learning Strategist and had established a meaningful connection.

An explanation of the project was sent to parents and their permission for their daughters' participation in data collection was obtained. It was made clear that no student would be disadvantaged should they decide not to participate in data collection, and that all collected information would be held in confidence and anonymized.

The Action

The central action of this project was facilitating students' creation of their own mindful routine that they could independently access throughout their day to build self-regulation and resiliency skills. Moving to a more student-centred approach and providing the girls with autonomy and ownership in this process by taking on the role of facilitator, was a different and welcome approach in my practice.

The project began with six 20-minute direct instruction lessons about resiliency and self-regulation to establish a common understanding of these terms. A collection of storybooks related to self-regulation, resiliency, and mindfulness were provided and the students chose which ones they wanted to explore. The girls took notes on what they had learned from these books and later shared their findings with their peers. Through teacher-facilitated class discussions, the girls proposed and came to a consensus on five categories to frame their mindful routine: breathing, meditation, movement, gratitude and positive self-affirmation. Once these categories were chosen, I created a Google Doc that included a number of resources or practices for each one. Through exploration and experimentation, the girls tested various practices from each category and self-reflected in their journals on the effectiveness of the practice.

After seven 20-minute periods in which the girls explored various practices, they built their personalized mindful routines by including one or two practices of their choice for each category (see Appendix). Time was allotted to allow each student to try their routine several times, while making adjustments until it felt “right” for them. Each girl practised the routine each morning and was encouraged to use it at other times in the day as a tool when they were feeling sad, mad, anxious or overwhelmed. We had numerous class discussions about when they would use their mindful routines throughout the day.

Data Collection

Over the six weeks that Grade 3 students co-created their mindful routines to improve their self-regulation and build resiliency, various qualitative data were collected. The techniques for data collection included questionnaires, interviews, student journals, observation, field notes, videos, and photographs. Polyangulation, or using a variety of methods to collect data, ensured that the data were trustworthy and authentic (Mertler, 2020).

One technique of data collection used in this project was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was a set of six questions based on Smith and colleagues’ (2008) Brief Resilience Scale, which was created to assess the ability to “bounce back.” I modified the wording to allow school-aged children to better understand the questions and to make them more open-ended, as suggested by Mertler (2020). The second part of the questionnaire included questions related to the girls’ knowledge and experience with mindfulness. This questionnaire was used to generate some of the baseline data that informed the next steps in the project. The same questionnaire was assigned midway through the project and again during the final week and the girls’ responses from the three questionnaires were compared.

Another integral part of the data collection process were focus group interviews with eight girls from the class. The interviews were conducted with two to four girls at a time to allow for more natural conversation. The same girls were interviewed three times throughout the data

collection period; however, the groups were made up of different configurations each time. The semi-structured interviews included predetermined questions that provided consistency throughout the interviews but also allowed me to ask clarifying or follow-up questions (Mertler, 2020). The questions focused on the girls' resilience, self-regulation, and mindfulness practices. To ensure the girls' responses were well-documented, these interviews were videotaped.

Student journals were also used to collect data on the girls' reflections and feelings. In their journals, students responded to given prompts. The journals allowed me to "gain a sense of students' daily thoughts, perceptions and experiences in the classroom" (Mertler, 2020, p. 138). In these journals, students reflected on the mindfulness activities they participated in and described how the activities fostered their well-being. Girls used their journals to record occasions when they accessed their mindful routines, providing valuable data when determining if they were independently utilizing them in other parts of their day.

Along with completing journal entries, the girls filled out reflection forms when they first tried out their mindful routine. The girls reflected on what was happening in their bodies and in their minds when working through the routine.

Unstructured observations and field notes were other methods of data collection used throughout the project. As the girls participated in researching various mindful activities and then co-creating a mindful routine, I took detailed notes about what happened in the classroom. In my field notes, I included my observations and interpretations of what I saw and heard (Mertler, 2020) while students were engaged in mindful lessons and activities. Video recordings and photographs of lessons and class activities were also used to collect data and provided evidence of the girls' engagement in their mindful routines. Collecting this wide range of qualitative data throughout the project provided reliable results concerning how the mindful routine improved the Grade 3 girls' self-regulation and resiliency.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In the process of collecting data, relevant themes were identified and used to assist with further analysis and the coding process. I found the most valuable data were the students' voices, conveyed through student journals, class discussions, and interviews. To honour the authenticity of the girls' voices, I have not corrected the spelling or grammar when quoting the students. As I examined the data generated by the research project, several patterns and trends emerged that were directly aligned with my research question. Four key themes emerged; each is explored in detail below.

Girl's Engagement Improved Due to Ownership of the Learning

When introducing the mindful routine project to promote resiliency skills, the element of co-creating these routines was integral. My data supported the claim by Thibodeaux (2019) that providing an opportunity for voice and choice empowered the students as they communicated a vested interest in this learning experience. Many of the girls articulated the positive result of taking ownership of building their own routines. One student mentioned, "My mindfull rotine is unique because it keeps me calm, " while another said, "My mindful routine is special because it's different from the others." Yet another commented, "What makes my mindful routine special is because, I am part of it." This feeling of pride in their individual creations and owning the process led to high levels of engagement.

By observing each girl build her own mindful routine, it became evident that the processes of critical thinking and self-reflection were essential to the ownership of this project and the development of some resiliency skills. I observed the girls referring to their notes when making their choices and relying on their self-reflections to guide them through the process and final decisions. I also noted that during the lessons, no redirection was necessary as the students were highly engaged in the activity.

After a few attempts with their mindful routines, the girls were invited to make changes. In their journals, they responded to the prompt: “Do you need to make changes to your mindful routine?” One student replied, “Air plane did not work for me so I did tree pose and it worked.” Another girl said, “Yes because 5-finger breathing did not work.” Other students mentioned that no changes were necessary, writing “no I like it the way it is” and, “no I think it is perfect because after I was refreshed.”

I observed high levels of engagement and ownership when the girls created videos showcasing parts of their routine to teach other students how to build a routine of their own. The girls created a script and practised their video segment to ensure it was clear and concise. The students were also able to articulate a strong connection between their mindful routines and improved mental health. My analysis of the data indicated that ownership of their routine and sharing it with others, led to a vested interest in this project.

The girls’ sense of ownership of their routines corroborated the claims of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET, 2021), which states that student ownership is evident when students can articulate what they are learning and how they will use these strategies in the future. As part of a school-wide initiative promoting good mental health, the Grade 3 students presented on the benefits of practising their mindful routines. In a small group interview, students also discussed how they would use their routines in the future: “I can use my mindful routine in the future to help me calm down when I’m angry.” Another student said, “Like maybe if I have an exam, to help me calm down.” One girl spoke about using her mindful routine in the future when she is trying something new. These data display how the feeling of ownership promoted the development of resiliency skills as some students plan to access this tool during future challenging times.

Girls Displayed Positive Emotional Responses Helping to Build their Resiliency

Another key theme that emerged from the data was the girl's strong positive emotional response to their routine, which helped to foster resiliency. In the midpoint journal entry, every girl expressed a positive emotional response after participating in her mindful routine. For example, one student noted in her journal that, "I feel brave after I do my mindful routine," while another wrote, "The mindful routine makes me feel calm and relaxed and happy." Another reflected, "My routine makes my body feel like new." These positive emotional responses allowed the girls to recognize the effectiveness of these routines as a tool for resiliency that can be used during challenging times.

On one occasion, a fellow teacher observed the Grade 3's participating in their mindful routine and commented on the girls' positivity. Through this reflective teaching data collection (Mertler, 2020), the teacher observed the girls exhibiting confidence and engagement as they participated in their routines. This teacher noted that the students were not concerned if others were watching them and felt that they did not feel self-conscious about participating in their mindful routine. She carefully noted that the students did not exhibit signs of inhibition or resistance when doing this activity.

The girls' positive emotional reaction to using their mindful routines was also observed during a class reflective discussion. One student said, "It gets all the bad stuff and feelings out of my body," and another stated, "It makes me feel like me but like a calm self of me." Another described doing the routine as, "It blows all my bad thoughts away." Every student commented on the positive emotional outcome that was connected to participating in her mindful routine and, therefore, they were eager to use the techniques at other times in their day when they needed to bounce back.

Girls' Self-Regulation Improved When Using their Mindful Routine

As the students began to recognize the positive emotional response generated by their mindful routine, they became more comfortable using the routine in other parts of their day to help

them self-regulate their emotions. As the literature indicates, teaching self-regulation is most effective when it targets strategies that assist with feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (Flook et al., 2015).

In their reflective mid-project journal, I asked the students to focus on whether they used their mindful routines outside of the set morning time. One student wrote, “When I use my routine is when I feel angry or sad. Some times it wont work but usaly it will.” Another student clearly articulated, “At home ... I had so much things I had to do and they got all stuck in my mind, so I cryed all the way to my room and I was practicing my box breathing and I came out calm. It is always helping me!!” Another girl wrote, “My mindful routine makes me feel colm. When I am mad at my sister. I take a breath. It has halp me by cekping colm.” Some girls discussed how they were using their mindful routines just before their ski races to calm them down. These responses suggest that using the mindful routine to help self-regulate emotions is a key component in developing resiliency and the girls were able to recognize their routine’s effectiveness as a tool to achieve this.

Other data that support the development of self-regulation skills was evident through the questionnaire, when comparing responses related to bouncing back quickly. Five out of the 11 students demonstrated a positive change in their response from September to December. In September, these five students all reported that they did not usually bounce back quickly, but by December they displayed growth in this area and were able to self-regulate by recovering more quickly to challenging situations.

The girls demonstrated how the resetting of their emotions was immediate for them when using their mindful routine. The class participated in a fill-in-the-blank exercise (see Fig. 1). This immediate change, or emotional reset, allowed the girls to know that their mindful routine “worked” as a good strategy to help them when a challenging situation arose, and to view it as an effective tool to build resiliency.

Figure 1

Resetting Emotions: Fill in the Blanks Exercise

Before I felt tired during I felt thankful, after I felt calm.

Before I felt tired and sleepy, during I felt a little awake but still sleepy, after I felt calm and relaxed.

Before I felt angry, during I felt calm, after I felt better.

Girls Developed Resilient Behaviour

The data were also analyzed to examine the development of resilient behaviour, or the feeling of being able to bounce back from a challenging situation. In the questionnaire, the responses to “How do you feel when you make a mistake?” were closely analyzed to examine if participation in the mindful routine fostered resiliency skills. In a few cases, the responses demonstrated some growth in the area of resilience. In early November, one student responded: “I feel a little bit mad,” but by December she wrote, “I feel happy because mistakes help you learn.” Another student described how, in November, making mistakes made her feel “mad and worried,” but in her end reflection she explained that making her mistakes made her feel “mad but then i do my mindfulnes routen and i feel great.” Lastly, one student went from feeling “frustrated” to “sometimes I feel ashamed but then I say it’s not a big deal as long as you learn from your mistakes.” These responses indicate growth in the development of resilient skills and an understanding that various strategies like their mindful routine can help them manage difficult situations.

While the data demonstrated a significant change in their approach to mistakes it must be noted that only three out of 14 girls articulated this growth. This suggests that the six-week data collection period was not long enough to make a significant difference in mindset, and I wondered, if the project continued, there would be different outcomes.

As the end of the data collection period coincided with the start of Winter Break, I made valuable observations on how the girls participating in their mindful routine demonstrated some resiliency as they managed strong emotions and impulses (Riopal, 2019). One morning was especially noteworthy as it was a school-wide Pajama Day with a special holiday-edition assembly and the school's Elf on the Shelf had just been located. The excitement was high; however, observations of resilient behaviour, as the students quickly settled and grounded themselves in their morning mindful routine, were well-documented.

Data gained from asking girls about resolving recess conflicts indicated that they were indeed developing resiliency skills. In their journals, one student wrote, "I did it at recess because someone was being really mean to me. My routine has always helped me feel better." Another student stated, "My mindful routine makes me feel calm when I am mad or sad. At recess somebody made my feel sad so I use my routine." Yet another girl wrote, "When I'm frustrated and mad I do my routine. I do my routine when I need some time by my self or if I have nothing to do. My routine has helped me many times." The ability of the girls to access their mindful strategy independently at recess provides evidence that resiliency skills were developing.

Conclusions

My action research findings demonstrate that girls, aged 7-8 years-old were able to display self-regulation and resiliency skills when facing challenging situations throughout their day by independently accessing their mindful routine. Having the opportunity to practise their mindful routine each morning, and at other self-selected times of the day, helped the girls recognize the effectiveness of this tool. They clearly articulated that this tool helped them overcome challenges or relieved negative emotions or thoughts. The girls used their mindful strategies to help them manage regular daily challenges, such as working through difficult academic concepts, recess conflicts, or sporting competitions, which demonstrated self-regulation skills and displayed

resiliency. Furthermore, the Grade 3 girls practised their mindful routines with a sense of pride and did not exhibit signs of inhibition or resistance when doing this activity. They truly saw the value in adopting this practice into their lives.

The positive impact of introducing mindful practice into the Grade 3 girls' daily lives was evident. However, there were several limitations to this project. One of the limitations was the significant rate of absenteeism by these young students due to various childhood illnesses that plagued Canada during the research period. Many students were away for 1- 2 weeks of school, which highly impacted the flow of this project over the six-week data collection period and significantly impacted the questionnaire comparison data. A second limitation was the time of day the project action was implemented. To preserve core subjects' instructional time, I met with the Grade 3 class each morning before their first period. Three students were often late for school and this disrupted their ability to complete their full mindful routine each morning. Lastly, it was difficult to measure the growth of resiliency skills in such a short time. To truly collect comprehensive data on building resiliency skill, a longer period of observation and data collection would have been beneficial.

Within the framework of the action research methodology, I have carefully reflected on how to implement the findings of this project to facilitate school improvement. With the success of this research project, I quickly realized the need to foster this approach for a longer time; thus, a three-year plan to fully implement this project in the Junior School is in the planning stages. To honour the girls' ownership element of this initiative, it is imperative that time to experiment and reflect on various mindful practices be provided before girls build their personal mindful routine. The plan is to work with students over one term to ensure they go through a similar process to that used in this project to create their own mindful routine. The school is also supporting my hope to track this group of students as they enter Middle school and observe if their development of self-regulation and resiliency skills assists them as they enter puberty. To do this, I would like to continue fostering

these tools with this group and follow them in Grade 7 to see the long-term effects this project has accomplished.

Reflection

During the pandemic, I recognized the need to alter my SEL programming and approach to better reflect the needs of the girls, so I was excited and grateful for the opportunity to participate in ICGS's Global Action Research Collaborative. Using researched-based strategies and approaches guided and informed these new practices and helped target needed interventions for the girls in the class.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to have provided an effective tool that this wonderful group of girls have adopted into their daily lives. It has been an amazing experience to witness the growth and development throughout the project as this class have become advocates for mindfulness and promoters of this tool throughout our school and at home. One of my favourite highlights includes when a student explained how she was coaching her dad in making his own mindful routine. She wanted to share the tool that was working for her and felt pride in teaching her family about it.

I am profoundly grateful for being on this journey over the past two years and have so many people to thank for their assistance and support.

Firstly, I would like to thank Natalie Demers, Margo Long and ICGS for providing such a positive opportunity for educators to grow and develop their practices in a structured and nurturing setting.

I want to thank Martha Perry, Heather Henricks and Katherine Hicks for their ongoing encouragement and guidance. I am also grateful for my wonderfully supportive SCS colleagues who have rallied behind this project and provided me with tremendous support. I am so fortunate to work in a such a caring community. Special shoutouts to Hillary Armstrong, Kate Faber, Jaime Malic, Laura Mustard, Tomas Johnstone and Ana Fonseca for our fruitful discussions, your skillful editing and unending guidance.

Huge thanks to my research advisor Leanne Horwitz for her ongoing support and valuable encouragement and feedback. To my group of GARC fellows, I feel so honoured to have been on this journey alongside you!

I would like to thank my family for their love and support as I worked on my research project. I look forward to spending some good family time together in the days ahead. I couldn't have done this without you!

And lastly, I would like to thank the Grade 3 students at St. Clement's School. It has been such a pleasure working with you this year. I have enjoyed exploring and learning with you. I have been completely blown away by your enthusiasm and passion for this project. Thank you!

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Appendix

Examples of Student-Created Mindful Routines

The Grade 3 girls were given a template that they filled in with mindful practices from each category that they had explored and self-selected.

