

Surprises in Kindness: Impact of a Mindfulness and Kindness Focused SEL Curriculum on Teachers

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1. Objectives or purposes

Research shows that mindfulness and kindness based curriculums positively impact students in executive functioning, selective attention, and social-emotional skills. In 2018, as part of a community collaboration, university researchers, agency directors, and local educators implemented a mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (KC) with the children, families, and teachers of four agencies, in an effort to support and increase intentional implementation of future social emotional learning (SEL) focused education within the larger community's early childhood population. Three of the four agencies are housed in the Community Early Learning Center (CELC)—a collaborative best-practice based community organization serving predominantly low-income families. The 4th agency is a university-based early childhood education center.

Using a mixed-methods approach the multi-year research project measures the impact of the mindfulness-based KC with preschool-aged children enrolled in the partnering four early childhood agencies and examines the experiences of their early childhood educators during the KC implementation in their early childhood classrooms. Prior to and at three time periods after a 26-hour training course, we measured the impact of the training and implementation on teachers' experiences of educator stress and burnout, as well as their own mindfulness skills.

We examined the beliefs and values of the first cohort of educators who implemented the curriculum within their classrooms and their perceptions of professional life. Not only did we find that educators and staff report increased positive growth of academic and social-emotional development of the children in their classrooms, we also found that the educators perceived increased acts of and moments of kindness between one another as co-workers. As this is a multi-year, community and university collaborative-based research model, we would not necessarily have expected to find programmatic level change (given that half of the teachers were in the control condition). We anticipate that this level of programmatic change at the teacher level will inform positive findings for children's SEL and academic growth. We consider the possible wider implications of a whole school mindfulness-based approach to SEL, for future implementation of the curriculum and to future scholarship.

We define our implementation strategy below. These three components of the curriculum are innovative and under-researched within mindfulness research as well as the larger field of SEL.

- **Whole school:** all children, teachers, and directors within the four agencies will have the opportunity to practice mindfulness and the curriculum

- **Coaching based:** all teachers will have access to mindfulness coaches both in the classroom and outside of the classroom to support their personal mindfulness practice and KC implementation.
- **Teach the teacher:** teachers are first introduced, trained, and supported in the cultivation of their own practice of kindness and mindfulness before they move to support children in this learning.

2. Perspectives & theoretical framework

While SEL is a current trend in educational research and practice, and curriculums/practices focused on mindfulness are included in these studies (Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2019, Flook et al., 2015; Flook et al., 2010), on the whole, the positive effects of mindfulness in early childhood settings deserves much more focus and attention. Current studies do suggest a positive effect with young students but further study is necessary in larger and more diverse populations (Davidson et al., 2012; Flook et al., 2015). This university school partnership contributes to the existing research on using mindfulness and kindness to support the social and emotional learning of young children, using a large, diverse population across varied programmatic early childhood education models.

In addition, despite an increased trend to study mindfulness and/or kindness in school settings, it is surprising that so few of the studies include little more than surface level experiences of the teachers who implement these programs. Other education research shows that teacher beliefs and values can greatly affect the social emotional learning of a classroom (Jennings, 2015). In particular, literature on the teacher experience in early childhood settings is especially scarce: we can find little research whose primary focus is on how teacher experience and teacher's own identification with practices of mindfulness and kindness, and perceptions thereof, affect and contribute to positive impact with children and families (Emerson et al., 2017). Even more scarce is research that examines how mindfulness focused SEL curriculums positively affects teachers as professionals. Most research on mindfulness practices with teachers relies primarily on measuring stress reduction and does not deeply explore other aspects of teaching professional life, such as pro-social behaviors, co-worker relationships, parent interactions, professional development, leadership, and management of early childhood schools and agencies. In this research study, we include quantitative measures of stress, burnout, and mindfulness, but also focus on co-worker relationships, pro-social behaviors, and personal practices and beliefs.

Some current studies do briefly touch on these concepts and do report improvements in teacher relationships with students, parents and colleagues as a result of the program techniques (Jennings et al., 2011). Research shows that in SEL focused curriculums teachers can feel a sense of self-efficacy and connectedness with students and colleagues which have shown important links to teaching engagement, less emotional exhaustion and psychological distress (Flook et al.,

2013). SEL programs may help teachers to cultivate their relationships with their co-workers, which may contribute to less burnout and stress.

As researchers we approach this project with an intention to support educators in their important work in our community. Thus, inclusion of the educators and the agency leaders as data is collected involves mutual collaboration. We take it as a given that social science research, in particular, research in early childhood settings, need not be driven by a stark separation between reason, emotion, and care. Rather, as we find in Nell Noddings's (1992) work on care in education, we do not reduce teaching, learning and research to one method or treatment. Our research questions focused on aspects of pedagogy that go beyond the cognitive impact, looking at such things as what the teachers talked about, how they perceived themselves, and how these carried into other aspects of classroom, professional, and personal practice. We consider this a way of researching kindness, through a theoretical foundation of kindness, itself. Though Noddings is our primary foundation we also draw on more recent research on kindness in teaching (Clegg & Rowland, 2010, Rowland, 2009).

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

Classroom head teachers were randomly assigned to a KC implementation (10 classes) or wait-list control group (6 classes), and completed quantitative mindfulness and stress and burnout measures at three time periods (fall, winter, spring). All KC implementation teachers also completed evaluations of the 26-hour training course, and were interviewed using a semi-structured interview process prior to and after implementation. In addition, thick descriptions from observations before, during, and after implementation of the curriculum were conducted in classrooms. Qualitative data was analyzed through open and selective coding.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials

For this particular paper, the qualitative data collected included a focus group interview with teachers and direct observations of their classrooms. We support these descriptions through data collected with a focus group of the agency directors. We also include quantitative teacher data from the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educator's Survey and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire. The CELC teachers are mostly veteran teachers (5+ years), identify as female, and have had previous training on the Pyramid model (Fox et al., 2003). The University-based center also has mostly veteran teachers and serves infants through age five, but does not formally implement Pyramid programming.

5. Results and Substantiated conclusions

Quantitative Results. Data comparing 17 teachers who implemented the KC to 12 teachers in the control condition confirmed that KC teachers experienced less stress and burnout overall and had higher scores on the Five Facet Mindfulness subscales. In particular, KC teachers

indicated greater feelings of personal accomplishment (i.e., less burnout) and reported significantly higher scores in mindful observing (see Figures 1 & 2).

Qualitative results. The teachers reported that they “feel” that the students in the classroom both practice kindness and use the words ‘kind’ and ‘kindness’ with one another. As expected, they find that they are more responsive to students, rather than reactive. The teachers seemed pleasantly surprised that this kindness towards others not only appeared in their reactions to students and to students’ interactions with other students but also with each other as co-workers. They spent a significant time in conversations with one another and they reported that these interactions were “kind” and “open.” In a curriculum focused on kindness, much of it about kindness with others, we find it interesting that in their pre-implementation expectations about the program, the teachers did not share an expectation to become more kind as co-workers, with each other.

We found several emergent patterns about their relationships as co-workers. The first centers around themes of learning (both that they can learn about the curriculum and one another). The second focuses on aspects of change. Finally, we uncovered a theme of vulnerability or what one teacher described as “more openness.” We recognize that these teachers have grown in their understanding of both what it means to be in a kind and caring relationship and that, through the implementation of this curriculum, they are finding ways to articulate that understanding into their practices with one another as co-workers.

During classroom observations, these findings were further corroborated, we saw evidence both of actions of kindness (sharing toys, taking turns) and also talking and modeling kindness (listening to others talk about feelings, asking others for help). Of great interest is the way that these later two (listening and asking for help) are evidenced in high percentages by both students and teachers (see Figures 3 and 4). We are encouraged also by the percentage of time during classroom observations where researchers observed sharing of toys and ideas. These findings were corroborated through discussions with agency directors who report that their staff takes time to practice gratefulness and care with one another. One director said, “I have seen my staff, I do believe they are kinder to each other.”

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

Noddings points us to a major effect of our current findings. In her work, she offers suggestions to make kindness, care, and the emotional work of being human a central component of the school curriculum. She points directly to the professional life of teachers and recommends that they too will need space and time to cultivate this kind of learning. She writes, “Teachers will also have to build in time to talk to each other about their own growth as well as that of students. They will have to offer each other moral support, intellectual/academic help, and solid friendship” (1992, p. 177). We acknowledge (as does Noddings) that this often requires a significant shift in a school or program focus. We suggest that the mindfulness based KC

implemented using a coaching and teach the teacher method, offers a strategic way that educators can intentionally build such activities into their school, classroom, and program.

What might our early childhood care centers, programs, and agencies look like if built around core ideas that one can practice and grow at becoming friends, building mindfulness, and connecting as co-workers and colleagues? In the modern and often stressful world for children and their care-givers, the motivation to continue to seek out and examine the way kindness might inform the professional life of teachers seems a truly important task, in particular for those working in close partnership with community and school agencies.

Figures: Selected Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Figure 1

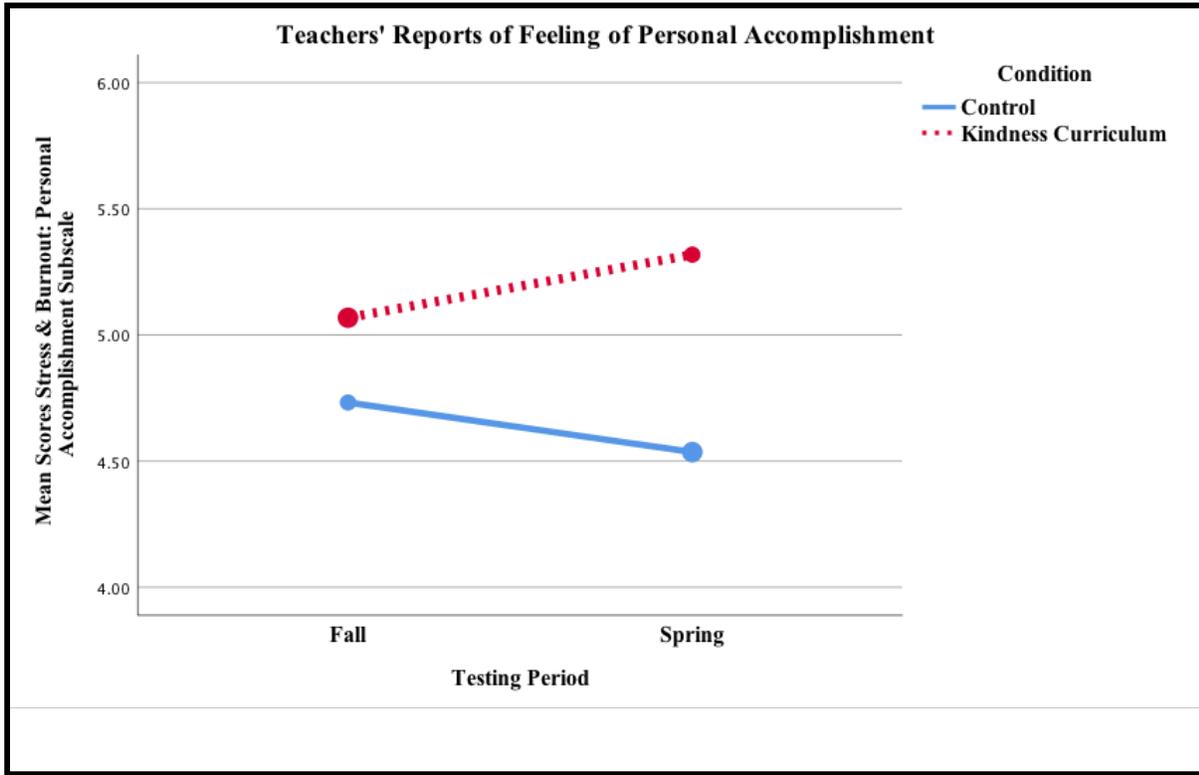


Figure 2

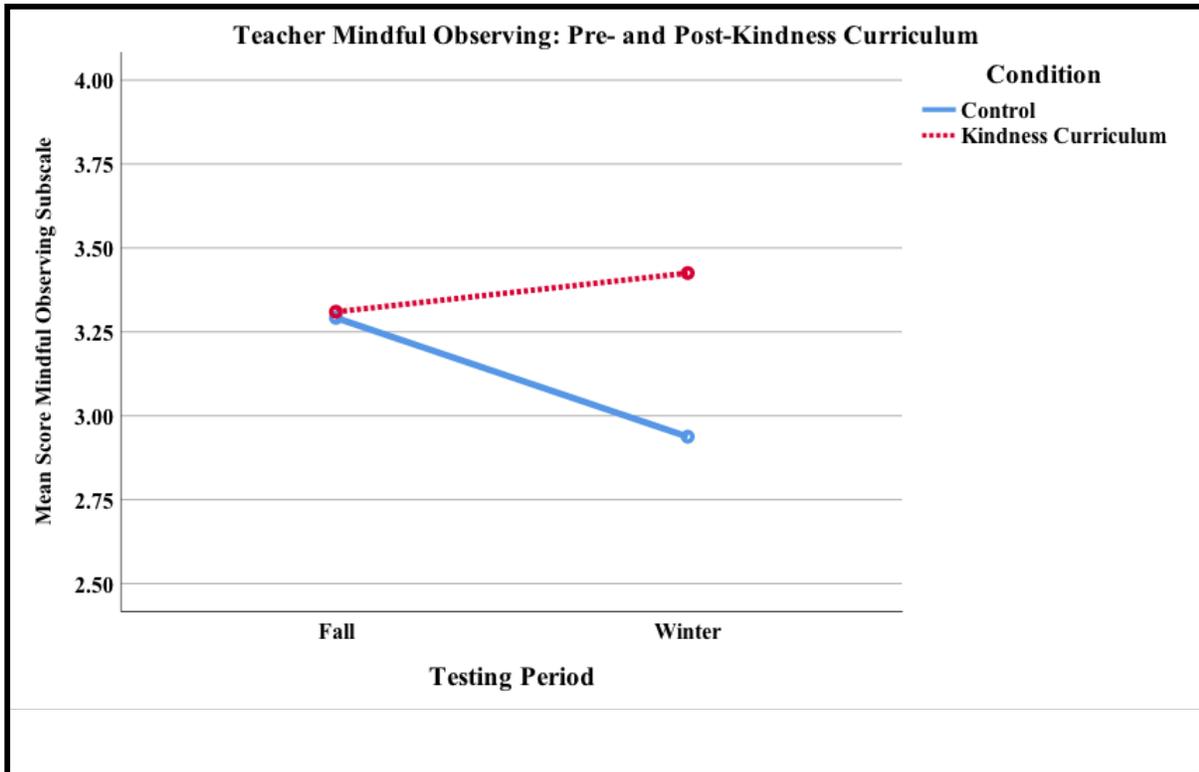


Figure 3

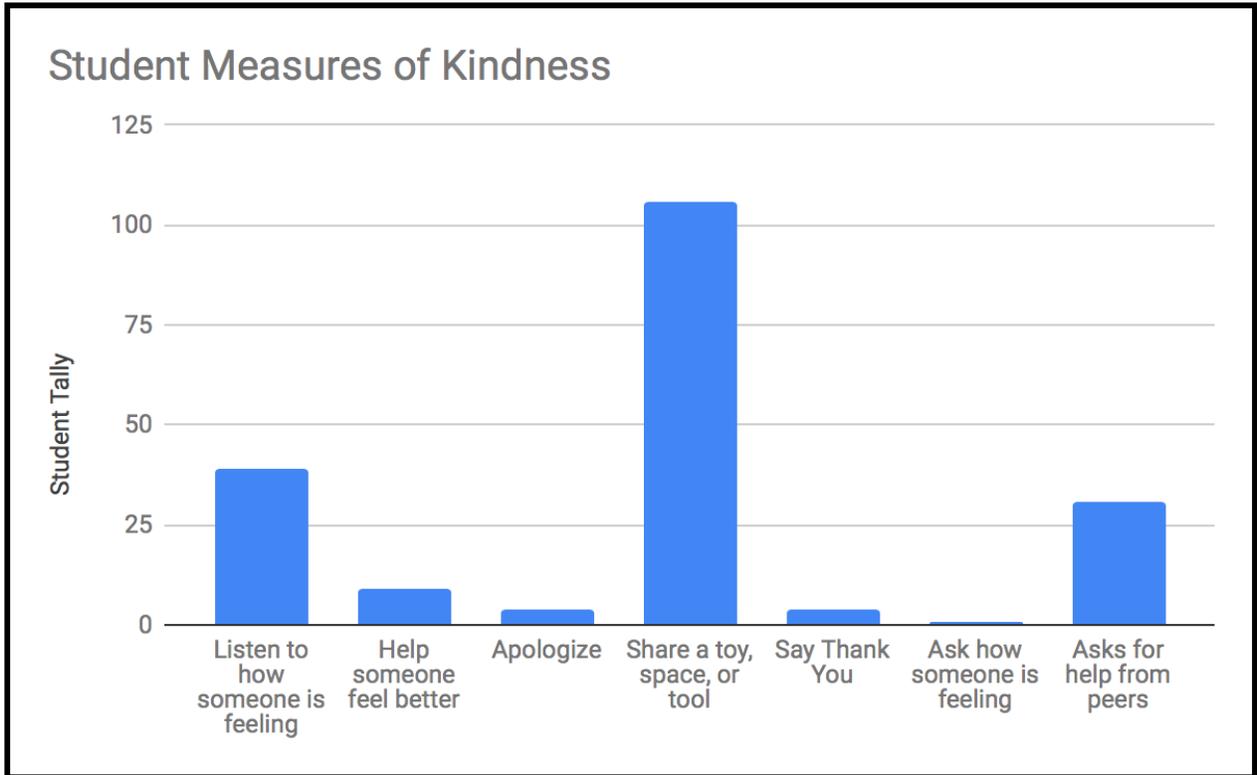
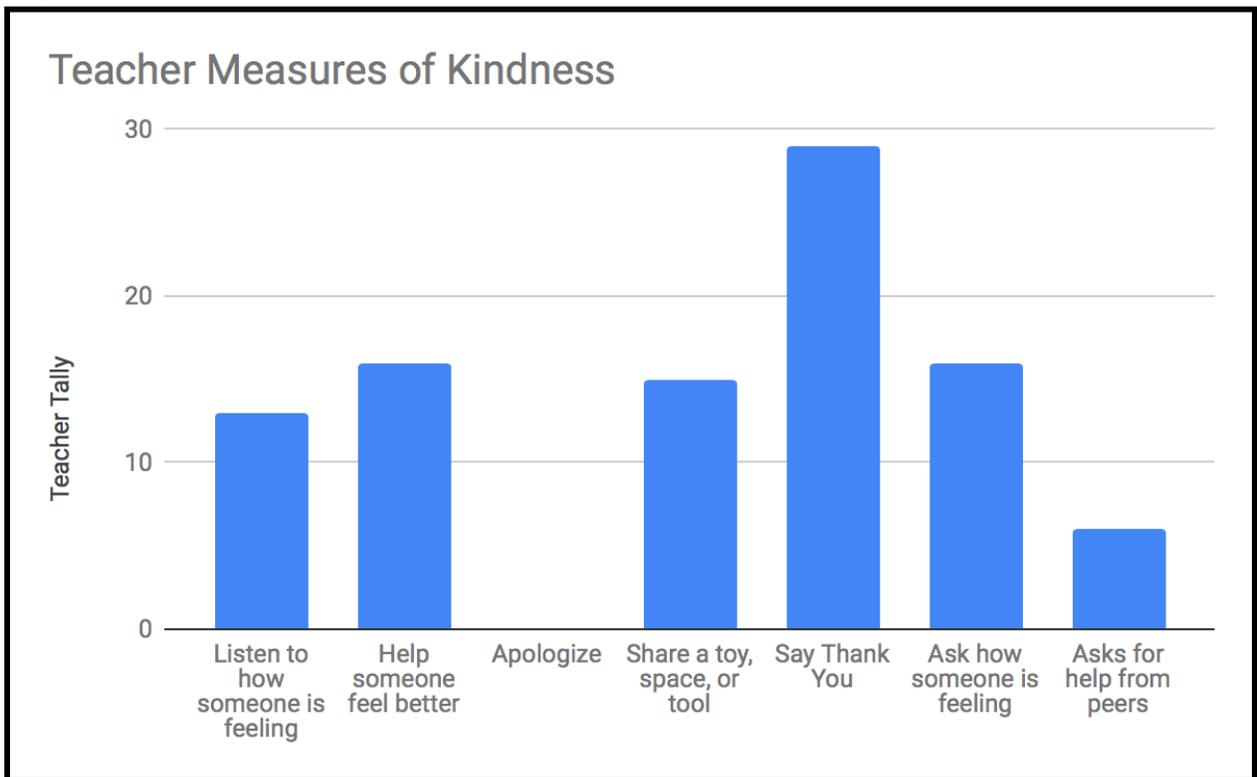


Figure 4



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