

Reclaiming Psychological Wellness Through Arts-Based Mindfulness

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Abstract

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This critical qualitative study explores how racially and ethnically diverse youth foster psychological wellness through the arts and how their teachers reflect on arts-based mindfulness practices. While there is a substantial research basis for mindfulness and social-emotional learning (SEL), more literature should explicitly examine the cultural sustainability of this work. The conceptual framework used to explore the data for this study is rooted in the tenets of DisCrit and the principles of Disability Justice. The framework focuses on three areas of inquiry: artistic expression to promote more inclusive psychological wellness practices, disruption of traditional classroom power dynamics through centering student experiences and choice, and the role of student identity, including non-Eurocentric values such as interdependence, in promoting psychological wellness. The data were analyzed through a frame of critical qualitative inquiry, where findings were applied to recommendations for applied practices in implementing culturally inclusive SEL. This study addresses this gap in the research by exploring how the implementation of arts-based methods can be used to center student voices while encouraging students to construct individualized definitions of mental well-being. Using the arts, mindfulness practices can be designed to be more child-led, creating the potential for redefinitions of mental wellness that are culturally inclusive and resist the conceptions of wellness prevalent in traditional Western ideology.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Psychological wellness can be understood as having control over one's life, a feeling of purpose and belongingness, and a sense of life satisfaction (Cowen, 1991). Prior research has shown that participation in mindfulness practices, including psychological wellness interventions, is associated with multiple positive outcomes, including reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Ahmedani et al., 2016) and benefits in socialization, education, and motivation to change (Van Metre et al., 2011). In addition, in children, wellness interventions can address symptoms of common mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, trauma, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) (Georgiopoulos et al., 2020).

Mindfulness has become an increasingly popular research focus in the literature on psychological wellness. Mindfulness is a practice where one pays mindful attention to the present experience (Leary & Tate, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Although there is increasing interest in examining the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions and practices, the research must be particularly attentive to individuals from historically marginalized groups participating in such interventions. Many of these interventions are individual-focused and encourage participants to improve their well-being through self-improvement and self-discipline. The problem with this is the disconnect with culturally adaptive approaches to well-being, in which it may be more appropriate to emphasize the collective wellness of a community. In addition, individual-focused interventions often overlook the role of oppressive social and political structures in marginalized groups while asking the individual to practice mindfulness techniques without acknowledging the need for systems-level change (Arthington, 2016). Thus, despite the documented benefits, there are equity problems concerning the accessibility and cultural relevance of wellness interventions. Psychological wellness interventions and research tend to reflect an individualistic perspective that minimizes collectivist values and structural oppressions that may impact mental well-being (van Uchelen, 2000). Frameworks heavily focused on wellness, such as positive

psychology, have been criticized for endorsing Western values such as autonomy and self-reliance while ignoring aspects of identity such as gender, class, ethnicity, and power relations (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Relatedly, wellness interventions may have discriminatory effects on individuals with disabilities. In adults and working-age individuals, employers may use wellness initiatives to provide additional benefits to employees who maintain good health and, therefore, can be more productive, defining health through an ableist and neoliberal lens (Basas, 2014).

Statement of the Research Problem

Although researchers have established an evidence base for mindfulness, more literature is needed to examine whether these practices are effective for marginalized individuals. Ensuring that methods are culturally appropriate can reduce barriers and empower those with historically marginalized identities. Culturally responsive social-emotional interventions can be defined as methods that work through a cultural lens, recognize the complexity of culture, and incorporate individual differences (Jones, 2014). Facets of these practices can include considerations around identities related to race, disability status, gender, and sexuality.

One way of adapting wellness practices to be more inclusive of intersectional identities is by using the arts (Diem-Wille, 2001). Incorporating arts-based practices centers individual voices and funds of knowledge and reduces the power differential between the practitioner and client (Freire, 2005; Goldberg, 2006). This study examines the potential benefits of arts-based methods to promote psychological wellness in individuals with multiple historically marginalized identities, specifically in school-age children.

There is a considerable evidence base for school-based social-emotional interventions that improve and support the development of youths' mental wellness (CASEL, n.d.). However, there are gaps in the literature examining the experiences of marginalized students participating in SEL, how minoritized students make meaning in the context of arts-based interventions, and how SEL can be

adapted to be more culturally inclusive (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Further research in these areas is crucial, as marginalized populations experience systemic barriers to treatment and intervention that promote mental well-being.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explores how school-age youth develop mindfulness skills through an arts-based social-emotional intervention using a conceptual framework informed by DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) and Disability Justice (Berne, 2015). This research project examines students' experiences participating in a mindfulness intervention implemented in a racially and ethnically diverse elementary school. The intervention was designed to challenge typical power structures in the classroom by encouraging open-ended artistic expression and displaying and centering student-generated art. These power dynamics include those where the teacher is positioned as an authority figure (Freire, 2005) and the “worship of the written word” (Okun, 2022), a preference for written expression over other modalities in Western education settings.

Significance of Study

Schools can promote the development of mental wellness through the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL refers to acquiring knowledge and skills related to emotional awareness, empathy for others, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2012). Evidence-based practices are frameworks and interventions with an established research base and, consequently, are more frequently chosen by administrators and school leaders to implement in schools. A sizeable number of SEL programs are available, and CASEL lists 86 in its program guide as evidence-based practices that meet the CASEL standards (CASEL, n.d.).

While there has been an expansion in research around school-based SEL and evidence-based practices, there is little research on how equitable these programs are and whether youth from marginalized backgrounds obtain the same benefits from participating in these programs as peers from

privileged backgrounds. Further, White Western medicine has a history of pathologizing aspects of diversity that are honored in other cultures and contexts, and the “gold standard” for treating mental illness is rooted in the traditions of Western medicine. Western medicine deemphasizes social and environmental contributors to wellness, isolating aspects of pathology within the individual and applying treatment or intervention to improve the individual’s functioning (McKee, 1988). School-based SEL typically draws on Western treatment models in determining what social-emotional skills are essential and what methods should be used to promote them. Popular SEL interventions are focused on individual social skill acquisition and application, and many are “monolithic” (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020, p. 60) and do not address how the nuances of power dynamics and social oppression can impact social-emotional functioning. Strict adherence to Western medical models of evidence-based practices (EBPs) can limit practitioners' ability to integrate community factors and influences into individual and group treatment (Aisenberg, 2008).

Prior research has explored the effectiveness of culturally inclusive SEL. These include the Adolescent Transitions Program (ATP) research study, which offered a multilevel depression prevention program through public middle schools that focused on family involvement and the development of positive parent-adolescent relationships (Connell & Dishion, 2008); Sisters of Nia, a school-based curriculum designed for adolescent African American girls which explored participants’ cultural experiences of being female and African American (Belgrave et al., 2004); and the Aban Aya Youth Project, aimed at reducing high-risk behaviors in BIPOC inner-city youth in grades 5 through 8 using the Nguzo Saba principles (Flay et al., 2004). The findings from these studies exemplify the need for cultural integration in SEL programming.

This study aims to contribute to the growing evidence base around culturally inclusive SEL. By exploring culturally inclusive SEL, school leaders will be better equipped to implement equitable interventions for all students and account for individualized and culture-specific understandings of

wellness. For populations who have historically and systemically experienced barriers to mental health intervention, access to a culturally inclusive, school-based intervention can significantly impact youths' mental well-being.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as a foundational theoretical framework informing this study (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT emerged in the field of legal studies in the late 1970s and has since expanded to various disciplines, including education, sociology, and social sciences. It offers a lens through which researchers can analyze and understand the intersections of race, power, and social structure. Key tenets of CRT include the recognition of the permanence of racism, the importance of intersectionality, and a commitment to social justice and addressing structural inequities. CRT emphasizes the role of storytelling, counter-narratives, and lived experiences to inform efforts toward societal transformation.

This study approaches the data through a lens of intersectionality as well. Crenshaw (1994) conceptualized intersectionality as the interaction of multiple forms of discrimination and oppression that individuals with intersected marginalized identities experience. A contemporary framework that builds on intersectionality theory, specifically the intersection between racism and ableism, is disability critical race studies (DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit uses the rationale of intersectionality to combine theory from Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and Disability Studies (DS) (Davis, 1999). The DisCrit framework posits that race and disability are socially constructed and dependent on one another, as ableism and white supremacy are also interrelated.

Along with DisCrit, the study references principles from Disability Justice (Berne, 2015b). This framework recognizes the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, including white supremacy, colonial capitalism, gendered oppression, and ableism. Disability Justice challenges

traditional medical understandings of wellness and calls for more inclusive definitions that reflect an “expectation of difference... in disability, identity, and culture” (Ortiz, 2012).

These frameworks inform the analytical approach to examine how racially and ethnically diverse students conceptualize wellness while participating in an arts-based mindfulness program. Student-generated works are the primary focus of the analysis, as they center on the perspectives of the individuals who typically hold less power in classroom settings. Further details regarding applying these theoretical frameworks to the study are described in Chapter II.

Research Questions

The qualitative data for this study were analyzed using a critical approach (Denzin, 2017) to form a call to action regarding how practitioners can better promote wellness in marginalized youth. Research questions were framed as open-ended to consider how findings may be used to create more inclusive understandings of wellness and also account for individual and group identities. The following research questions are explored in this study:

- What themes were observed in participants’ art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?
- How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?
- What are teachers’ impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

One of the primary theoretical foundations informing this study is critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT originated in legal scholarship in the 1970s and has since expanded beyond the field of law to be applied to fields such as education, sociology, and political science (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995). CRT examines how race and racism are embedded in social structures, institutions, and cultural practices. There are six general principles, or tenets, of CRT: 1) Race is socially constructed; 2) Racism is normalized; 3) Interest convergence; 4) Differential racialization; 5) Intersectionality; and 6) The voices of color thesis. The second, fifth, and sixth principles are most relevant to this study.

The second principle of CRT asserts that racism in the United States is normalized; in other words, racism is the ordinary experience of most people of color. For example, despite civil rights advancements such as school desegregation (Fine, 2004), systemic discrimination is the norm in institutions such as schools. Disparities in funding exist between predominantly White and predominantly BIPOC neighborhood schools, limiting what academic resources are available for BIPOC students. (Weathers & Sosina, 2022). Students of color are disproportionately subjected to punitive discipline in schools, and schools with predominantly BIPOC populations are more likely to implement measures that facilitate the “school-to-prison” pipeline, such as surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and police officers and security guards (Irwin et al., 2022).

The “voice of color” thesis states that people of color are uniquely qualified to speak about racism based on their experiences and provide a counter-narrative to dominant racist tropes. CRT utilizes the practice of “counterstorytelling” as a means of challenging dominant narratives from groups

that hold privilege (Merriweather Hunn et al., 2006). Counterstories are accounts of the experiences of people of color that speak to their experiences with racism and discrimination.

An essential consideration in developing culturally responsive interventions is the role of intersectionality. Crenshaw (1994) conceptualized intersectionality as the interaction of multiple forms of discrimination and oppression that individuals with intersected marginalized identities experience. Crenshaw's seminal essay uses the example of the experiences of Black women in the legal system to illustrate intersectionality. In considering legal claims of discrimination against Black women, the justice system has viewed sex-based and racial prejudice as separate rather than compounded issues that would impact Black women more than White women or Black men. Crenshaw's theory illustrates the importance of emphasizing intersectionality in conversations around equity and the necessity of taking an intersectional approach to center the multiply marginalized, including in explorations of the ways they negotiate meanings of wellness.

DisCrit

The primary intersectional identities and connected oppressions examined in this literature review are race, ethnicity, and disability status. A contemporary framework that builds on intersectionality theory, specifically the intersection between racism and ableism, is disability critical race studies (DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit combines principles from Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and Disability Studies (DS) (Davis, 1999). DisCrit is informed by seven tenets, outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: DisCrit Tenets

Tenet Number	Tenet Description
1	DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
2	DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
3	DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
4	DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
5	DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
6	DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.
7	DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

Note: Adapted from Annamma, S.A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1-31.

Of its seven tenets, the following two are most relevant to this study: Tenet 4, which states that DisCrit privileges the voices of marginalized populations who are typically not acknowledged within research, and Tenet 7, which says that DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance. Tenet 4 is supported by a critical examination of existing psychological research and Western psychological medicine, which have upheld Eurocentric views and values as more evidence-based and credible while pathologizing characteristics and behaviors seen as normative in certain cultures. These practices reflect ableism, assigning value to others' bodies and minds based on social

constructs such as normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness (Lewis, 2022). In Lewis' definition of ableism, what is valued is determined by intersecting oppressive systems such as eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. A redefinition of psychological wellness looks beyond ableist values. It considers how specific cultures and groups may define well-being and incorporates culturally inclusive practices used to improve mental health in particular populations. This study is aligned with Tenet 7 by using the arts as a form of resistance against the dominant Western narratives of what it means to be mentally well. Mental health practitioners can also participate in resistance and activism by challenging medical models and deficit perspectives when working with clients from marginalized backgrounds and using their positionality to advocate for systemic change within the field.

Disability Justice

The Disability Justice framework was formed through the work of activists impacted by multiple intersecting oppressions, such as disabled people of color, queer individuals with disabilities, and trans and gender non-conforming people with disabilities (Berne, 2015b). It focuses on forming "liberation zones" where marginalized individuals advocate for change. One such zone is *Sins Invalid*, an arts-based performance project that centers queer, trans, and Black/Indigenous people of color (QTBIPOC) with disabilities (Kafai, 2021). Disability Justice highlights the critical role of all forms of activism in combating ableism, such as the healing justice movement (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). The healing justice movement puts the power of healing into the hands of the community. It promotes interdependence rather than positioning a select, privileged few as experts and assuming modern Western medicine to be more effective than longstanding cultural traditions for healing (Mingus, 2013). Disability Justice has ten principles, outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Disability Justice Principles

Principle	Brief Description
1 - Intersectionality	“We do not live single-issue lives” - Audre Lorde Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world “invalid.”
2- Leadership of Those Most Impacted	“We are led by those who most know these systems.” - Aurora Levins Morales
3 - Anti-Capitalism	In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit, we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having non-conforming body/minds.
4 - Commitment to Cross-Movement Organizing	Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance.
5 - Recognizing Wholeness	People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.
6 - Sustainability	We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.
7 - Commitment to Cross-Disability Solidarity	We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation.
8 - Interdependence	We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over our lives.
9 - Collective Access	As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other.
10 - Collective Liberation	No body or mind can be left behind - only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

Note: Adapted from Berne, P. (2015a). 10 Principles of Disability Justice [blog post].
<https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice>

Of its ten principles, eight and nine are particularly relevant to this study. Principle eight, interdependence, advocates for meeting one another's needs in working toward liberation (Berne, 2015a). In mental health contexts, this includes diminishing the power differential between practitioner and participant to form a relationship of collaboration and connecting with community members and organizations to work towards the healing of the collective and the individual. This study examines how young people participating in this arts-based intervention engaged in student-directed self-expression toward healing, as well as how arts-based mindfulness shifted classroom power dynamics. Principle nine, collective access, promotes meeting the access needs of others through non-normative means and respecting vulnerabilities while recognizing strengths. Principle nine was referenced to explore how students used artwork to express their vulnerabilities and strengths.

Defining Critical Qualitative Inquiry

In qualitative inquiry, research questions use participants' voices and experiences to interpret and explain what is happening in a specific context (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Within qualitative research, there is a wide range of what is accepted as legitimate data and evidence. Sample sizes tend to be relatively small, with more attention paid to the depth of examination rather than breadth. This practice is what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description" - going beyond physical description and tangible facts and constructing meaning and interpretation of what the researcher observes. Geertz argues that describing without interpretation does not account for the complex and layered cultural factors determining what something means within a specific context. While qualitative research findings are not intended to be generalizable to entire populations, qualitative research can be impactful because data can elicit various responses and interpretations. Therefore, this type of research is broad not in the sense that it is universally applicable but in that multiple meanings can be found within a single data set. Qualitative data can mediate various understandings depending on the data used, participant and

researcher characteristics and backgrounds, and participant-researcher relationships (Butler-Kisber, 2018).

Eisenhart and Jurow (2017) describe the evolution of qualitative research and the more recent types of qualitative inquiry that have emerged. There has been a divergence between the more conventional view of qualitative research, which emphasizes rigor and systemic standards, and the alternative, “avant-garde” perspective that academics should evaluate qualitative research using nontraditional means. An example of alternative standards for qualitative research criteria proposes four dimensions for evaluation: a) credibility, including corroboration with study participants to ensure the accuracy of their perspectives and transparency regarding the researchers’ role; b) dependability, including ongoing review, clarification, and critique of the research process, as well as interim analysis, interpretations, and decisions; c) confirmability, which includes triangulation, the reporting of negative instances, audits for bias, and reflection; and d) transferability, which consists of the use of thick description of the research context and comparison with demographics and other studies (Keifer-Boyd, 2011).

Denzin (2017) defined *critical* qualitative inquiry as interpretive and performative qualitative research carried out in the interests of those who experience social injustice. The alternative paradigms, or basic belief systems, proposed by Guba (1990), played a role in developing critical qualitative inquiry. Guba examines three alternatives to positivism, a traditional research paradigm that believes scientific research aims to determine objective truths and that the researcher is impartial and unbiased. In positivism, researchers must test hypothetical truths using the scientific method of conducting empirical tests under controlled conditions. Guba proposes postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism as potential alternatives. Postpositivism, like positivism, theorizes that there are absolute truths but that inquirers are flawed, and therefore, the understanding of these truths is incomplete. Whereas positivism frames research as uncovering an absolute truth, postpositivism believes that, while

this goal is ultimately unattainable, research should continually work towards a more complete understanding of reality, including building awareness of and working around researcher biases (Creswell, 2013). Critical theory incorporates ideologies such as neo-Marxism, materialism, feminism, Freireism, and participatory inquiry. In this paradigm, the researcher's values impact the research process, including the target problem, the instruments and type of analysis used, and interpretations and conclusions. Constructivism posits that reality is specific to contexts and dependent on the persons holding them, that research findings are the product of an interaction between the researcher and participant, and that multiple interpretations, and therefore realities, are possible.

Critical qualitative inquiry represents a movement from positivism towards alternative paradigms. It promotes ethically responsible, activist research that resists traditional concepts of what is considered scientific evidence and how to carry out the analysis. Its goals include placing the voices of the oppressed at the center of inquiry and using inquiry to reveal sites for change and activism. It prioritizes marginalized individuals and directly applies to advocacy for social policy change (Denzin, 2017). In addition, critical qualitative inquiry can directly contribute to advancing social justice. These contributions can include identifying definitions of the research problem, examining assumptions held by parties of interest, identifying strategic points of intervention, improving and assessing relevant agencies and programs, and suggesting alternative moral points of view to interpret and evaluate the problem (Denzin, 2017).

Critical Qualitative Inquiry as a Means of Resistance

The development of critical qualitative inquiry arose to challenge traditional concepts of legitimate research and evidence, including the narrow standards used in establishing an evidence base (Denzin, 2017). Qualitative researchers have criticized conventional ethnography and experimental writing for upholding privileged Western values, voices, and interpretations (Smith, 2012; Clough, 2000). Qualitative inquiry and ethnography historically have taken a colonizer perspective, othering the

participant and focusing on the social problems they presumably cause in schooling, welfare, and healthcare systems without considering the societal structures that contribute to them (Vidich & Lyman, 1994). Traditional ethnography positions the researcher as neutral and objective, discounting participant voices and failing to acknowledge the political implications of the research as well as the connections between academia and postcolonialism (Clough, 2000). In postcolonial qualitative research, there is a recognized need to represent and elaborate on intersectional identities, including race, class, and gender, and explicitly address the political connections to the subject matter. Clough's criticisms of ethnographic writing align with critiques of other identity-centered research areas, particularly feminist scholarship.

Feminist methodologies and research have been particularly influential in developing critical qualitative inquiry (Bloom & Sawin, 2009). In general, feminist research traditions have influenced other types of social research in developing more critical and humanizing methodologies. Values typically held in feminist methodologies include privileging marginalized standpoints, creating meaningful relationships with study participants, valuing relationships over data, and attending to the lives and needs of participants. In identifying marginalized viewpoints, researchers account for gender and other forms of identity, such as sexuality, socioeconomic status, and race. By centering marginalized voices, researchers can identify and map social injustices and develop a sense of the problematic ways in which these individuals experience the world. Feminist scholars use study findings to directly assist and benefit participants, such as communicating results in ways that reach policymakers so that they can impact social policy.

There are also linkages between critical qualitative inquiry and critical race theory (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2018). As mentioned previously, critical race theory (CRT) refers to a cross-disciplinary movement that incorporates intersectionality, critiques of liberalism, critical social science, structural and poststructural analysis, denial of academic neutrality, and incorporation of storytelling

and counternarratives (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Incorporating CRT into research means actively resisting the racist history of scholarly research, such as scientific studies that sought to establish a relationship between race and intelligence (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2018). In these studies, researchers used the correlation between race and intelligence quotient (IQ) scores to argue that some races, particularly Black individuals, were intellectually inferior to Whites. However, these studies did not consider the biases in the design of intelligence tests, such as the types of knowledge and problem-solving methods aligned with Eurocentric values and beliefs about intelligence (Stoskopf, 2012).

Critical qualitative inquiry aligns with Indigenous methodologies that challenge traditional research paradigms (Kovach, 2018). Indigenous epistemology differs from Western views in that it sees knowledge as holistic, interconnected, and interdependent. Indigenous scholarship may incorporate tenets of *holism*. Kovach describes indigenous methodologies as relationship-focused and resistant to classification and categorization. Participants determine researcher credibility by examining the quality of their relationship with the community along with their research findings. Smith (1999) links Indigenous research with activism, encouraging collaboration between researchers and activists to advance Indigenous interests at multiple levels. For research to function as resistance, the research agenda can be aligned with the activists' goals, such as advocating against globalization and neo-liberalism.

Critical qualitative inquiry is applicable in research related to disrupting intersectional injustice. When designing a research study, it is essential to consider the identities of research participants, the intersectionality of multiple identities, and how their identities, as well as those of the researcher, affect the nature of the study (Abrams et al., 2020). Crenshaw (1989) defined intersectionality as the interconnected and interactive effects of the identities one holds, including race, class, and gender, which can lead to an individual experiencing numerous and overlapping forms of discrimination. Crenshaw based her conceptualization on the experiences of Black women, whom the institutions of

racism and sexism oppress simultaneously. Like critical qualitative inquiry, Black feminist scholarship and theory were influential in developing intersectionality theory. For example, before Crenshaw's article, the Combahee River Collective (1977), a collective of Black feminists, stated a political stance of actively opposing the interlocking systems of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, calling for the dismantling of all forms of oppression in the pursuit of liberation.

While social justice movements have recognized intersectionality for decades, it has more recently become a consideration in academics and politics (Anthias, 2013). To encourage the inclusion of intersectionality in research, Anthias (2013) provides guidelines and framing concerns to consider when analyzing data. Overall, data analysis should go beyond examining intersectional identities as categories specific to the individual and explore how participants' experiences interact with the broader social landscape of power and identity. During the study design process, researchers should reflect on how social classes or social relations, such as hierarchy and inequality, are related to framing the research question. They should also consider what social contexts and connections are relevant to the research question and what historical outcomes or processes are of interest to the research question(s).

In human-centered fields such as qualitative health research, few studies feature intersectionality, and there needs to be more guidance in the literature on applying intersectional considerations to qualitative health research (Abrams et al., 2020). Abrams et al. (2020) propose using intersectionality as a theoretical lens or methodological framework and outline several recommendations around how researchers can apply intersectionality theory at multiple levels of the research process in human-centered and health fields. These recommendations include careful consideration of the participants' identities in the studies, examination of the researcher's identity and how it impacts interactions with participants, "insider" versus "outsider" perspectives, and training community members as study team members and co-leaders. The researcher's perspectives as an insider versus an outsider have been discussed at length within the qualitative research field, typically

dichotomously. However, many researchers fall somewhere in between. For example, they may hold privilege as an academic while identifying with their participants' racial group. Therefore, researchers should cultivate awareness of their roles as insiders and outsiders (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Intersectional framing at the participant recruitment stage includes determining the characteristics of individuals of interest and considering the role inequality plays in their lives and commonalities across the multiple identities of participants. For data collection, Abrams et al.'s (2020) recommendations include methods that center on participants' voices and experiences, such as focus groups and interviews, participant observation, and analysis of preexisting documents. At the data analysis stage, researchers should cultivate awareness of how their biases, identities, and power differentials impact their interpretations, continually reflect on their assumptions, and examine the socio-political conditions related to their research.

Defining Psychological Wellness

Psychological wellness was conceived as an alternative to mental health frameworks that focused on psychopathology and the provision of reactive interventions to address existing problems and symptoms (Cowen, 1994). A wellness framework takes a more proactive and preventative stance, emphasizing resilience factors such as adaptive functioning, interpersonal effectiveness, and a sense of satisfaction with oneself and one's life. Individuals are often encouraged to cultivate psychological wellness by practicing "self-care" – a broad term generally referring to actions and behaviors that one may take to promote one's well-being (Godfrey et al., 2011). Primarily, the literature on psychological wellness is written from an individualistic perspective, which places a high value on independence and self-reliance (Schimmack et al., 2005). Existing conceptions of psychological wellness often do not consider the impact of oppressive systems on one's well-being or position acts of self-care as a means of thriving in oppressive spaces and promoting community health (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). For diverse

groups to effectively build and maintain psychological wellness, it is crucial to recognize the importance of developing a more intersectional understanding of wellness.

An essential step in building a more intersectional approach to understanding mental wellness is critically examining and redefining the common understanding of wellness. The mainstream Western media portrayal of “wellness” typically features wealthy, white, slim, nondisabled, cisgender women (O’Neill, 2020). This exclusionary ideal is exemplified by popular social media presences such as Goop, Gwyneth Paltrow’s lifestyle and wellness business (Conor, 2021). The pop-culture representation of wellness is inaccessible to those who do not fit this profile. Further, many of the practices endorsed by this version of wellness, such as meditation and yoga, have Eastern origins. The colonizer's conception of wellness idealizes and adapts traditional Eastern forms of healing to suit Westerners through a perspective that can be described as “Romantic Orientalism” (Newcombe, 2012) even though historically, Western medicine has perceived traditional Eastern healing practices as ineffective and lacking an evidence base (Hemenway, 1998).

Prevalence and Mental Health Needs of Diverse Populations

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2004), approximately 10% of school-age children and adolescents in the U.S. will meet the criteria for a mental health diagnosis. In large, urban schools, these rates may be significantly higher, with estimates that over 50% of youth in these schools demonstrate emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties impacting their daily functioning (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2018). In addition, experiences of discrimination, such as racial and ethnic discrimination, are linked to a higher risk of mental disorders among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Williams, 2018).

Multiple trends in diagnostic disproportionality exist within the field of mental health care. Measures traditionally used to identify mental health needs may not align with the experiences and norms of specific groups. As a result, youth who are impacted by significant psychological symptoms

may be overlooked in such cases. For example, typical screeners and assessments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) do not accurately identify PTSD in immigrants experiencing trauma symptoms due to the migration process (Arrellano et al., 2018). When Black individuals seek access to mental health services, discrepancies exist in diagnosis rates for certain conditions compared to rates for other racial and ethnic groups. For example, among Black Americans and Latines, some diagnoses are elevated compared to other racial groups, leading researchers to speculate on racial bias's role in diagnostic decision-making (Schwartz & Blankenship, 2014). Specifically, Black Americans and Latines are more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia and other severe psychotic and behavior disorders (Schwartz & Blankenship, 2014), leading to higher hospitalization rates, antipsychotic medication use, and the use of restraints (DeArth-Pendley, 2012). Potential explanations for these disparities include distrust of healthcare systems, which may be interpreted as paranoia, and misidentifying mood symptoms as symptoms of psychosis (Gara et al., 2019). Higher levels of life stress have been linked to the risk of psychosis. Black and other BIPOC individuals are more likely than white individuals to experience systemic stressors such as structural racism, poverty, and race-related trauma and violence (McMillen, 2022).

Further, mental health practitioners may not consider how discriminatory and oppressive experiences contribute to developing “healthy paranoia” (Gara et al., 2011). Healthy paranoia is a term initially used by Grier and Cobbs (1968) to describe the normative and adaptive distrust Black Americans had developed toward European American society based on experiences of racism and oppression. Cultural mistrust is positively associated with rates of paranoid schizophrenia diagnoses in Black individuals, indicating that clinicians may pathologize “healthy paranoia” and interpret it as a sign of psychosis (Whaley, 2001). Historically, participation in civil rights demonstrations and protests has been pathologized and labeled as schizophrenic behavior, described by clinicians in terms such as “hostile and aggressive feelings” and “delusional anti-whiteness” (Metzl, 2010). In Gara et al.’s analysis

of epidemiologic differences, symptoms in Black individuals were more often associated with psychotic disorders rather than affective disorders. These patterns suggest that Black individuals are at greater risk of being improperly diagnosed with psychotic disorders and may not receive appropriate care for their symptoms. Psychotic disorders are significantly stigmatized compared to other mental health disorders, which can impact the quality of support an individual receives, such as avoiding seeking help due to internalized stigma (Gronholm et al., 2017) or receiving poorer quality treatment from practitioners who have a negative bias towards those with psychotic disorders (Avery et al., 2015).

Race-based diagnostic disproportionality is also present in school-age individuals. Students diagnosed with a disability from racially marginalized backgrounds are more likely than those without a disability label to experience concurrent adverse academic outcomes such as educational segregation and limited access to general education (Artiles, 2003). These outcomes are determined partly by the individual's diagnostic category. For example, when examining national trends, Black youth are three times more likely to be diagnosed as intellectually disabled and twice as likely to be diagnosed with emotional/behavioral disorders (National Education Association, 2007). Meanwhile, Indigenous students receive special education at twice the rate of students overall (National Education Association, 2008), and they are 1.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with a specific learning disability (SLD) than White students (Harper, 2017). There is disproportionality among Latine students in some districts, but this pattern is more variable nationally than among Black and Indigenous individuals. (Artiles, 2013). Students of color are also more likely to be referred for disciplinary action for minor infractions, such as loitering or excessive noise, and to receive punitive and exclusionary consequences rather than restorative intervention in response to their actions (Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014).

Further, BIPOC youth displaying behavioral challenges and impulsivity are more likely to be diagnosed with disruptive disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD) than ADHD compared to White youth (Fadus et al., 2020). These diagnoses are often made

without examining possible mood-based influences on behavior - for example, undiagnosed anxiety or depression. Whereas mood disorders would be treated with more empowering mental wellness initiatives and ADHD with medication and therapy, being labeled with a disruptive or psychotic disorder leads to more punitive interventions such as involuntary hospitalization, school expulsion, and incarceration (Erevelles, 2014).

Systemic Barriers to Psychological Wellness

In the United States, marginalized youth face systemic mental health care barriers (Mongelli et al., 2020). Along with systemic challenges, individual and interpersonal factors may prevent marginalized individuals from accessing mental health care. For example, discrimination from providers, such as making treatment decisions based on stereotypes or implicit biases, can impact a treatment's quality and effectiveness, prevent the development of a trusting provider-client relationship, and cause the client to terminate treatment prematurely. Further, White and non-disabled practitioners are overrepresented in the mental health field, posing an additional challenge for individuals from marginalized backgrounds who may prefer to establish care with providers they can connect with over a shared cultural or linguistic identity (McGuire & Miranda, 2008).

Racial/Ethnic Minorities & Systemic Barriers to Psychological Wellness

Compared to White individuals, racial and ethnic minorities have historically had less access to mental health services and receive poorer mental health treatment (Leong & Kalibatseva, 2011). As a result, they are more likely to terminate treatment prematurely or delay or fail to seek formal mental health treatment (McGuire & Miranda, 2008). In addition, discriminatory socio-economic policies at the systems level can create financial barriers to accessing mental health care for marginalized groups. According to Kids Count (2020), the rates of individuals under 18 living in households with income under the poverty line are higher for Indigenous Americans (30%), Black Americans (31%), Latines (23%), and multiracial individuals (17%) compared to White individuals (10%). Poverty impacts

multiple aspects of one's well-being, including health status. Further, structural discrimination perpetuates the disproportionate rates of BIPOC individuals living in poverty (Beech et al., 2021).

When considering how identity can impact access to care, the intersectionality of multiple marginalized identities an individual holds can further complicate the process of overcoming barriers (Crenshaw, 1989). The interconnected effects of these identities can lead to an individual experiencing numerous and overlapping forms of discrimination. For example, as discussed earlier, BIPOC individuals are more at risk for poverty. In addition, Black Americans are also more likely to be diagnosed with a disability (Goodman et al., 2017). However, current U.S. policy overlooks how intersectionality can impact access to resources and government programs that support individuals in obtaining necessary resources. For example, disability benefits, including healthcare coverage, often require proof that one is incapable of working; at the same time, anti-poverty programs often require individuals to work to receive benefits (Pokempner & Roberts, 2001).

Cultural Barriers to Wellness

The individual-focused, ableist version of wellness described above indicates systemic inaccessibility to mental health supports for BIPOC and individuals from other historically marginalized identities. Due to cultural stigma, difficulties building relationships with practitioners from different cultural backgrounds, skepticism toward the Western medical system, and lack of practitioner training around working with specific cultural groups, multiple groups of marginalized individuals report barriers to accessing mental health services. These barriers have been identified in Asian Americans, particularly women (Le, 2016); Muslims (Ciftci et al., 2013); immigrants (Arrellano et al., 2018); disabled and LGBTQ+ individuals (Nakkeeran, 2018); and Black adolescents and individuals (Opara et al., 2021a, Gibbs, et al., 2020), among others. Further, practitioner bias, including unconscious biases, can lead to mislabeling and misdiagnosis of BIPOC individuals. The medical model's centering of

White, Western health ideals can lead to the pathologization of traits that deviate from these norms. This phenomenon has been labeled “scientific racism” in previous literature (Opara et al., 2021b).

Barriers to Wellness within School Settings

In school-age populations, the behavior of BIPOC children may be over-pathologized, as most schoolteachers identify as White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) and may experience a cultural disconnect with diverse student populations. For example, White teachers tend to assign higher ratings of behaviors associated with ADHD to BIPOC students, such as Black boys, than parent ratings (Kang & Harvey, 2020). These disparities may be partly due to a lack of cultural awareness of differences in beliefs about behavioral norms, such as directness, emotional context and expression, verbal and nonverbal communication, and how to interact with authority figures (Sue & Sue, 1977). Another example of a potential cultural disconnect is the significance of eye contact. In many Asian, African, and Latine cultures, direct eye contact can be seen as disrespectful towards authority figures. On the other hand, in Western cultures, eye contact is a social norm, and avoidance of eye contact can be interpreted as a sign of inattentiveness or defiance (Wood & Mallinckrodt, 1990). Addressing these cultural disparities in educational settings is crucial for fostering a more equitable environment to promote wellness for all students.

Issues of Power Dynamics in Mental Health Care

In traditional therapy, power differentials between therapist and client can impact the therapeutic relationships and limit the client’s growth and sense of empowerment (Hammer, 2019). This power differential can be amplified if the therapist holds privileged identities and the client has multiple marginalized identities (Hook et al., 2017). In such therapeutic contexts, the therapist is positioned as the holder of knowledge, with knowledge consisting of techniques rooted in Western medicine and research, and the client as the recipient, who resolves their psychological symptoms by implementing these techniques. These approaches can create barriers to effective care if the individual

does not share the same values endorsed by the chosen intervention. An alternative approach to the top-down therapy model would be to place the client as the expert (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). Using this lens, the therapist acknowledges that much is “not known” and that treatment is co-constructed through conversation between client and therapist. Cultural humility also plays a role in disrupting this power imbalance (Hook et al., 2017). Practitioners develop cultural humility by engaging in processes of self-reflection around their identities and privileges and keeping an open mind to the perspectives and funds of knowledge that clients bring into the therapeutic relationship. By embracing the “not-known,” practicing humility, and positioning clients as experts, practitioners can challenge the restrictive version of wellness and enable access to psychological healing and restoration to more diverse clients.

Similar dynamics can occur in educational settings as well. Broderick and Lalvani (2017) discuss the impact of dysconscious ableism and how it can affect the well-being of disabled students. Broderick and Lalvani built this theory from the literature around dysconscious racism (King, 1991), a term used to describe White teachers' implicit beliefs about race-based social inequity and how these beliefs can create barriers to equitable education. Similarly, dysconscious ableism perpetuates ableism in classrooms through nondisabled educators' tacit acceptance of privileged norms and values. Broderick and Lalvani examined change in teacher trainee perspectives on disability while participating in a course that critically discussed ableist assumptions of disability in education. They found that building awareness of these assumptions shifted trainees' attitudes from seeing disability as a deficit and impairment towards a more radical definition of disability as an identity and aspect of diversity and a social construct resulting from systemic discrimination. Therefore, psychological wellness practices, including school-based interventions, must be critically examined for underlying racist and ableist assumptions and whether privileged values are being centered. In addition, the study also highlights the

importance of training and dialogue around implicit biases, especially for practitioners with privileged identities.

Culturally Inclusive Approaches to Promote Wellness

In psychological wellness research, mindfulness has emerged as a prominent focal point. Scholars have increasingly turned their attention to investigating the impact of mindfulness practices on mental wellbeing (Leary & Tate, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This includes research on the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions in promoting psychological wellness in children and adolescents. Prior research has indicated that practicing mindfulness improves children's mental and emotional well-being, reduces anxiety, and supports cognitive development (Weare, 2012). The most often used approaches include mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), dialectic behavior therapy (DBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Burke, 2010). Burke's review of the research around these approaches supports the feasibility and acceptability of these interventions without reporting any adverse effects.

Although there is increasing interest in examining the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions, there needs to be more research explicitly centering on individuals from historically marginalized groups participating in such interventions. Numerous interventions prioritize individual effort and growth without recognizing the role systemic change must play in promoting wellness (Arthington, 2016). In building an evidence base for mindfulness, researchers must intentionally individualize treatment to honor and center intersectional identities rather than generalizing the effectiveness of an intervention to all groups after it is found to be effective in normative populations.

Modern wellness practices associated with Western psychological medicine have co-opted traditions from Eastern healing practices and Afro-Native Indigenous folk medicine (Gamby et al., 2021). To disrupt this trend, there is a need for a new wellness paradigm that decentralizes the White settler view in favor of an approach that considers the individual's psychological health along with the

collective. Gamby et al. provide suggestions for supporting this shift in several cultural groups. In Black communities, practitioners should build familiarity with the collective historical and generational trauma derived from continual systemic oppression and the intersectional oppression experienced by Black women and individuals who are Black and LGBTQ+. Practitioners should acknowledge the mental health field's historical marginalization of Black communities. Treatment should incorporate community care and connect with the community and spiritual healers within the client's community. In a study of Black adolescents' attitudes towards mental health service use, almost all participants reported relying on family networks for help, including parents, cousins, grandparents, and godparents, and family attitudes towards mental health services impacted participants' level of comfort in utilizing services (Lindsey et al., 2013). Family psychoeducation groups and a family therapy component in treatment can also strengthen the connections between an individual's service provider and community (Kawaii-Bogue et al., 2017).

Additionally, many participants in the Lindsey et al. (2013) study reported relying on church communities and school staff for emotional support. Compared to predominantly White churches, Black churches have been found to provide more comprehensive mental wellness and support programs to their members despite a lack of partnership with formal mental health providers (Blank et al., 2002). Increasing communication between Black church communities and mental health practitioners can improve access to mental health services, decrease stigma towards receiving formal services, and increase practitioners' cultural awareness. For example, a study that provided psychoeducation about depression in church settings changed Black participants' beliefs about emotional disorders and mental health treatment options (Lawson-Briddell, 2006).

Just as it is relevant to working with Black individuals, treating individuals from Indigenous communities must also include acknowledging generational and collective trauma (Gamby et al., 2021) and the individual's environmental context. For example, Waddell et al. (2017) critique the

individualistic nature of the Western concept of wellness concerning Inuit populations and advocate for holistic approaches that align with Indigenous values. Such practices would factor in the larger social context, including family, community, nature, and spirituality (Richmond & Ross, 2008). The study by Waddell et al. focused on the role of community elders in promoting wellness and building resilience through storytelling to transfer skills and knowledge. Practitioners should also be aware of and partner with wellness organizations built on Indigenous traditions, such as The Native Wellness Institute (n.d.) and Well for Culture (n.d.). In Walker et al.'s (2013) Indigenous Women's Wellness Study, the researchers utilized a five-stage model Laenui (2000) developed to create a culturally responsive wellness program. These stages included rediscovery and recovery, reclaiming history, culture, and language, and challenging colonizer perspectives. Another facet of the program focuses on mourning historical trauma and abuse. The program also emphasizes working proactively toward equitable social change.

Another population to consider in conversations around reclaiming wellness is the disabled community. Deconstructing barriers to wellness for this population extends beyond the need to provide physically accessible spaces. A culturally inclusive approach to wellness for this population, like the groups above, should include the consideration of community support in treatment planning (Gamby et al., 2021), as disabled individuals have a history of being supported by peers through mutual aid networks (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2021). Treatment should also include awareness of the systemic and societal oppressions individuals with disabilities are subjected to, including their devaluation and dehumanization due to the capitalist colonial association between productivity and human worth (Khanmalek & Rhodes, 2020). An anti-ableist, disability-inclusive redefinition of wellness should also challenge the presumption that disability is a defect that needs to be cured before the individual can be considered healthy and whole (Lu, 2018). A more inclusive definition of wellness can be imagined by assessing the relationship between one's psychological wellness and held identities. Within this

redefinition, wellness is developed and sustained when systemic barriers are removed, and each individual possesses the self-determination and autonomy to define what wellness means to oneself.

Use of the Arts to Promote Wellness

In reconceptualizing wellness, an essential step is diminishing the power differential between the practitioner, whose training is typically based on White, Western medical models, and the client. Medical treatment models have been criticized as ableist, as through this lens, disability is conceptualized as a tragic defect that causes pain and suffering, which must be corrected through medical means (Reynolds, 2017). Medical models also have the potential to perpetuate racism by reinforcing power imbalances between client and practitioner (Dolan et al., 1991) while adopting a stance of “colorblindness” to preserve the practitioner’s supposed scientific objectivity (Braddock, 2020).

Using arts-based methodologies can empower clients from a range of cultural backgrounds. Art provides clients with a means of expressing and defining themselves within their cultures and identities. Art therapy is effective in numerous cultural settings and contexts. It can be effectively adapted to be appropriate for a wide range of cultural groups, including BIPOC, religious groups, the autism community, children and adolescents, military veterans, substance users, and incarcerated populations, among others (Howie et al., 2013). It can be used as an alternative “language” to encourage self-expression among individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally, including young children, some autistic individuals, and those labeled with speech impairments (Levitt, 2009). Among elementary-age students, the use of therapeutic art activities combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) was found to promote coping skills and resilience in trauma-exposed populations (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015). However, few studies of arts-based mental health initiatives disaggregate the data based on race, ethnicity, and disability status identity categories.

Therefore, while the results of such studies are promising, there is a need for further research in this area that specifically examines individuals from marginalized populations.

Art therapy as a formal practice emerged from Western medicine. While therapeutic artistic practices have been identified across history in various cultures, such as Navajo sand painting and African sculpture, the explicit use of “art therapy” began in European medical settings in the early twentieth century (Junge, 2015). Therefore, practitioners should consider cultural and intersectional factors when planning treatment to ensure the practices are appropriate for clients' identities. Without explicit consideration of cultural factors, arts-based therapeutic interventions have the potential to continue patterns of colonial oppression. Such interventions may include the exclusive use of evidence-based practices determined by Western psychological research standards, insistence on English language use, and referring to all art practices as “therapy” without acknowledging traditional names and protocols for culture-specific methods (Napoli, 2019). Examples of culturally inclusive adaptations include using conventional art practices, materials, and mediums commonly used within the client’s community and interpreting works within culture-specific metaphors, idioms, and symbolism (Potash et al., 2017).

When individuals have the freedom to express themselves creatively, arts engagement can function as a self-regulation strategy and promote resilience for marginalized populations such as African American youths with trauma histories (Woods-Jaeger et al., 2020). Culturally inclusive arts-based wellness practices promote collective healing and healing of the individual within the context of their community. For marginalized groups, arts activism can be used as a wellness practice. Kafai (2021) describes *Sins Invalid*, an artistic performance project based on Disability Justice, as a means of centering the voices of and promoting healing within the queer, disabled BIPOC community. Bay Area disability activists Patty Berne and Leroy Moore conceptualized *Sins Invalid* in 2006 and organized its first performance event featuring queer, disabled BIPOC performers. Through theatrics, storytelling,

and artmaking, performers share their experiences navigating intersectional oppression while redefining and reclaiming their identities as beautiful and worthy. An example of this practice is Mat Fraser's 2009 *Sins Invalid* performance, "No Retreat, No Surrender." Mat Fraser, a disabled actor, writer, and performance artist, fights and is beaten by an invisible attacker. At the same time, recordings of ableist statements play overhead, conveying to the audience the brutality of everyday oppression and the importance of continuing the fight against ableism. While advocating for their communities and sharing their truths, participants in *Sins Invalid* are also empowered to experience radical self-love and appreciate the beauty, worth, and wholeness of their identities.

Applications of Arts-Based Intervention to Promote Equity in Classrooms

Arts-based interventions can also be effective in school settings with various student populations. School-based and youth-oriented therapeutic art interventions have been found to reduce the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), detect depression in children (Wallace et al., 2004), and support the community integration of immigrant and refugee students (Rousseau et al., 2005). Let Art Unleash Great Happiness (L.A.U.G.H.) is an arts-based mindfulness app for school-age children. A study of L.A.U.G.H. as a social-emotional intervention was conducted in a racially diverse elementary school setting. Participants engaged in mindful breathing exercises using the app and produced digital drawings. The intervention celebrated student work by displaying participants' pictures on projection screens so they could be shared with the school community. Students in the study reported improvements in mood, School Connectedness, Joy of Learning, and feelings about school (Jones & Lee, 2022).

From a critical standpoint, encouraging youth to have more positive feelings toward school downplays the need to alter the oppressive systems within schools that perpetuate inequity. In other words, student attitudes, rather than inherently racist and ableist practices, need to be changed. An alternative perspective is that dismantling discriminatory classroom practices can improve youths'

feelings about school and their school engagement. Educators may promote a more equitable learning environment by critically examining children's literature, implementing anti-racist and anti-ableist behavioral expectations, and expanding methods students use to represent meaning-making (Beneke et al., 2022). Marginalized students' experiences are legitimized through such practices to equip them better to engage in the classroom. Salazar Pérez and Saavedra (2017) describe the example of a young Black male who prefers to express himself through song and dance and is limited by classroom policies restricting movement. To engage him in the classroom, his teacher rejects norms that pathologize high movement needs and provides this student with opportunities to move independently, listen to music, and sing to himself. These practices honor his lived experiences and encourage artistic expression rather than punish and exclude him for his nonconformity to White, ableist behavior norms.

Expansion of School-Based Mental Health Services

One way to diminish barriers to accessing care for underserved youth populations is by expanding services provided through schools. In the United States, nearly 50 million youths are enrolled in public education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Educators and school staff have frequent contact with students and families and hold the potential to play a foundational role in the lives of the youth they work with (Pollock, 2017). Their roles can include providing support in building social-emotional skills and resilience along with instruction in academic subjects. Through skilled, intentional interactions with students, along with collaboration with families and other professionals, educators can build emotionally and relationally healthy communities and support youth to grow into caring and secure individuals (Johnston, 2004).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is typically implemented in schools to promote psychological wellness. The term "social and emotional learning" (SEL) was coined in 1994 by educators, researchers, and child advocates at the Fetzer Institute. It provides a conceptual framework for promoting students' social-emotional competence and wellness while reducing school mental health problems and academic

issues (Elias et al., 1997). SEL refers to acquiring knowledge and skills related to emotional awareness, empathy for others, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2012).

The documented benefits of effective SEL include more positive attitudes towards oneself and others, increased self-efficacy and confidence, increased pro-social behaviors, reduced conduct problems, decreased emotional distress, and improved academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Farrington et al., 2012; Sklad et al., 2012). However, there needs to be more research on interventions developed or modified for specific identity groups. This research gap is an important consideration, as systemic oppression directly impacts mental wellness. The minority stress theory proposes that psychological distress in individuals with minoritized identities is rooted in experiencing ongoing stigma related to their identities, including internalized oppression (Meyer, 1995). Initially developed for LGB populations, further research on the minority stress model has found that it can be applied to other minorities, such as racial and ethnic minorities (Velez et al., 2021). Without consideration of the impact of identity on social-emotional wellness, SEL interventions overlook crucial systemic influences on psychological health, such as historical and political contexts (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). They also may be informed by Eurocentric norms and, as a result, discourage social behaviors that do not align with them. Therefore, research involving minoritized students participating in SEL is crucial to ensuring diverse youth groups can benefit from specific SEL interventions and establishing an evidence base for culturally responsive practices when providing SEL to marginalized youth populations.

Models for Mental Health Services in School Settings

Mental health workers can diminish barriers to care by expanding school-based mental health services. Within school settings, *mental health services* typically intend to prevent and treat emotional and behavioral challenges that impact academic performance (Christner, 2009). In school-based mental health, services are not limited to a single client working with a therapist or counselor. Instead,

“clients” can include students, teachers, administrators, families, and systems, while service providers consist of school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals.

Christner et al. (2009) outline four levels at which providers can deliver school-based mental health services. These are the *universal*, *targeted*, *intensive*, and *crisis* levels. At the *universal* level, interventions are provided to all students within a particular school or district, typically focusing on building protective factors, problem prevention, and sharing resources. One of the benefits of providing school-based services at the universal level is that services can focus on preventing mental health issues and building resilience. In contrast, mental health services are traditionally responsive and aimed at reducing an existing problem. *Targeted* interventions are aimed at students who are “at-risk” and are considered early interventions for individuals who are not responsive to universal, schoolwide programs. Interventions at this level focus on minimizing risk, building skills around specific areas of concern, and creating opportunities to learn and practice skills in small groups or individually. At the *intensive* level, interventions are individualized for students demonstrating existing social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Intensive services are appropriate for students with unmet mental health needs at the universal or targeted level. For example, suppose a student continues to demonstrate emotional and behavioral difficulties after participating in universal and targeted interventions. In that case, they may begin to receive one-on-one support where evidence-based methodologies are tailored to their needs, possibly with the help of community-based professionals and organizations (Reaves et al., 2021). At this level, school-based mental health professionals typically provide services that resemble traditional psychotherapy. Finally, *crisis* interventions are provided in response to specific and unprecedented crises such as suicidality, abuse, or the death of a parent. Crisis services can be delivered at the universal, targeted, and intensive service levels.

Social-Emotional Learning as a Mental Health Service

Schools can promote the development of mental wellness through the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL refers to acquiring knowledge and skills related to emotional awareness, empathy for others, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2012). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines five areas of competence that SEL can target: self-awareness, or the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence others; social awareness, or the ability to understand others' perspectives and empathize with others; self-management, or the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts and behaviors effectively; relationship skills, or the ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships; and responsible decision-making, or the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions (CASEL, 2020).

In terms of Christner's (2009) models of SBMH, SEL often takes place at the universal level of intervention. Schools can implement SEL at the classroom and schoolwide levels (Weissberg et al., 2015). Classroom-level intervention includes teaching and modeling social-emotional skills and allowing students to practice and use these skills within various contexts. Many evidence-based SEL programs provide a structured curriculum with lessons teachers can utilize to deliver explicit instruction on social and emotional skills. In other approaches, social-emotional learning is embedded into academic instruction (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Administrators can implement policies, practices, and structures at the schoolwide level to promote safe and positive school climates (Weissberg et al., 2015). Such policies may include an SEL-focused building leadership team, fair and restorative discipline practices, and bullying prevention programs.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a SEL framework rooted in the behavior analytic tradition and designed to be implemented at multiple levels (Farrell, 2009). This approach uses environmental alterations to increase desired behaviors. It focuses on what *function* specific behaviors

serve in a given context - in other words, what an individual is trying to obtain or avoid by engaging in the behavior. School-based practitioners implementing PBIS modify the environment to reduce the behavior and teach alternative and preferred behaviors through positive reinforcement. This approach has become widespread, as over 16,000 school teams have been trained on the PBIS implementation framework (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). School-wide PBIS (SWPBIS) has been found to improve behavioral problems, concentration, social-emotional functioning, and prosocial behavior and reduce office disciplinary referrals (Bradshaw et al., 2012). However, schools implementing SWPBIS continue to experience racial and ethnic discipline disproportionality (McIntosh et al., 2018), causing some researchers to speculate that while PBIS is effective, it may not be equally effective for all groups of students.

Best Practices in Providing Culturally Inclusive Social-Emotional Interventions

Cultural factors can be considered and integrated at all levels of intervention, and culturally responsive practices can benefit all students and not only those from racially marginalized backgrounds (Klinger et al., 2005; Nichols et al., 2000). Jones (2014) outlines several recommendations for providing culturally responsive school-based interventions. Some suggestions are built around the practitioner's self-awareness and professional development, such as self-exploration of the practitioner's identity and values and consulting with other professionals on multicultural issues. In terms of planning treatment, recommendations include (a) being intentional in considering cultural factors when interviewing a client and learning about culture and family values through them, (b) assessing for acculturation, (c) altering treatment based on cultural factors, and (d) awareness of both standard cultural norms for specific groups as well as individual differences (Jones, 2014). As a practitioner continues working with students, they must incorporate culturally inclusive practices, including family involvement and working from a strengths-based perspective.

The sections below outline several interventions incorporating culturally responsive considerations. They are organized according to four overlapping themes and practices identified in reviewing the literature: community and family involvement and input, positive identity development, centering cultural values, and culturally inclusive creative expression.

Community/Family Involvement and Input

School-based interventions can be more culturally responsive by emphasizing family involvement and input. For example, the Adolescent Transitions Program (ATP) research study offered a multilevel depression prevention program through public middle schools focused on family involvement and positive parent-adolescent relationships (Connell & Dishion, 2008). A significant number of study participants were from historically marginalized racial and cultural groups, with 44.3% identifying as African American, 7.6% identifying as Latine, and 16% identifying as another ethnicity other than white. In ATP, researchers established family resource centers (FRCs) at each participating school, which provided parent consultations and an in-class sequence of SEL lessons. This classwide curriculum taught school success, healthy decision-making, positive peer relationships, respect, coping with stress, and practical problem-solving. A more intensive intervention, the Family Check-Up (FCU), was also offered, which used motivational interviewing with the family to assess concerns and elicit family input to individualize the student's intervention plan. Study results indicated that participation in the intervention prevented the escalation of depressive symptoms. The authors attribute high levels of family involvement partly to its association with the public school setting, as school staff members were able to assist in the recruitment process.

Understanding Violence is a community violence prevention program implemented with a racially and culturally diverse population of fifth graders. The program incorporated community involvement through its "Peace Night" event (Nikitopoulos et al., 2009). Peace Night celebrated the conclusion of the program curriculum and was planned, organized, and supported by students, parents,

teachers, and other community stakeholders, including business owners, activists, and politicians. Participants reported high satisfaction with the intervention and changes in their attitudes toward violence.

The Maat Adolescent and Family Rites of Passage Program, designed to promote resilience in African American boys, included a family enhancement and empowerment component in its SEL intervention, after-school meetings with peers and facilitators, and individual and family counseling (Harvey & Hill, 2004). Rituals used in group meetings were based on African cultural practices for honoring ancestors and building familial bonds. The family enhancement and empowerment component included monthly family meetings focused on parenting skills, parent-child relationship building, and parental advocacy. A parent retreat was also held where family members participated in self-esteem and skill-building activities and learned about African cultural practices. The intervention culminated in a *kuumba* graduation ceremony where participants shared their takeaways with family and friends. Youth participating in this intervention reported increased self-esteem and positive racial identity. In addition, parent participants reported stronger family bonds with their children.

In the Healing of the Canoe wellness intervention, the research team partnered with Suquamish tribal elders in the community to develop and implement a program for high school students to prevent substance use and promote tribal identity (Donovan et al., 2015). The intervention used the concept of a Canoe Journey as a metaphor for life. Units in the curriculum included education around media stereotypes, Suquamish values and traditions, addiction, mental health and coping, skill development around community building, goal setting, problem-solving, effective listening and communication, identifying role models within the community, and participating in community projects. The intervention results reflected increased hope, optimism, and self-efficacy and decreased substance use compared to the beginning of the school year.

As these examples illustrate, involving family and community in school-based SEL interventions can yield numerous benefits. When parents, school staff, and community members work together to support students' emotional well-being, they create a collaborative environment that supports students' unique cultural backgrounds. These collaborative relationships can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging at school and positive relationships with their peers and elders.

Positive Identity Development

Another consideration in developing culturally responsive SEL is promoting the development of a positive ethnic-racial identity. Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is a multi-dimensional construct of one's identity. ERI can be derived from a combination of ethnic-racial identifications, the process through which an individual navigates membership in ethnic-racial groups, feelings about members of these groups, and society's views of their ethnic-racial group (Loyd & Williams, 2016). A positive sense of identity is associated with prosocial behavior and a reduced likelihood of risk-taking behavior (Meeus et al., 1999). However, for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), healthy identity development can be impacted by negative race-based experiences such as discrimination and bias (Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Multiple school-based interventions have been developed to support youths' development of positive ethnic, racial, and cultural identities. The Identity Project (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2017) is a universal intervention for adolescents. Components of the 8-week curriculum include unpacking identity, group differences, historical accounts, family histories, cultural traditions and rites of passage, photo storyboarding, and the ethnic-racial identity journey. Participants in the intervention rated ERI exploration higher than controls, and ratings for BIPOC participants were higher than their white peers.

Interventions have also been developed to center marginalized intersectional identities. For example, the Young Empowered Sisters (YES!) program is a school-based SEL intervention to promote cultural identity development and psychosocial wellness in African American adolescent girls (Thomas

et al., 2008). The program's themes include developing a solid and positive ethnic identity, building a sense of collectivism as a protective factor against marginalization and discrimination, promoting critical awareness of racism, and involvement in youth activism. Participants in the intervention reported significantly higher levels of positive ethnic identity, racism awareness, collectivist orientation, and support for liberatory youth activism.

Sisters of Nia, another school-based program aimed toward adolescent African American girls, explored participants' cultural experiences of being female and African American (Belgrave et al., 2004). Small group intervention sessions emphasized community relationship building and familial connection, learning about African culture and female African American leaders, wellness, and prosocial skills. The study outcomes included measures of participants' attitudes toward ethnic identity, gender roles, and relational behaviors. Compared to the control group, intervention participants reported higher levels of positive ethnic identity and gender role androgyny and lower levels of relational aggression than the control group. Further studies utilizing the Sisters of Nia curriculum have corroborated the increase in participants' ratings of ethnic identity (Jones et al., 2018) and found improvements in school engagement for study participants (Jones & Lee, 2020; Jones et al., 2018).

In the context of school-based social-emotional interventions, Flay et al. (2004) examined the effectiveness of the Aban Aya Youth Project in reducing high-risk behaviors in Black inner-city youth in grades 5 through 8. The intervention drew upon the Nguzo Saba principles, a Swahili term for seven core African American values (Karenga & Karenga, 2007). The intervention objectives were to promote cultural values such as unity, self-determination, and responsibility through culturally-based teaching methods such as storytelling and proverbs and to teach about and build knowledge of African and African American history and literature. The most effective form of the intervention, which combined classroom-based instruction with parental support, school climate, and community components, produced the most significant decrease in risk-taking behaviors among male participants.

Centering Cultural Values

Cultural values can vary significantly across racial and cultural identities, posing unique challenges and considerations when implementing culturally responsive SEL. As mentioned earlier, Asian Americans are less likely than members of other racial and ethnic groups to seek professional mental health support (Spencer et al., 2009; Abe-Kim et al., 2007; Kimerling & Baumrind, 2005). However, they are more likely to seek help from non-medical support within their communities. Among Filipino Americans, for example, individuals may be discouraged from seeking formal mental health services to avoid “loss of face” and instead seek treatment from laypersons and folk methods (Gong et al., 2003). By partnering with traditional laypersons and incorporating folk methods into treatment planning, mental health professionals could increase access to more robust mental health services, decrease cultural stigma, and become more informed on how to tailor treatment for specific cultural groups. Wang et al. (2021) fostered partnerships with community organizations in developing a bullying prevention program for Asian American youth. Community partners included a Pan Asian volunteer health clinic and a Sikh Gurdwara (place of worship). These partnerships enabled the program developers to create culturally inclusive content informed by student, family, and community experiences and needs.

In Latine populations, specific cultural values include *familismo* and *personalismo* (Ayón & Aisenberg, 2010). Honoring the collectivistic value of *familismo* could involve focusing on family well-being rather than individual improvement, recognizing kinship networks beyond the nuclear family, and involving close extended family members. Understanding *personalismo* can clarify family expectations around respectful listening and caring interactions. Personalismo can be honored by prioritizing getting to know the family, frequently communicating, and showing genuine interest in building close connections with the family. Schiele (2015) conducted a study of the Circle of Education program, an early childhood school readiness program implemented in a school predominantly serving low-income

Latine children. The program included SEL lessons incorporating Latine cultural values such as *familismo* and *personalismo* with social-emotional skills such as emotional regulation, self-esteem, and social relationships. Parent participants reported satisfaction with the program, sharing feedback that they enjoyed building relationships with other parents and that the activities helped strengthen parent-child relationships.

Centering cultural values when implementing culturally responsive SEL can help to ensure that social-emotional interventions are respectful and effective in supporting the psychological well-being of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Practitioners should be aware of any cultural stigma around mental health services and cautious attitudes toward healthcare professionals. To remedy this issue, practitioners may partner with trusted laypersons in an individual's community or involve broader kinship networks that provide significant support to youths. By taking such measures, practitioners can increase access to appropriate social-emotional intervention while working toward decreasing cultural stigma.

Culturally Inclusive Creative Expression

The use of the arts in SEL has shown an emerging potential to make mental wellness interventions more culturally responsive. Many approaches and mediums have been used in arts-based SEL, including visual arts, music, crafting, and dance. Through the arts, youths can be given opportunities to explore their culture and beliefs and those of others. Creative expression creates space for youth to explore their own identities while building knowledge and appreciation of those of their peers. The arts can also be used to engage in social justice themes by creating works that advocate for issues that impact students' lives (Farrington et al., 2019). While exploring cultural identities, students participating in arts-based SEL can simultaneously build their identities as artists and creators.

The Maat Adolescent and Family Rites of Passage Program included a component that taught expressive arts based on African cultural practices, such as leatherworking, jewelry making, music,

dance, and theater (Harvey & Hill, 2004). Participants were African American boys between the ages of 11 and 14 years deemed “at-risk” due to referral criteria such as involvement in the juvenile justice system, prior arrests or charges, or being under a consent decree. Participating youths demonstrated statistically significant gains in self-esteem and knowledge of substance use. The researchers also noted sizeable increases in racial identity and cultural awareness.

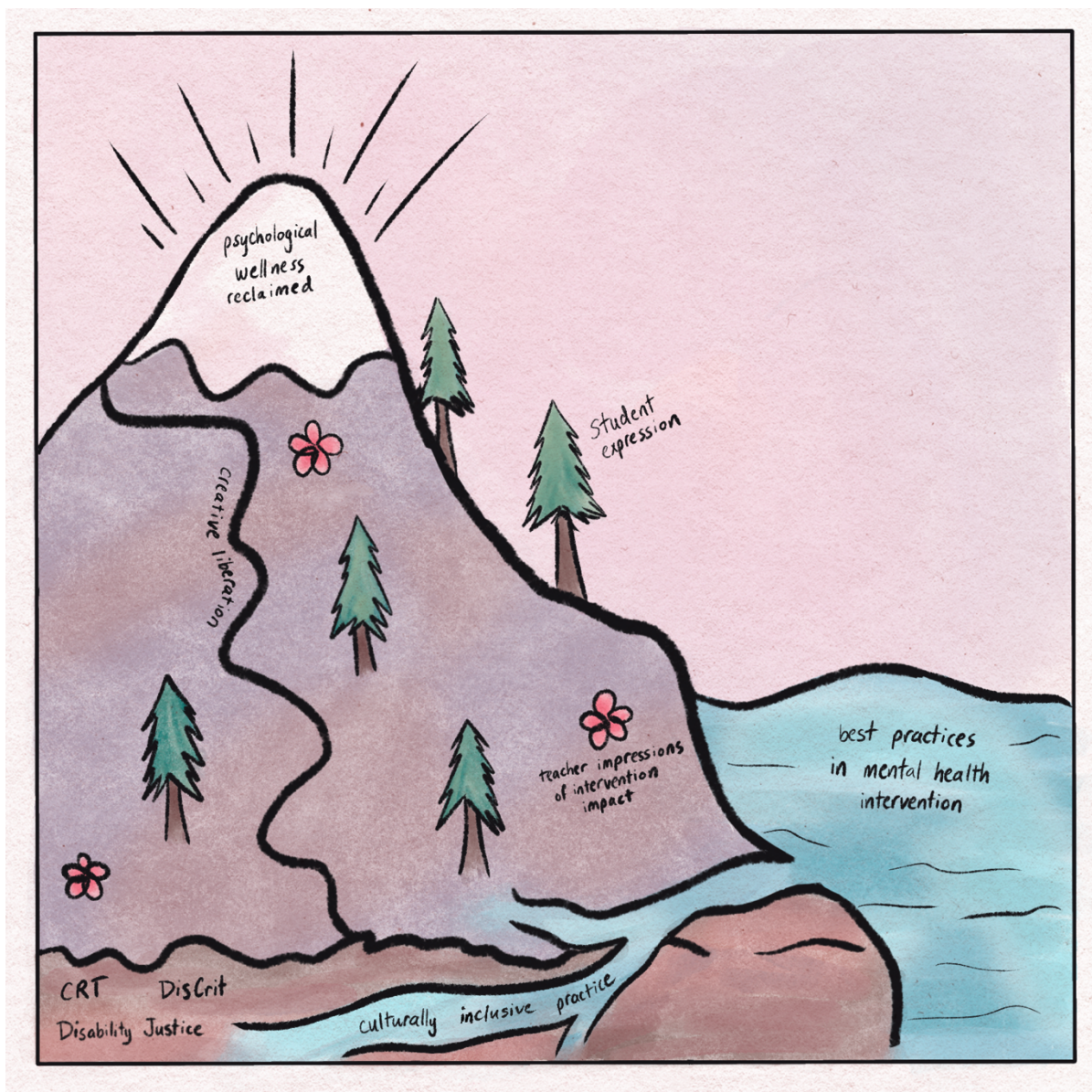
A study by Necheles et al. (2007) used the Photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997) to help adolescents in a low-income, predominantly Black and Latine community engage in visual dialogue around health and factors influencing health. Participants also created posters advocating for reducing stress in relationships and at school. Collaboration in identifying common themes among photographs created opportunities for participants to consider others’ perspectives in promoting positive health practices, and poster development allowed them to share their findings with the school community. Their advocacy posters were featured in a museum in Los Angeles, and the exhibit was featured in several U.S. media outlets. Findings indicate that the adolescents identified multiple community health challenges, including lack of access to healthy foods, exposure to violence, and stress related to family and peer relationships. Participants also identified community strengths and resources such as social networks, cultural traditions, and faith-based supports. Through participation in the study, the adolescents could effectively advocate for relevant health concerns and disseminate information throughout their communities and beyond.

Lastly, a digital, arts-based mindfulness program called L.A.U.G.H. (Let Art Unleash Great Happiness) was implemented with a population of students attending a racially diverse elementary school (Jones & Lee, 2022). Utilizing L.A.U.G.H., students practiced mindful breathing and created digital artwork, which was shared through projection screens with the school community. Participants in this study who identified as Black/African American and Asian American/Pacific Islander demonstrated significant improvements in school connectedness and positive feelings about school.

Conceptual Framework: Reclaiming Wellness through the Arts

The conceptual framework for this study draws from the principles of CRT, DisCrit, and Disability Justice to propose an alternative conceptualization of psychological wellness and mindfulness that is inclusive and empowering for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Interventions that align with this framework should disrupt traditional power structures upheld by medical models of intervention and promote resilience and resistance simultaneously. Resistance to oppressive systems through the arts, such as the activism of Sins Invalid (Kafai, 2021), is a means by which school-age youth can amplify their voices while engaging in practices that have been shown in previous literature to improve psychological wellness (Howie et al., 2013). This qualitative study used the following framework to analyze the artwork youth produced as part of an arts-based mindfulness intervention (Figure 1). Data analysis focused on identifying themes around community, wellness, and individual identities that emerge as youth engage in open-ended self-expression and develop their understanding of mindfulness over the school year.

Figure 1: Study Framework – Reclaiming Wellness through the Arts



In considering the most accurate way to represent this conceptual framework, I grappled with ideals that were seemingly at odds. The framework had to convey strength and resilience while simultaneously capturing a vast capacity for transformation. It also needs to define a system of distinct but interrelated parts contributing to a unified whole. I considered the symbolic representations that could hold personal meaning to me, symbols that would reflect the relevance of this research to my own experiences and values. I thought about my current home in Washington State and the sights that

inspired me most and elicited a sense of wholeness. Finding refuge in the mountains, sheltered by evergreen trees, is the best visualization of this sense of wholeness. I also considered my Korean cultural heritage and our stories of generational pain, resilience, and the narratives of overcoming that have emerged as a cultural phenomenon in response to these traumas. Specifically, the lore of *Arirang* is a traditional folk song that describes the longing of two young lovers separated by the sea. It is all at once about sorrow, separation, reunion, and love (UNESCO, 2014). This folk song paradoxically became an anthem of Korea's resistance against the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945 (Atkins, 2007), demonstrating that love, art, and resistance can be, and often are, natural companions. The final verse of the standard version of *Arirang* can be translated to:

There, over there, that mountain is *Baekdu* Mountain,
Where, even in the middle of winter days, flowers bloom

(Kim Yoon & Williams, 2015, p. 39)

Elements of the Study Framework

This mountain scene best encompasses the conceptual ideas presented in this study. As shown in Figure 1, each landscape component represents an aspect of the framework. In this framework, the sea represents best practices in mental health intervention, such as those outlined in CASEL's guidelines for school-based social-emotional intervention. The river symbolizes culturally responsive mental health interventions that share connections to general best practices. The path up the mountain represents creative liberation. The framework depicts two types of plant life: evergreen trees and flowers. The evergreen trees, the most prominent features of the mountainscape, are student expressions, while the flowers are teachers' impressions of an intervention's impact.

The sea itself is rife with contradictions. At its worst, it is treacherous and overpowering; at the same time, it is vitalizing and diverse in its life forms. It is largely unexplored by humankind, and its depths hold countless exciting mysteries. At their best, mental health interventions have the potential

to yield significant mental wellness benefits for diverse populations of students. At worst, an overemphasis on Western and ableist values around psychological wellness can be destructive, invalidating presentations of mental health that do not align with these values.

Connected to the sea is the river, which branches out into the soil at the mountain's base. The freshwater from the river intermingles with the mountain's solid base, which is representative of the theoretical foundations of this study: CRT, DisCrit, and Disability Justice. These components produce fertile soil that nourishes the mountain's plant life. While both types of plants come from the soil, the trees rise above the flowers, illustrating how, within this framework, student voices are those that are most important. The flowers, or the teacher's impressions of an intervention's impact, are resilient in their own way, just as those described in the verse of *Arirang* that bloom in the middle of winter days. However, they are shaded underneath the trees. They do not outgrow or overshadow the trees.

While creative expression is not the only path toward inclusive psychological wellness, it is the path featured in this study and, therefore, the only path in view in this depiction. In addition, creative expression can be used as a tool for liberation, facilitating the uphill climb to the summit. Finally, the summit of the mountain is psychological wellness reclaimed. This is the ultimate goal presented in this framework. With a healthy foundation in place and a clear pathway in the form of creative expression, students, with teacher support, can work towards realizing and reclaiming their definitions of psychological wellness.

RQ 1: What themes were observed in participants' art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?

One area of focus in the data analysis process is the use of artistic expression to promote more inclusive psychological wellness practices. The first research question posed in this study is, "What themes were observed in participants' art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they

fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?” *Elements of artistic expression* refer to stylistic features of the drawings, such as line, shape, texture, color, and value (Roxo, 2018). Tenet 7 of DisCrit supports all forms of activism (Annamma et al., 2013), including activism through the arts. Resistance to oppressive systems can take many forms, including literature, photography, visual art, films, dance, and food, that honor and highlight the joy in one’s individual and collective identities. These products are inspired by and co-created within communities and serve to express and overcome personal and historical trauma and oppression. Principle nine of the Disability Justice framework is centered on meeting access needs through non-normative means (Berne, 2015a). The study examines how the intervention design encourages students towards psychological wellness practices that go beyond or against normative Western medical ideals. Further, I studied how themes in student work reflected these ideals (e.g., family and home, culture). Analyses explored how students represent wellness through pictures and writing and their feelings about aspects of the intervention that challenge traditional schooling structures (e.g., emotional expression and opportunities for unstructured social connection).

RQ 2: How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?

This study’s second research question focuses on the role of student identity, including non-Eurocentric values such as interdependence, in promoting psychological wellness. It asks, “How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?” Principle eight of disability justice emphasizes interdependence by meeting one another’s needs in working toward liberation. In the context of this study, the intervention fostered community-building and mutual support by sharing student art with the school community. I examined how students represent interdependence in their artwork - for example, commonalities between students’ works that were not based on the model photos provided by the app. I also examined how student surveys reflected feelings

about the projection component of the intervention, as they shared feedback on how they felt seeing their art on display.

RQ 3: What are teachers' impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?

The study explores wellness as a means of resistance to oppressive systems and hierarchical classroom dynamics. When resistance is aimed at acting against racism and building one's resilience and empowerment, it lends itself to wellness, as it requires those involved to grapple with uncomfortable emotions within a supportive community (Rozas & Miller, 2007). The third question posed in this study is, "What are teachers' impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?" Tenet 4 of DisCrit emphasizes centering the voices of marginalized populations, which are traditionally minimized in research. L.A.U.G.H. provided students with an opportunity for open-ended self-expression and asked for student input regarding their mood. In typical academic activities, teachers limit and redirect student voices, deeming some topics inappropriate (Schneider, 2001). Because teachers hold a position of power, questioning a student's creative choices can be a form of coercion. In such cases, the teacher's judgment overrides how students wish to express themselves (Lensmire, 1994). The limits of what is acceptable content for school can be subject to teacher bias; for example, not allowing student expression around themes of non-heteronormative sexual identities or racism due to the teacher's discomfort (Schneider, 2001). As educators work towards supporting the development of students' expression, it is essential to question whether students are being taught to express themselves in a way that accurately reflects their beliefs and intentions or if they are being asked to minimize their voices to conform to academic standards (Denson & Repke, 2019). I explored how teachers created space for open-ended activity, challenging the notion that the teacher ultimately decides what is acceptable and what is taboo in the classroom.

Chapter 3: Research Strategy, Design, and Methods

This chapter introduces the research methodology for this qualitative inquiry study, which examined four measures: student art, student surveys, teacher interviews, and teacher surveys. The data was explored through a lens of critical qualitative inquiry to identify findings that could be applied to advocate for more equitable social-emotional intervention practices. The chapter will describe the process of collecting and analyzing data, the methods employed, and how the research methodology aligns with the research questions and objectives. This chapter will also discuss the study's limitations and measures taken to acknowledge and minimize bias.

Critical Qualitative Inquiry

Denzin (2017) defined *critical* qualitative inquiry as interpretive and performative qualitative research carried out in the interests of those who experience social injustice. This interpretive study drew from a highly diverse student population of which many participants belonged to historically marginalized groups. In utilizing student artwork as the primary data source, the perspectives and visual “voices” of the participants were placed at the center of the inquiry. In examining the visual art data, the analysis considered not only aesthetic qualities but also reflections of social and cultural norms. I reflected on my positionality and examined the held assumptions that could impact the analysis process. Therefore, multiple perspectives and interpretations of works were explored through the process of coding. Finally, the qualitative data for this study were analyzed using a critical approach to form a call to action around how practitioners can better promote wellness in marginalized youth. The findings of the analysis were applied in proposing changes in practice and policy, described in the discussion.

Positionality

My research project examines the outcomes of a mindfulness intervention implemented in a racially diverse public elementary school. My elementary school experiences were based in a predominantly White, private Catholic school setting; therefore, my experiences likely bear little

resemblance to those of the study participants. The ability to choose to enroll in private school is a privilege in that students come from families with enough financial privilege to pay steep tuition bills. Quantitative research has indicated that youth with more financial privilege are less likely to experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety than those with low socioeconomic status (SES) (Lemstra et al., 2008). However, I struggled with feeling excluded in this setting until I could switch to a different environment and find peers with shared identities. As I reflected on the perspective of the participants, I thought about the protective potential of attending a more diverse school and being more likely to find an accepting peer group. Would these students feel differently about their sense of community and belongingness at school if they were the only child of color in their classroom? As I made sense of the research data, I was aware of the possibility of projecting my elementary school experiences into my interpretations of their artwork. My involvement in public schools has been as an educator for several years and now as a parent. Therefore, I was mindful of how the power I am used to holding in these spaces influenced my research, intentionally centered student works, and attempted to make meaning of their work without necessarily applying an educator's lens.

In grappling with my power and positionality concerning participants, I also acknowledged my privilege as someone with degrees in higher education. I reflected on my exposure to classic studies of ethnography, which describe the practices of other cultures through the lens of exoticism. Different cultures are inscrutable to outsiders without an "intellectual" interpretation (Thomas, 1991). Being steeped in the culture of academia, how I have been conditioned to write and think about phenomena creates distance between myself and the participants. I wanted to ensure that I humanized participants and centered their works in my research above my interpretations and assumptions. I addressed this by connecting with individuals involved in the study and obtaining firsthand accounts. As I examined the data, I shaped and refined my understanding of the context and community in which this intervention occurred.

I felt naturally inclined to pay more attention to art that appealed to my aesthetic senses and preferences. This kind of selective attention had the potential to impact which works I paid the closest attention to. Many drawings were generated while this intervention was carried out. As I needed to pare them down for my analysis, I considered how to choose the works for analysis (e.g., specific students, grades, classrooms, or identity groups). To hold myself accountable for any of these biases, I used ongoing memos, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing. These practices have also been identified as methods of upholding academic rigor in qualitative studies (Bhattacharya, 2017). Further details regarding these reflexivity practices are outlined in the Data Analysis Approach section of this chapter.

Sampling

Setting and Participants

The study participants were 84 second and third-grade students from a small, urban elementary school (total school population $N = 237$) in a large district. For the 2017-2018 school year (in which the study took place), 67.1% of the student population identified as BIPOC, 39.2% identified as Black/African American, and 53.2% were considered low-income. Of the sample of 84 study participants, 55 students identified as BIPOC (see Table 3). All students participated in an average of 35 L.A.U.G.H. sessions over the school year. Students who completed fewer than ten L.A.U.G.H. sessions were excluded from the final data analysis due to concerns about a lack of opportunities to engage meaningfully with the intervention program.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the School Population and Study Participants

Racial Category	Whole School N = 237		Study Participants		Participants in 2 nd grade		Participants in 3 rd grade	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black/African American	93	39.2	43	51.2	23	27.3	19	22.6
White/European American	78	32.9	29	34.5	14	16.7	15	17.9
Multiracial	39	16.5	4	4.8	2	2.3	2	2.3
Hispanic/Latino	22	9.3	5	6.0	3	3.6	2	2.3
Asian	5	2.1	3	3.6	2	2.3	1	1.2
English Language Learner/Linguistically Diverse	29	12.2	19	24.4	11	14.1	8	10.3
Experiencing Homelessness	36	15.2						
Low-income	126	53.2						

Note: Data for the last two variables is only available at the school level, as it was publicly available data about the setting.

In the original L.A.U.G.H. study, there were four participating classrooms, two second-grade, and two third-grade, and a total of four teacher participants. Two teacher participants were available for a follow-up interview at the time of this writing, several years after the initial data collection. The two teacher interview participants, referred to in this study as “Amy” and “Madison,” both identified as White, cisgender women. Amy reported having experiences working in diverse classrooms before teaching at the school where L.A.U.G.H. took place, including classrooms where she was “the only

White person in the room.” Amy left this school following the school year due to challenges such as changing from a K-8 school to a K-5 school and the perceived absence of teacher support from leadership, particularly for behavioral challenges. Madison had been teaching for four years at the time of L.A.U.G.H., with two of the four years at the school where L.A.U.G.H. took place. Both Amy and Madison were third-grade teachers and divided their students based on subject, with Madison specializing in third-grade literacy and Amy focusing on third-grade math.

Intervention and Procedures

The arts-based mindfulness intervention was delivered through an iPad app called L.A.U.G.H.® (Let Art Unleash Great Happiness). This iPad app incorporated mindful breathing and art exercises, including tracing, copying, and free drawing. L.A.U.G.H. was developed by the Catherine Meyer Foundation and was designed to be a tool for supporting youth in schools. It utilizes traditional mindfulness techniques such as guided deep breathing and arts-based methods such as free drawing and copying pictures, allowing for a simultaneous examination of the benefits of mindfulness and arts-based interventions on BIPOC students.

Sessions were facilitated by a research team from the University of Washington and took place on Monday and Wednesday mornings for 20 minutes at a time. Teachers were provided with materials to facilitate the administration of the intervention, including laminated cards with instructions to read to students, 5-minute and 1-minute reminder cards, and a script for teachers to read to students as they answered questions at the end of the session. During L.A.U.G.H. time, teachers used scripted language to initiate the session, instructing students to get an iPad and headphones and open the L.A.U.G.H. app. Teachers were guided by the research team on how to respond to students during L.A.U.G.H. time, specifically if they expressed self-criticism or frustration. Teachers were discouraged from saying anything in response to criticism and were given additional guidelines on how to talk about student art (Table 4). These guidelines included refraining from any kind of evaluative statement, including

positive feedback. This type of feedback would risk imposing a teacher’s subjective preferences onto the student’s work, potentially stifling creativity or discouraging other students. Teachers were instructed to avoid comparisons between student work, as it would risk fostering a culture of competition rather than support and collaboration among participants. Evaluative feedback could also shift focus to the quality of the final product, rather than encourage students to be mindful of the process of creating art.

Table 4: Teacher Protocol Do and Don’t Guideline

Do	Don’t
Use nonverbal communication to encourage continued effort	Make value judgments on drawings in progress (e.g., “that’s my favorite”)
Smile and make eye contact to reengage students that are disengaged.	Make any reference to the quality of a drawing (e.g., “that is a beautiful drawing/painting”)
Praise <i>everyone’s</i> effort at the end of the L.A.U.G.H. time.	Compare one student’s art to another (e.g., “that painting is as good as _____’s”)
Notice any changes in confidence, behavior, enjoyment in your students and tell the team about it!	Connect perceived skill level to their artwork (e.g., “you are very talented,” or “you are great at art.”)

Note: Content from Jones (2017) L.A.U.G.H. Teacher Protocol.

All students in the class engaged in L.A.U.G.H. at the same time. Students began each session by logging into the L.A.U.G.H. app and completing the RULER mood meter. They then engaged in the mindfulness activities of intentional deep breathing and free drawing. After being presented with the digital canvas, the app verbalized the following prompts: “There are no rules. No wrong way. You can experiment with different tools and different colors. Go slowly and have fun. Really look. See each shape, each color.” The prompts reflected components of mindfulness such as attentiveness to the present moment, practice without focusing on the outcome, and letting go of expectations (Kabat-

Zinn, 2003). Students could select from a group of images for inspiration when completing their drawings, or they could free draw.

At the end of each session, students were asked again to complete the RULER mood meter and answer questionnaires, for which they provided a rating of 1-4 for a set of eight questions. Throughout L.A.U.G.H. sessions, the app played relaxing music and maintained the tempo of the deep breathing exercises. In addition, breathing exercises were led by an animated character on screen (“Ambi”), who provided verbal guidance around the pacing of the user’s breath during these exercises. The app was customized to integrate the school’s SEL curriculum and measure additional indicators of school engagement. These features will be discussed in the Measures section.

Data Collection

Student Art

Student participants produced digital drawings in the app every session of L.A.U.G.H. These drawings were examined to address Research Question 1 – “What themes were observed in participants’ art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?” I looked for common themes within each student’s body of work, each class, and all participants. I noted any subjects that appeared often, and the artistic techniques employed. The content of student works was partially impacted by whether the student selected a model image. The presence of an identical subject across multiple students’ works served as a potential indicator that a model image was used. I also looked for patterns at different points of time in the school year (e.g., beginning, middle, and end of intervention) and identified similarities and differences. I disaggregated student drawings to distinguish work created by BIPOC students and White students based on demographic information collected at the beginning of the L.A.U.G.H. study. In the study’s findings, names and other identifying information in the drawings were blurred to protect student and teacher privacy.

Student Surveys

Student surveys were administered in person on paper at the midpoint of the intervention in March 2018. Students were given three open-ended sentence stems with blank lines to fill in their responses and three blank boxes to draw visual responses to the prompts. Each student completed a one-page survey, and responses were deidentified using a “special number” assigned to the student. Once finished, student surveys were scanned and stored electronically. Like the student drawings, any potentially identifying information, such as names, was crossed out to protect student and teacher privacy.

Student participants completed mid-year surveys that prompted students to “Please write and draw how these questions make you feel.” Students were presented with three questions: 1) “When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel: ____”; 2) “When I breathe with Ambi, I feel: ____”; 3) “When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel: ____.” These surveys address Research Question 2: “How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?” Like the approach used in the student art for addressing this question, the surveys are differentiated between BIPOC and White students, and initial themes in written and pictorial responses were noted. While replies to all prompts were examined, I mainly attended to differences in responses to the first question related to the Disability Justice principle of interdependence.

Teacher Surveys

Teacher impact surveys were administered to the four participating teachers on February 9th, 2018, requesting them to be completed by February 16th, 2018. One teacher completed the questions on the first day. Reminders to finish the survey were sent to teachers who still needed to respond on February 13th, 14th, and 19th. Ultimately, three of four teachers completed the survey. Five questions were posed to teachers. Out of the following, this project focuses on questions 2, 4, and 5, as these questions prompted a descriptive, open-ended response and are, therefore, most applicable to the

research questions, whereas 1 and 3 asked teachers to use a rating scale. Responses were collected and stored electronically.

The questions from the teacher surveys examined for this study were worded as follows: Q2) Do students interact with their peers differently on L.A.U.G.H. days vs. non-L.A.U.G.H. days? If so, how? Q4) In general, how would you describe student behavior after L.A.U.G.H. time on Mondays and Wednesdays? Is student behavior different on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday? Q5) What do you wish was different about L.A.U.G.H. time? How could you imagine L.A.U.G.H. working differently in a classroom? The teacher surveys address Research Question 3: “What are teachers’ impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?” Teacher surveys were completed at the end of the 2018 school year, but the responses were relatively brief. Therefore, follow-up interviews were conducted in early 2023 to elicit more in-depth conversations about teachers’ impressions of impact and observations regarding the L.A.U.G.H. intervention.

Teacher Interviews

Another form of data utilized is teacher interview data. These interviews were completed five years after the study as a form of retrospective analysis of intervention impact. I contacted teachers who participated in the original intervention and conducted semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured format enabled me to frame the conversation around my research questions and facilitate the comparison of responses (Bhattacharya, 2017). For the teacher interviews, a protocol was developed with questions that mapped onto each research question. The protocol lent itself to a semi-structured interview. Teachers who participated in the 2017-2018 L.A.U.G.H. intervention were contacted via email in December 2022, with a follow-up request sent in January 2023. Of the four teachers contacted, two responded, expressing interest in participating in an interview. Individual interviews were conducted on January 17, 2023, and February 1, 2023. Before the interview date, each teacher was sent a consent form to review that described the purpose of the current study, including risks and

benefits. Both interviews were conducted remotely – one over the phone and one via web-based teleconferencing. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with Otter.ai or Zoom’s transcription feature, and the researcher edited and cleaned up the transcriptions.

Topics explored during the interviews included changes noticed in individual students and classroom dynamics throughout the intervention, comments or interactions they recalled related to students’ conception of wellness, and the teachers’ identities and how they aligned with the classroom population. Further, interviews examined teachers’ perspectives on power dynamics and how these dynamics may have shifted, as well as teachers’ observations of student interdependence and community-building while participating in the intervention. All interview questions are outlined in Appendix A, and the participant consent form shared with teachers is in Appendix B. The teacher interviews addressed each research question. Examples of questions are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Teacher Interview Question Examples

Research Question	Interview Question Example
1) What themes were observed in participants’ art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?	What common themes did you notice in students’ drawings?
2) How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?	How did students react to the components of the intervention (free drawing, projections)?
3) What are teachers’ impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?	What changes did you notice in students’ moods and coping skills over time?

Data Analysis Approach

Coding is a categorizing strategy common in qualitative research (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). It involves labeling and grouping data items by category and then analyzing and comparing within and between categories. Alternatively, connecting techniques such as case studies can be a means of interpreting qualitative data. Strategies such as case studies or narrative analysis preserve more of the contextual aspects of the data, offer a more holistic portrayal, and involve less editing and reduction of the original data (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). This process usually includes identifying key relationships that tie data into a singular narrative and highlighting similarities and differences. Categorizing and connecting strategies may also be integrated and used together. One way to do this is to use them sequentially, coding the data and then developing a model for connecting or relating the categories. In reverse order, researchers use holistic means to analyze cases and individuals and then identify similarities and differences (Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

This study used coding to identify patterns within and across each data source. Identifying common themes facilitated the connection of multiple ideas into an overarching narrative describing the intervention's outcomes and potential future research directions in this area. Data were first coded using broader categories, such as *classroom management*, *community building*, and *emotional support*. These codes were then synthesized into several more specific themes, such as *mindfulness as behavior management*. The themes with similar characteristics were combined to form broader thematic categories, such as *navigating independence and interdependence*. Ultimately, three broad thematic categories, with several subthemes in each, were utilized in discussing the study's findings.

Visual inquiry uses graphical images as data for reflection, elicitation, and representation (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Collier (2001) provides a general process for analyzing pictures. This process reflects thematic forms of inquiry and categorizing approaches utilized in qualitative data analysis (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). The first recommendation is to examine the corpus of images, noting

overall impressions and feelings that occur in the viewing process. The next step is the creation of categories to organize and inventory the pictures, considering the focus of the study. Next is a structured analysis that fine-tunes initial impressions and discoveries, targeting specific research questions. Finally, the researchers assign meaning based on the entire visual landscape and details from the structured analysis, defining the significance of the data within an appropriate context. This process examines the drawings and identifies common themes in the image set.

All digital drawings produced during the intervention have been stored electronically. To enable a broader analysis of themes, color copies of a selection of images were printed, grouped by classroom, and, within classrooms, by each student. Color copies of the student surveys were also printed to facilitate movement between the documents to compare and look for common themes. This methodology is based on the work of Collier (2001), who recommends beginning the visual analysis process by examining image sets as a whole to note initial impressions. The data were analyzed using coding and visual inquiry methodologies supported by a critical qualitative inquiry approach. Visual analysis procedures were employed to examine the drawings from the intervention and the surveys (Collier, 2001), and coding was utilized to organize and categorize the images for thematic analysis. Relatedly, coding methods were also used for narrative and verbal data (Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

Reflexivity Practices

Several reflexive practices were implemented throughout the analysis process to mitigate the potential for bias. Ongoing memos and reflexive journaling produced documentation of the introspective process, facilitating critical evaluation of the analytic decisions made. Engaging in dialogue with peers elicited additional insights into the analysis process, allowing constructive critique and validation. In using these methods, the analysis of data could be continually assessed for potential bias, and corroboration of the findings from peers reinforced the validity of the data interpretations.

Applying Critical Qualitative Inquiry

The principles of critical qualitative inquiry were applied in the data analysis process, with the researcher reflecting on how findings can be used to advance more equitable practices. The data was examined with the goal of obtaining an expanded understanding of how wellness is developed in the context of a culturally responsive intervention. In addition, the researcher considered how individual and collective identities are represented in the data. Finally, a call to action was formulated to encourage practitioners to examine whose values are embodied in wellness interventions and to explore modifications to make practices more equitable and participant-centered.

Potential Challenges/Limitations of the Design

The primary methodological challenge for this study was using secondary data that has already been collected. Because I did not have access to the student participants, I could not get their narrative or verbal input. On the one hand, the researcher interprets any type of data - visual or verbal. In academia, we privilege the written word over other forms of communication. Non-verbal data holds as much potential value as verbal data. However, to corroborate the patterns I find in the drawings, I incorporated other data sources, such as mid-year student surveys and end-of-year teacher surveys. I also utilized teacher interviews formatted to align with my specific research questions.

One challenge in the analysis process was distinguishing between drawings based on photo models and freehand drawings. In the 2017-2018 school year, almost all inspiration images were of single objects (e.g., beach ball, bear, ice cream, butterfly). To address this concern, I compared the digital drawings to a gallery of preset photos stored in the app. However, the inspiration images currently in the app are not a precise reflection of what they were at the time of the study, as more pictures were added midway through the school year, and the app has been revamped several times since its inception. Nonetheless, the presence of identical subjects across several students' drawings may indicate that these images were based on photo models.

Teacher interviews were conducted several years after the intervention. Therefore, teacher interviewees may not have recalled specific details of the original L.A.U.G.H. study, which may have resulted in inaccurate or incomplete information being provided during the interview. Only two of the four participating teachers from the original study agreed to participate in interviews. These teachers' perspectives and experiences may differ from those of the other two teachers who did not participate in the interviews. Therefore, the information provided by the two teacher interviewees may not represent the perspectives of the entire cohort of teachers from the original study.

A final limitation to consider is selecting images to focus on in the data analysis process. One potential means of narrowing down images was to use a selection of pictures pared down by the original researcher. The researcher chose fourteen drawings from each student to compile into end-of-the-year gifts. The researcher used subjective judgment to determine the "best" drawings, and the students themselves did not select which drawings were included. Using these preselected images meant excluding images that could have relevance to the research questions. Analyzing only a selection of images may also result in omitting significant insights and nuances that would be captured by studying the entire body of images. The decision to focus on a selection of images rather than all drawings was primarily due to practicality, as hundreds of drawings were produced throughout the intervention. In order for the analysis process to be feasible with regard to time and resources, the set of drawings analyzed was limited while still incorporating a diverse range of drawings from all participants.

Chapter 4: Findings

The following chapter will review the analysis of measures used in this study and present the results in the context of three broad themes that emerged in the process of data analysis. The first research question of this dissertation study asks, “What themes were observed in participants’ art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?” Students’ digital drawings were examined to address this question. The overall body of drawings was first skimmed to identify recurring themes and notable examples. A list of keywords to describe the most common themes was created, and drawings were examined and coded using these keywords. Keywords were then subsumed into more descriptive themes, and drawings were sorted accordingly. Digital drawings were saved and stored in folders corresponding to each theme.

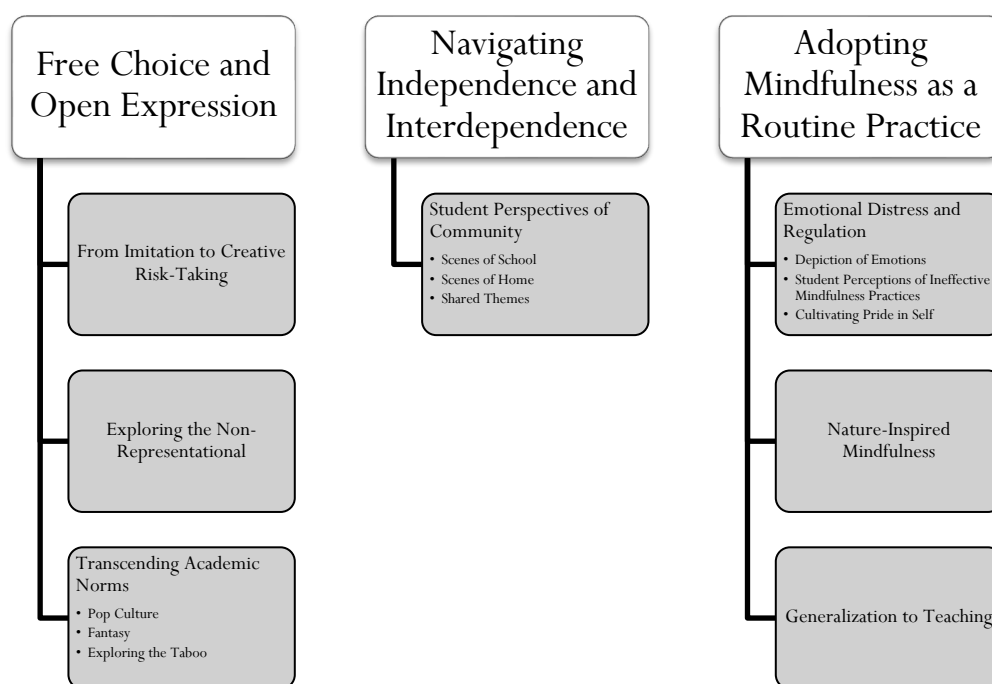
The second research question, “How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?” was addressed primarily using student survey data. Like the process employed in the analysis of drawings, all survey pages were skimmed to identify recurrent topics, and keywords were developed and applied to individual survey responses. These keywords were then used to create thematic categories into which surveys could be sorted. Images of the relevant parts of the survey data were sorted into corresponding digital folders.

The third research question is, “What are teachers’ impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?” These findings draw on data collected from teacher interviews and surveys to gain insight into how teachers perceive mindfulness practices that incorporate creative arts in the classroom. Teacher interviews were transcribed from audio recordings, and both interview transcripts and surveys were coded based on themes identified in both measures.

The themes from each type of measure were examined for commonalities to generate three overarching themes that encompass data from all measures: 1) free choice and open expression, 2)

navigating independence and interdependence, and 3) adopting mindfulness as a routine practice. Each broad theme encompasses a selection of subthemes identified in the data analysis process. Within “free choice and open expression,” associated subthemes were: 1) from imitation to creative risk-taking, 2) exploring the non-representational, and 3) transcending academic norms. The drawings associated with “transcending academic norms” were further divided into three topics: 1) pop culture, 2) fantasy, and 3) exploring the taboo. Within “navigating independence and interdependence,” an associated subtheme was “student perspectives of community.” Aspects of community explored here include 1) scenes of school, 2) scenes of home, and 3) shared themes. Subthemes associated with “adopting mindfulness as a routine practice” are 1) emotional distress and regulation, 2) nature-inspired mindfulness, and 3) generalization to teaching practice. Within “emotional distress and regulation,” the following subthemes were defined: 1) depiction of emotions, 2) student perceptions of ineffective mindfulness practices, and 3) cultivating pride in self. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the themes identified in this study.

Figure 2: Data Analysis Themes



Free Choice and Open Expression

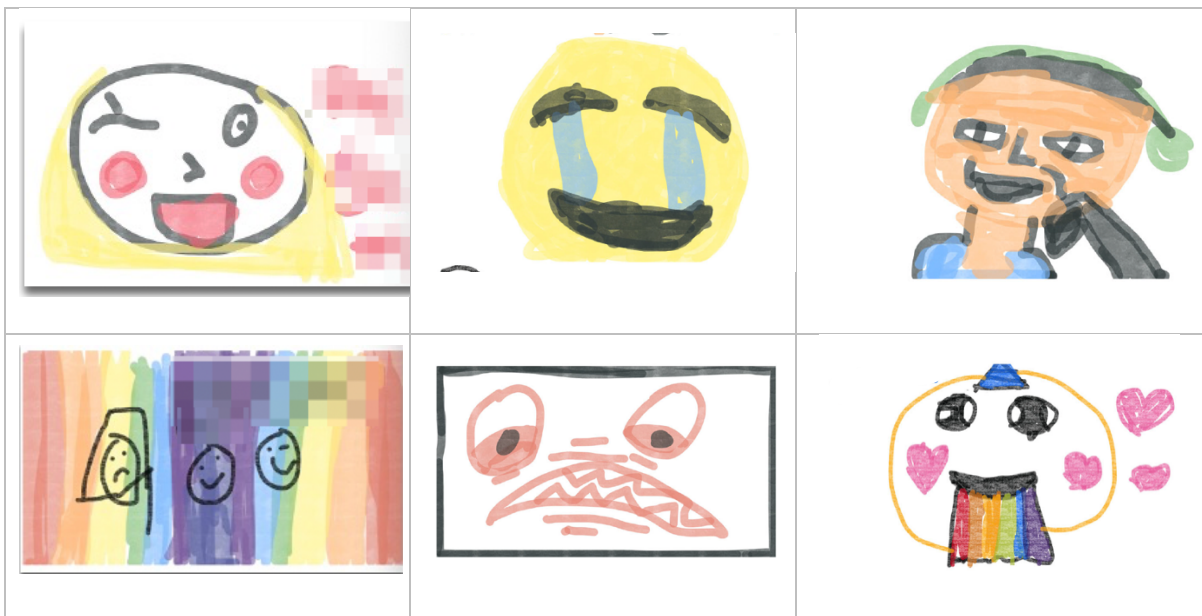
Several statements from the teacher participants indicated valuing the importance of free choice during the school day. Free choice activities refer to unstructured time in the classroom, an absence of pressure to complete work or perform specific tasks, an emphasis on process rather than product, or the use of open-ended prompts in initiating an activity. Students' challenges engaging in open-ended work are evident in the progression of some students' drawings over the year. At the beginning of the intervention, many students copied the model images provided by the app, such as an image of a beach ball, ice cream cone, or flip-flops. Over time, these students expanded the subject matter of their drawings, incorporating personal interests, depictions of home and school life, and abstract, non-representational experimentation. For students who preferred abstract drawing, recurrences of similar designs and colors can be observed over time, indicating that students recalled and revisited artistic elements that held their interest. Student works also reflected themes often discouraged in the classroom, which typically places a higher value on observational, representational drawings of academic subject matter and realistic scenarios (Chad-Friedman et al., 2018). Common subjects observed in this domain include fantasy characters, pop culture, and subjects considered "taboo" or inappropriate. For example, violence, bathroom humor, and frightening scenes.

The variation in subject matter for free drawings contrasts noticeably with the art created for the mid-year student surveys. During their free drawing time, students were given the same open-ended prompts of, "There are no rules. No wrong way. You can experiment with different tools and different colors. Go slowly and have fun. Really look. See each shape, each color," whereas in the surveys, students responded to three specific prompts: "When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel: ____"; "When I breathe with Ambi, I feel: ____"; and "When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel: ____." Responses from the surveys were depictions of either facial expressions or scenes from the

classroom during L.A.U.G.H. time. Drawings of emotions rarely included color and had fewer details than depictions of facial expressions compared to the free drawings (Figures 2 and 3).

The following image sets are samples of drawings from individual students across the four classrooms included in the study. The facial expression drawings in Figure 3 were created during free-drawing periods and utilize a variety of colors and details that enhance the viewer's experience, such as rainbows, facial lines, pupil placement, and the use of features commonly associated with emoji, popular text message-based pictograms that often convey emotional cues that add expressivity to typed conversations (Prada et al., 2018).

Figure 3: Depictions of Emotions from L.A.U.G.H. Free Drawings



In contrast, the survey drawings in Figure 4 bear a closer resemblance to one another and appear more formulaic: a circular, human-like face consisting of eyes and a mouth. Most are pencil line drawings, with one of the sample pictures incorporating neutral, realistic colors for the hair and skin. Details included in these drawings are more restrained – the addition of body parts such as shoulders,

hair, and a nose rather than the rainbows, hearts, playful winks, and sharp fangs seen in Figure 3.

Overall, the free drawings demonstrate more creative risks than the student surveys.

Figure 4: Depictions of Emotions from Mid-Year Student Survey



From Imitation to Creative Risk-Taking

The following section examines a selection of student drawings that exemplify the development of creative risk-taking over time. One of the primary indicators in selecting the drawings presented here was the presence of a beach ball in the student's early drawings. The beach ball was a model drawing included in the L.A.U.G.H. app as an inspiration image to support students in generating ideas for their art. A teacher interviewee noted students' discomfort and uncertainty in the context of free drawing due to limited opportunities for unstructured activity in the classroom. It can be inferred that such students were more likely to be dependent on the model pictures at the beginning of the intervention. As time went on, these students were continually provided with opportunities for unstructured drawing, and the presence of the beach ball image faded as the school year progressed.

Figure 5 shows a chronologically ordered selection of drawings created by E., a female African-American-identified second grader. The first drawing in the series contains a beach ball and a few other items commonly associated with the beach, such as a flip-flop and a slice of watermelon. E.'s subsequent drawings do not include the beach ball, but a similar color palette as the first image can be observed in later drawings, most notably a pastel, rainbow color palette that is first seen in the coloration of the beach ball. Her appreciation of this color selection is evident in her sixth image, which she captioned "beautiful colors." In E.'s case, the colors she chose for her beach ball continued to influence her future drawings, and she could explore a variety of subject matter with this palette as a starting point.

Figure 5: “Beautiful Colors”



Figure 6 shows the progression of the work of N., a female African American-identified third grader. Throughout the intervention, N. produced detailed drawings that included multiple subjects, contexts, and scenarios. In the earliest three drawings, a beach ball is incorporated into outdoor scenes that contain relevant imagery, such as the ocean, ocean animals, sunny skies, and blue water. Over time, N. expands the subject matter of her works to include unicorns, Christmas scenes, images of friends and family, and other events. Beach scenes reappear in later drawings, but without the beach ball present in her drawings early in the school year. Although blurred in the figure, N. began to label the individuals in her drawings with names, and her drawings went from having one individual to including groups interacting with one another. Overall, the growth in N.'s drawings demonstrates an increasing inclusion of people and events that held personal meaning to her.

Figure 6: The Beach and Beyond



Figure 7 depicts the drawings of N., a female Black/Somali second grader bilingual in English and Oromo. The first drawing in this series contains the beach ball from the model drawing and other model items, such as flip-flops. Subsequent drawings contain images that prompt viewers to think of the beach and ocean, such as sea stars, seahorses, and sailboats. For the following few drawings in the series, N. began experimenting with abstract imagery. Like E.'s work in Figure 5, N. favors a consistent color palette across her drawings. Some of her drawings show multiple colors layered in curved, wiggly lines that fill the entire canvas, while other drawings are simpler and use clean lines and blocks of color. In the final image of the series, N. creates a representational drawing again. This time, the drawing does not contain beach-related imagery but a tree with a heart next to it. The tree is made using a color scheme similar to her abstract drawings, and the tree leaves utilize a similar multilayered,

multicolored technique as her earlier work using wavy lines. It appears N. worked towards developing a distinctive art style, with colors and techniques that could be observed across time.

Figure 7: Moving towards Abstract Experimentation



Exploring the Non-Representational

Along with N., many students favored using L.A.U.G.H. time to experiment with abstract work. From a child development standpoint, non-representational work, often referred to using terminology such as “scribbles,” is perceived as less advanced than representational drawing. In art education settings, children are encouraged to progress from scribbling to more detailed, realistic drawings (Martins, 2017). However, in L.A.U.G.H., no value was placed on the level of detail or realism, allowing students to experiment with simple lines and forms or explore what it means to produce a detailed drawing without a point of reference in the form of a real-life object.

Figure 8 depicts the abstract exploration of S., a White male second grader. S. produced several drawings utilizing several of the same techniques. In the examples below, the student began with a crosshatched background and drew over this background with translucent, geometric blocks of color. This student tended to use many of the same colors in this series of drawings. At the same time, distinct differences are present in the types of shapes used and their configurations. They resemble tangram puzzles in that each shape fits side-by-side with its neighbors, without overlap, to form a central figure. Combined with their graph paper-like backgrounds, the body of drawings takes on a mathematical quality.

Figure 8: Repeated Crosshatching

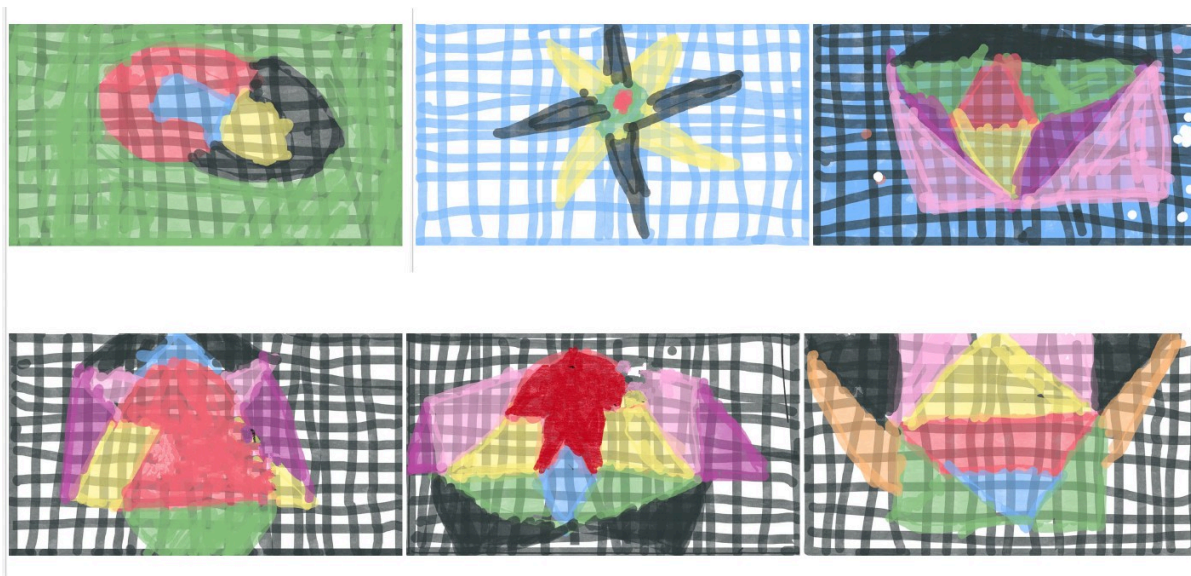


Figure 9 is a selection of drawings from four students across two classes, who all employed a similar strategy to create colorful designs that span the entire canvas. In each example, parts of the canvas have been sectioned off, filling each section with a distinct design. Three of these examples have a symmetrical quality, with design sections replicated on the other halves of the canvas. In the other two examples, while there is more overall asymmetry, there is repetition in color and the use of dots, lines, and shapes. The format of these drawings resembles the therapeutic “scribble technique”

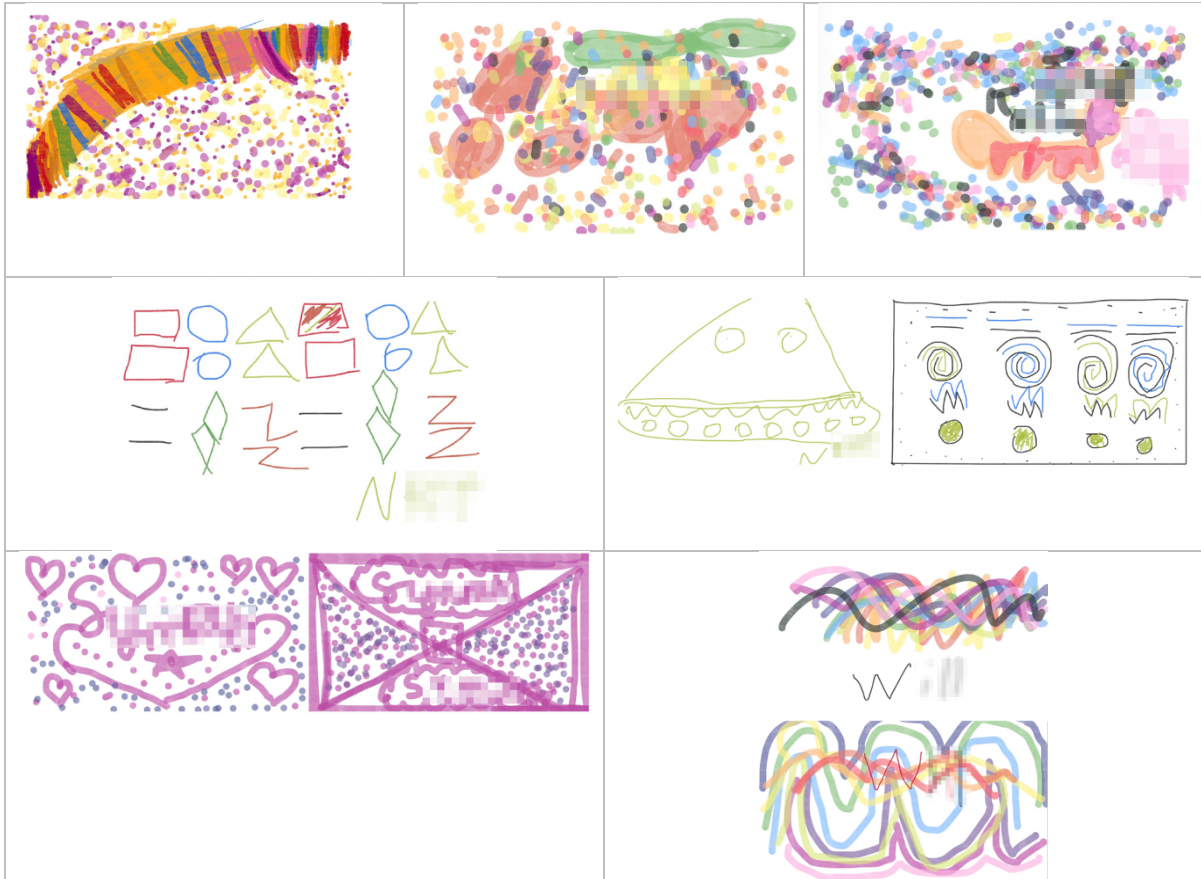
described by Cane (1983), a non-representational exercise intended to reduce inhibitions and encourage spontaneous image-making. These students intuitively replicated this technique during L.A.U.G.H. time, each section presenting a unique opportunity for artistic exploration.

Figure 9: Sections of Design



Figure 10 is an array of drawings from five students across three classrooms. These images include abstract designs comprised of simple dot and line elements. These elements are relatively easy to produce, making this method an accessible means of artistic exploration. This approach also invites participants to experiment with positive and negative space, whereas the examples in Figure 9 often cover the entire canvas. These images also reflect the exploration of repetition, symmetry, composition, and patterns. Using this minimalist method of artmaking, participants are not constrained by standards for realistic representation and can focus on essential artistic elements rather than get caught up in adding details. This method lends itself to process-oriented thinking, a mindset that aligns with the mindfulness value of staying focused on the present moment (Peterson, 2015).

Figure 10: Dot and Line Experiments



Student participants in L.A.U.G.H. experimented with abstract representation in various ways, including layering lines and colors, creating textures through crosshatching or dotting, exploring positive and negative space, and experimenting with patterns and symmetry. This tapestry of abstract exploration reflects creative risk-taking and process-oriented creativity, while the simplicity of elements in these drawings allowed students to overcome potentially intimidating, traditional artistic boundaries. The use of abstract methods not only nurtures the development of technical skills but encourages participants to stay in the present moment, constructing the image one element at a time without a required “end product” to work toward.

Transcending Academic Norms

For students who produced representational drawings, freedom of expression can be observed in their chosen subject matter. Traditional academic work tends to have restrictions around subjects, themes, and styles. Without these predetermined guidelines, students can express themselves genuinely and explore their interests through art. The freedom to engage in non-academic topics through drawing can also boost students' confidence and foster self-validation, as artistic exploration of these topics is not discouraged but shared with the classroom community. Drawings that fell outside of academically normative subject matter typically belonged to one of three categories: pop culture, fantasy characters, and taboo topics.

Pop Culture

Multiple students chose to make depictions of pop culture figures and scenes during L.A.U.G.H. time. The sample set of drawings in Figure 11 includes works from eight students across all four classrooms. Pop culture franchises in this figure include *Transformers*, *Pokémon*, *Beyblade*, *Pac-Man*, *Trolls*, *Disney* movies, *Captain Underpants*, and *Spongebob Squarepants*.

Figure 11: Pop Culture Depictions



Students may gravitate towards creating drawings related to pop culture for several reasons. Children in the U.S. spend a significant amount of their time engaging with screen media, with 8 to 12-year-olds using, on average, just under five hours' worth of screen media per day, not including using screens for school or homework (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Further, the amount of time spent using screen media is significantly higher in youth from low-income households. As such, media influences students' interests, hobbies, and conversations with others. Characters from movies, TV shows, or video games can hold personal significance for students, and the familiar nature of these characters can promote connection with peers who share these interests. Pop culture also reflects the values, trends, and aesthetics of a particular time and place. Drawing from pop culture can allow students to explore the various influences shaping their lives. It becomes a form of cultural expression and commentary.

Students may also find inspiration in their favorite media's unique designs, colors, and themes. Pop culture is rich in diverse and imaginative content that captures audiences' attention. This inspiration can fuel students' creativity and encourage them to experiment with different artistic styles and techniques. The exaggerated details and emotions depicted in many media characters can support students in discovering how to express their feelings.

Fantasy

Many students chose to portray fantasy themes in their free drawings. The fantasy genre offers an escape from the routine of everyday life. In drawing characters from fantasy worlds and scenarios, students can express their imaginations and temporarily step away from the demands of school. Figure 12 contains samples of drawings that fell within this theme, created by nine students across three classrooms. Fantasy characters shown or mentioned in the drawings within this category include mermaids, unicorns, dragons, vampires, and monsters.

Figure 12: Fantasy Characters and Creatures



Like pop culture media, engaging with fantasy themes allows students to explore and express their creative impulses freely by thinking beyond the constraints of reality. The fantasy genre provides a therapeutic mental break from real-world concerns. This escapism can contribute to stress relief and relaxation (Seregina, 2014). Drawing these intricate characters requires mindful focus on details such as textures, shapes, and colors. This process encourages students to be present in the moment and engaged in the act of creation. Fantasy art also provides a non-restrictive and nonjudgmental space where students can express their creativity without worrying about conventional standards. This freedom can promote a sense of acceptance and self-compassion.

Exploring the Taboo

Several participants chose to portray subjects that tend to be considered inappropriate in traditional academic contexts. Subjects categorized within this topic include violence, frightening images, and bathroom-related images. Figure 13 contains a sampling of such drawings from six students across three classrooms. The first of these images is a self-referential example of this topic, a black box labeled “*sencored*” (censored) covering the upper half of an expressive face. Other drawings depict violent scenes, with deliberately placed areas of red that resemble blood, as well as weapons, severed heads, and sharp objects. The seventh example is an eerie drawing of Slender Man, a fictional horror character from an Internet meme. Two of the images include a pair of underwear, an item adjacent to the “potty humor” typically discouraged in academic settings. Students were not reprimanded for creating these kinds of drawings. Still, any drawings considered inappropriate by the adults in the research team were excluded from being projected on the communal screens.

Figure 13: Taboo Topics



There are several potential benefits to students experimenting with taboo topics during L.A.U.G.H. time. The opportunity for free expression provides participants with a space for processing subjects about which others may discourage communication. This allows them to communicate their thoughts and emotions around these subjects visually. The absence of punitive consequences in the context of L.A.U.G.H. also provides participants with a safe space for testing boundaries against societal norms. Drawings falling within the category of taboo topics were absent from the student surveys, which included adult-created prompts.

Teacher Interpretations of Independent Expression

When asked about her observations of students' responses to L.A.U.G.H., Amy reflected on the intervention's potential to disrupt structured school routines: "Particularly [in] school settings, where everything is so scheduled and so organized, there's such a pressure to make sure that we're

serving these students and we're making them prepare for the tests and making sure that they're reaching their reading and math goals, that there is this loss of play and unstructured time, which is so, so important to their development.”

L.A.U.G.H. held educational value to this teacher in providing unstructured moments beneficial to child development. She continues to share: “I think some students just really hadn't had that time and that feeling of ‘what to draw.’ But that's also really healthy to have that time. I'm like, ‘Okay, you don't have to draw something’ one time a day, ‘you don't have to do it if you don't want to.’ So, I think that was challenging for a few students but in a good way.” Within L.A.U.G.H., students were given a task, but there was no pressure to engage, offering students a rare opportunity to refuse a school-based task without adverse consequences.

Amy acknowledged that some students had difficulties accepting this degree of creative freedom, speculating that they were not used to having this kind of autonomy. Madison observed that L.A.U.G.H. time “creates a calmer environment and a better culture in the classroom. We’re not hyper-rushed and focused on learning.” Compared to academic periods, the time students spent engaged in this arts-based intervention moved slower and placed fewer cognitive demands on students. Open-ended drawing offered students opportunities to engage in self-directed activity and develop their creativity.

Navigating Independence and Interdependence

L.A.U.G.H. also functioned as a tool to support students in independent social-emotional skill-building and fostering a sense of community independence. In terms of independent skills, students explored aspects of their identities and used creative expression to share about themselves. The incorporation of mindfulness practices supported students in developing emotional regulation skills. In terms of interdependence, common topics across students’ free drawings suggest the work of their peers may have inspired the participants. Depicting cultural symbols like flags may indicate participants’

interest in their peers' cultural backgrounds. The teachers' input related to this theme indicated L.A.U.G.H.'s use as a tool for emotional and behavioral management. Teachers reported students benefitted from having a calm transitional activity built into their routines. They also noted that L.A.U.G.H. encouraged students to connect in a positive, supportive way. Within the participants' drawings, the value of interdependence was often reflected in students' depictions of their communities.

Student Perspectives of Community

The analysis of student drawings produced several categories falling within the theme of *independence and interdependence*. Some drawings depict students' perspectives of their communities, including scenes from their school and home environments. Within the school context, students chose to depict mindfulness practices, experiences in academic subjects, and mentions of peers. Within home contexts, many students shared experiences with family, such as holidays and cultural symbols. Several students also expressed their identities by creating drawings related to their interests. Another phenomenon observed within this theme was the adoption and repeated use of specific motifs across classrooms. Altogether, three subthemes were identified that showcased several levels of community: school, home, and within the intervention itself.

Scenes of School

Drawings categorized as scenes of school included some reference to a school-based item, person, or activity. These drawings typically fell into one of three subcategories: mindfulness, academic activities, and inclusion of peers. Several participants' drawings included mindfulness-related imagery, including activities incorporated into L.A.U.G.H. Examples of this subcategory are shared in Figure 14, which contains work from six students across three classrooms. Two images are of *Ambi*, the cartoon ant from the L.A.U.G.H. app that led users through breathing exercises. Five pictures contain a distinctive quadrant of four colors characteristic of the Mood Meter used in the app and the

participants' school community. A note from S., a Black male third grader, is also included here, as the app regularly prompted students to reflect on and rate their sense of belongingness at school. It reads, “I [heart] [school name] for its kindness, love and health.”

Figure 14: Mindfulness and L.A.U.G.H. Activities



Several students represented their school experiences in academic subjects. Figure 15 contains samples of such drawings from seven students across three classrooms. Subjects represented include math, reading, and science. The drawings in the first row were all created by Z., a Black female third grader who consistently included school-related themes in her work. The first is an array of three items: a smiling face within a rectangular archway with the words “Time to learn!” a pencil, and a spiral-bound math notebook. The second is more abstract; the canvas is divided into colored sections with one multiplication problem in each. The third paints a scene of the classroom, including a row of desks, more multiplication problems, and the phrase, “I know [you’re] talking get to work.” The first

drawing in the second row similarly includes an example of language associated with the school environment, including the words “Do your best work” and images of a pencil and a reading assignment. It resembles the first picture in the third row, created by a different student in the same class, which is composed similarly but features a math assignment instead.

Other drawings in the figure convey excitement about school. One presents a dynamic scene involving chemistry, with a solution being poured into a flask with a “poof” sound effect while a smiling figure looks on. Another expresses enthusiasm verbally by exclaiming, “School rocks,” while the last example is a series of multiplication problems with four- and five-digit products, signed off with an exclamation point. Overall, the drawings in this figure convey aspects of students’ internalized experiences in school – through representing their knowledge, focusing on a particular academic interest, or writing out words and phrases associated with the classroom context.

Figure 15: Academic Activities



Another way that participants represented their school community was through the inclusion of peers in some form. Figure 16 shows examples of ways participants included their peers in their art, with drawings from six students across all four classrooms. Three of the examples are addressed “To [peer name].” The first two were created by the same student, J., a Black female second grader, for two separate peers. Four of the drawings depict the participant playing with one or more peers. These drawings often included the names of students as labels. The bottom left picture is a game of tic tac toe played between two participants. In drawings such as this one, peers collaborated to create the image, focusing not on the aesthetic of the final product but on their interactions as they engaged in a shared activity.

Figure 16: Ways of Including Peers



Scenes of Home

Along with creating art to represent their school communities, many participants' art reflected aspects of their personal and home lives. In exploring these themes, students had opportunities to share facets of their identities outside of school with their peers, as well as show appreciation for their peers' identities. Some patterns in subject matter identified within this category include flags from students' cultures, holiday scenes, family environments, and individual interests.

Figure 17 is a sampling of drawings from eight students in three classrooms. The drawings in this set all depict flags of numerous countries: Japan, Mexico, Germany, Jamaica, the United States, and Ethiopia. The images in the first row were all done by the same student, O., a Mexican American male third-grader who took a particular interest in depicting flags. Along with drawing flags that represented his background, Mexico and the United States (not pictured), O. drew flags from several additional countries. The two drawings of Jamaican flags are another example of students representing their cultural background, both drawn by the same Black Caribbean-identifying male third grader.

Similarly, the two sample drawings of the U.S. flag came from two African American-identifying male students. Several students chose to draw the Ethiopian flag, represented in four of the eleven images in the figure. Three flags were drawn by Ethiopian, Amharic-speaking male third graders, while one was drawn by a female, African American peer. One participant further embellished his flag with Amharic script.

Figure 17: Flags as Cultural Symbols



Drawing flags served as a means for students to express cultural pride and appreciation. Participants were able to share their connection to cultural, historical, and symbolic elements associated with a flag. Producing art within this theme also allowed students to visually identify with a cultural identity and communicate a sense of belonging to a particular group. Students who drew flags from countries they did not identify with demonstrated an appreciation of the diversity of cultures in their school community.

Many students shared aspects of their cultural identities through the depiction of holidays. Figure 18 has several examples of such drawings from nine students across all four classrooms. The holiday most frequently depicted was Christmas, followed by Halloween and Easter. Drawings of

holidays can be seen as cultural symbols as they can reflect the values, traditions, and significance associated with a particular culture's celebration. Many students' drawings reflected activities commonly associated with a specific holiday, such as a decorated Christmas tree and presents, colored Easter eggs, and Halloween candy and Jack-o-Lanterns. As similar symbols can be identified across drawings, works in this category reflect the commonalities between students who celebrate the same holidays, presenting an opportunity for connection over shared experiences.

Figure 18: Holidays as Cultural Symbols



Another common topic identified within this category was the representations of home-based activities. Figure 19's examples within this category include drawings from six students across all four classrooms. The first and second examples are both solitary scenes of the participant appearing comfortable at home, with particular attention paid to details in their surroundings. The following two images focus on the structure of the home itself rather than individuals, while the fifth and sixth images

focus on family members. The fifth image exclaims, “My grampa comes today. Grampa!!!” The artist, who also created one of the Ethiopian flags mentioned above, included the flag's colors in his drawing. The sixth, labeled “Mom and Me,” connects to the previous theme of holidays and depicts a scene with an Easter basket. The last row of drawings, created by one third-grade student, is a series of scenes involving family members, including Christmas scenes and a hiking trip.

Figure 19: Family Environments



Lastly, some participants chose to share their outside-of-school selves through their interests. Such drawings are included in Figure 20, a selection of drawings from eight students in three classrooms. Many of the drawings within this category are action-based and depict the individual participating in an activity, such as a sport or the arts. Others featured a significant item related to their interest, including a wrestling belt, musical script, and painted crafts. Compared to the previous examples within the theme of *community*, these examples emphasize the individual more. At the same

time, works within this category also hold the potential to foster social connection by inviting the attention of peers who share a particular interest.

Figure 20: Individual Identity

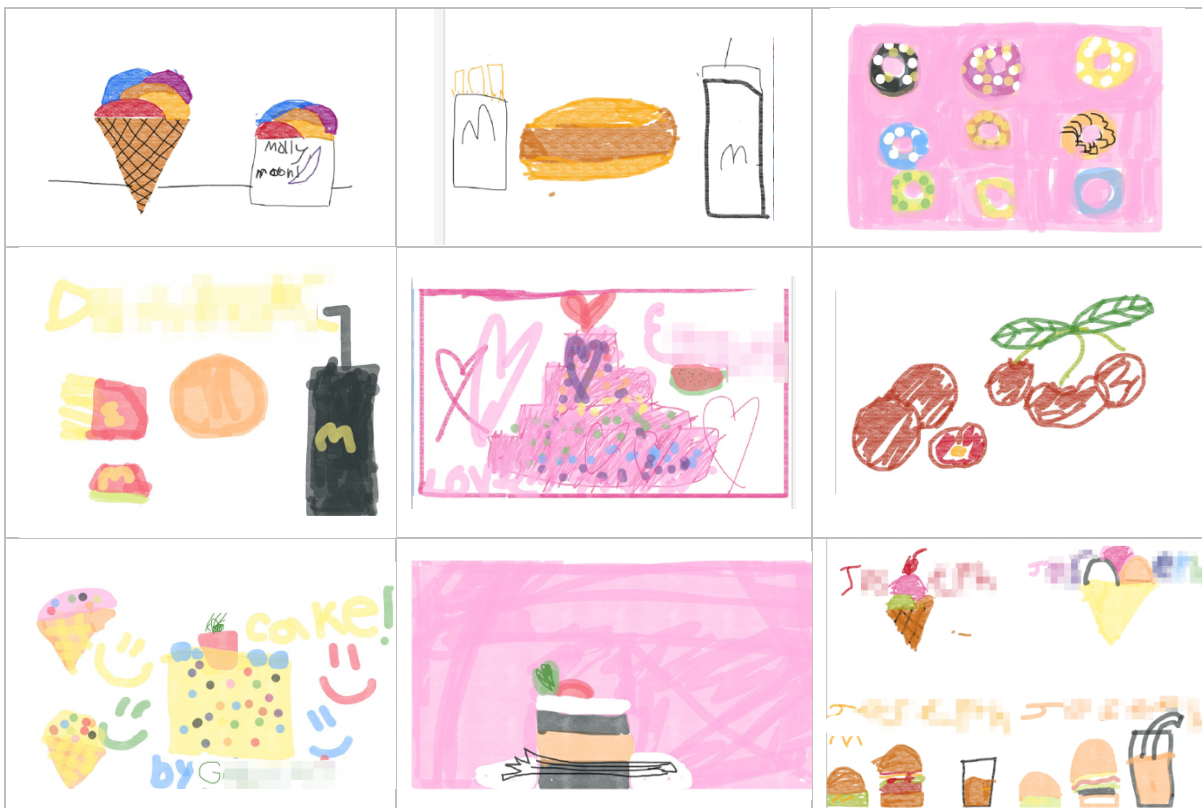


Shared Themes

Several recurring subjects emerged that were not based on the L.A.U.G.H. app's model drawings. These subjects were present across students and classrooms, and many shared similar details that indicated the influence of the participants on one another's work. Three of the most common shared themes were food (Figure 21), hearts (Figure 22), and rainbows (Figure 23). The prominence of these themes reflects the development of a common visual "language" that became heavily utilized during L.A.U.G.H. time. Overall, the subjects in this category carry strong positive associations and meanings and indicate the participants' influence on one another through their shared art.

The images in Figure 21 are examples of works that featured food as a central theme. Some drawings, such as the first one, referenced local food establishments, while others depicted more widely known brands, most notably McDonald's. Many students depicted enjoyable, sweet foods such as desserts and fruit. Food as a shared theme can hold significance for several reasons. Food can reflect students' cultural norms and personal experiences by referencing foods from their local community and foods associated with special events such as birthdays and weddings. Further, food is a universal experience that everyone can relate to. People from various backgrounds can find common ground in the shared experience of eating, making food an accessible theme.

Figure 21: Food



Two other shared themes commonly seen in student works across classrooms were hearts and rainbows. Figure 22 is a sampling of drawings featuring hearts created by nine students from all four classrooms. Three of these students were third graders, while six were second graders. Examples of

drawings of rainbows are presented in Figure 23. These drawings were created by six second graders and three third graders from all participating classrooms. Like food, these symbols hold widespread appeal, often associated with positive and emotionally resonant meanings. Hearts are commonly associated with love, friendship, and positive emotions, particularly in Western cultures (Yalom, 2018), while rainbows are often linked to joy, diversity, and optimism (Lee & Fraser, 2001). The prevalence of these symbols suggests an innate understanding of these positive associations.

The context of mindfulness may have encouraged such themes by conjuring positive emotions in participants, which could then be expressed through drawing. Further, the presence of these themes suggests the influence of peers and the environment on participants. Because drawings were projected, students could observe their peers experimenting with such themes and see their peers receive positive feedback and attention for their work. In observing such an interaction, students may feel inclined to incorporate these symbols into their drawings.

Figure 22: Hearts



Figure 23: Rainbows



Teacher Interpretations of Independence and Interdependence

Teacher responses included themes around both independence and interdependence. Regarding independence, teachers described the potential for L.A.U.G.H. to support students in independently controlling their behavior and making choices that are conducive to their learning. Some responses positioned mindfulness as a gentler means of managing student behavior. The theoretical framework of this study speculates that the L.A.U.G.H. intervention's design might lend itself to disrupting traditional classroom hierarchies. However, it seemed that teachers saw the intervention not as disrupting the hierarchy but as a means of maintaining it peacefully. Interview data described the punitive measures typically used in the school environment, particularly outside the classroom. Amy discussed the behavior dysregulation that she believed arose from the disciplinary techniques used during lunch time: "Students would come in, refuse to do work, refuse to sit at their seat, really would

not want to be there. And so by not wanting to sit down, not wanting to pick up the pencil or follow directions or come to the carpet [...], especially after lunch, the lunch room was a very chaotic place. There was a lot of yelling in the lunchroom. There was a lot of “you're not allowed to talk” or a lot of punishment.” When students returned to the classroom emotionally elevated, this teacher would implement mindfulness-based and arts-based activities, such as the Mood Meter, journaling, and free drawing, to get students “ready to focus and learn.”

Teachers’ perception of mindfulness as a behavior management tool is also reflected in critiques of L.A.U.G.H. One survey respondent said they would have liked to see “more instruction on mindful drawing at the beginning. Some students spend their L.A.U.G.H. time playing tic tac toe or writing messages to each other.” While some teachers appreciated L.A.U.G.H.’s unstructured format, this respondent would have preferred a more explicit instructional component to keep students on-task rather than engaged in unstructured social exchanges. This teacher’s perspective reflects an individualistic perception of mindfulness, where each student is ideally practicing mindfulness independently while in proximity with their classmates. By contrast, the theoretical framework of this study hypothesizes that wellness can be co-constructed through social connection and that social support is crucial in developing psychological wellness.

Teacher responses reflected these themes of interdependence as well. Teachers expressed that L.A.U.G.H. positively impacted community building and social connection in their classrooms. The intervention provided students with a setting where they were encouraged to share their creative work with one another. By seeing peers’ drawings on the display screens, students could express appreciation for one another’s work. Madison noted, “I would see them peek over and look at each other’s art, and looking on the screen, and when they would notice it was their own, I think it would build some community of encouragements or complements. “I really like what you did,” or that sort of thing.”

Some teachers also observed students expressing interest in collaborative work during L.A.U.G.H. time. One survey respondent shared, “I’ve also noticed a lot of students wanting to show other students their work or draw with a partner.” Typically, students are given unstructured time to socialize during non-academic activities such as lunch and recess. However, teachers reported that these times were often chaotic and triggered emotional dysregulation. Amy observed that “coming back from the lunchroom was always really upsetting. Kids shouting out or saying inappropriate things. Occasionally throwing things.” L.A.U.G.H. time provided a unique opportunity for students to interact in a safe and calm context, facilitating more prosocial and collaborative interactions.

Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice

Some teacher responses focused on the usefulness of L.A.U.G.H. as a routine. A teacher survey response noted, “Our mornings run much smoother on L.A.U.G.H. time. The students respond well to the structured routine and are more engaged than on other days. They also act calmer on those days as a result of L.A.U.G.H. time.” A different respondent made a similar observation: “I definitely think L.A.U.G.H. time is a great routine for the morning. It is reliable, and students miss it when it does not happen... On the other days, students aren’t as sure what they are going to be doing, which can add stress to their morning. L.A.U.G.H. time also provides a buffer for students who are late. This makes their start to the day less stressful as well because they know they already know what to do when they arrive.” Although the drawing activity had little structure, teachers expressed that having a familiar activity to start the day with was relaxing and enjoyable for the students. Keeping L.A.U.G.H. at a consistent time in the morning decreased stress for some students, such as those who came in late. The teacher participants appeared to find value in both structured and unstructured aspects of L.A.U.G.H. all at once. Students benefitted from opportunities to engage in unstructured artistic activities in which they did not have to follow specific directions or even participate. At the same time, implementing

L.A.U.G.H. as a part of daily classroom routines also had observed benefits, as students could start the day with a familiar activity.

Emotional Expression and Regulation

Both students and teachers were asked for feedback regarding the mindfulness skills practiced in L.A.U.G.H., intended to reduce emotional distress and improve self-regulation. In the student surveys, participants were prompted about their feelings related to specific components of the intervention –free drawing, deep breathing practice, and drawing projections. Participants could respond in the form of words and drawings and were given three prompts: “When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel _____,” “When I breathe with Ambi, I feel _____,” and “When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel _____.” Teachers also provided insights into the effectiveness of mindfulness practices within L.A.U.G.H., shedding light on subthemes that included depiction of emotions, student perceptions of ineffective mindfulness practices, cultivating pride in self, and teacher interpretations of emotional expression and regulation.

Depiction of Emotions

Through the surveys, participants expressed their emotions in varied ways. Through facial expressions, verbal descriptions, and environmental depictions, students provided insightful glimpses into their emotional experiences while engaging in specific aspects of the L.A.U.G.H. interventions. With prompts provided, the drawings produced in the surveys were more likely to represent emotions in concrete, descriptive ways.

Figure 24 includes a sample of drawings where participants represented their emotional experiences primarily using facial expressions. In these drawings, a single emotion word, often “happy” or “calm,” was usually noted in the written response, accompanied by a face reflecting the emotion word. While each art style is unique, representations of the same emotion word included similar features. “Happy” faces tended to have broad, upturned smiles and large eyes, while “calm” faces were

more subdued, with neutral or softly smiling mouths. Drawings in this category were more individual-focused, depicting a singular figure without additional background context.

Figure 24: Facial Expressions



Other participants represented their emotional experiences by sharing meaningful symbols and experiences. Figure 25 is a sampling of works falling within this theme. Like the previous group, these students tended to use singular emotion words in their verbal responses. However, their drawn responses were presented in ways that included the environmental context of L.A.U.G.H. To depict

how seeing their drawings made them feel, these students drew themselves looking at the projection screen or images that reflect recurring themes from the free drawing exercises, including animals, nature, hearts, and pop culture. In their responses to how they felt breathing with Ambi, these participants often drew the Ambi character from the app, sometimes including details such as her beach ball and dialogue, or drew themselves engaging in deep breathing while looking at an iPad screen. Images representing how participants felt when drawing in the app were often depictions of the self or recreations of their free drawings. Unlike the previous theme of facial expressions, these representations of self were more likely to show the individual's whole body. Many of these pictures showed the individual engaged in some action related to free drawing, such as using their finger to draw or holding an iPad. Within this theme, students appeared to visually represent a named emotion with a depiction of something that elicited the feeling rather than a face that imitated the emotion.

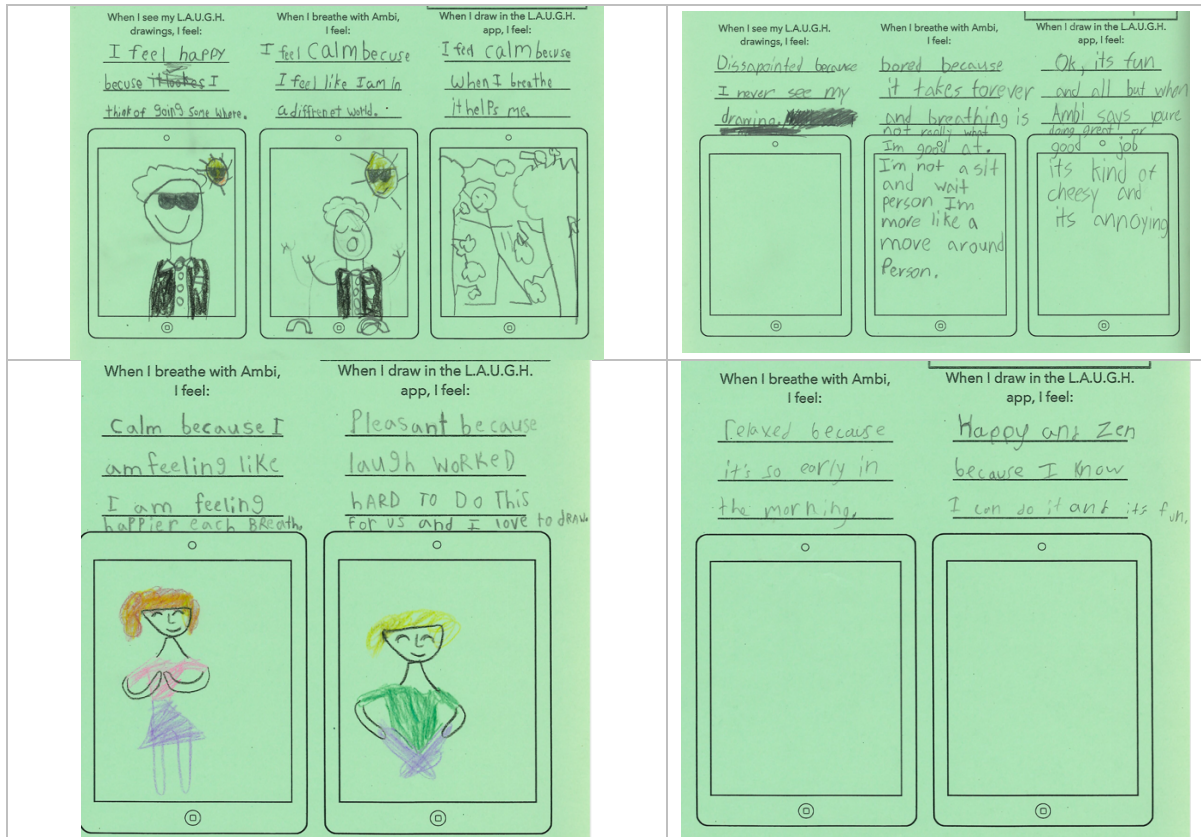
Figure 25: Environmental Contexts



The third method participants used to represent their emotional experiences was verbal description. Figure 26 contains a sample of four surveys that included a lengthier verbal response of one

or more sentences, all created by third-grade students in the same class. Two survey pages include drawings and written responses, while the others contain only verbal replies. Compared to the other three participating classrooms, surveys from this third-grade class tended to contain lengthier verbal responses overall.

Figure 26: Verbal Descriptions of Emotional Expression



The top left example in Figure 26 was created by an Ethiopian, Amharic-speaking male participant, who wrote the following responses: “When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel happy because I think of going somewhere,” “When I breathe with Ambi, I feel calm because I feel like I am in a different world,” and “When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel calm because when I breathe, it helps me.” The top right example, made by a White male participant, reads: “When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel disappointed because I never see my drawing,” “When I breathe with Ambi, I feel bored because it takes forever and breathing is not really

what I'm good at. I'm not a sit and wait person I'm more like a move around person," and *"When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel – OK, it's fun and all but when Ambi says you're doing great or good job it's kind of cheesy and it's annoying."* Responses in the bottom left example were made by a White female participant, who said: *"When I breathe with Ambi, I feel calm because I am feeling like I am feeling happier each breath"* and *"When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel pleasant because L.A.U.G.H. worked hard to do this for us and I love to draw."* Finally, the bottom right example, made by a female multiracial student, says, *"When I breathe with Ambi, I feel relaxed because it's so early in the morning"* and *"When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel happy and zen because I know I can do it and it's fun."*

Written responses such as these reveal various perspectives, some of which will be discussed in greater depth in the following sections of this chapter. These students put effort into describing the rationale for their feelings in written form, typically using conjunctions such as "because." These responses also reveal that, while participants used similar words to describe their emotions, such as "happy" and "calm," the reasons they named for these emotions differed. For example, one student reported L.A.U.G.H. made him think of being "in a different world," while another specified that deep breathing prompted feelings of calm.

Overall, the three ways of representing emotions discussed in this section – facial expressions, environmental contexts, and verbal descriptions – communicate different aspects of an emotion. In drawing facial expressions, participants depicted the outward appearance of the emotion itself. Through environmental contexts, students represented situations in which their emotions occurred. With verbal descriptions, participants elaborated on the reasons for their feelings.

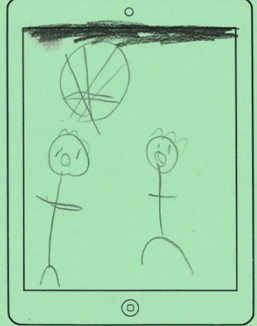
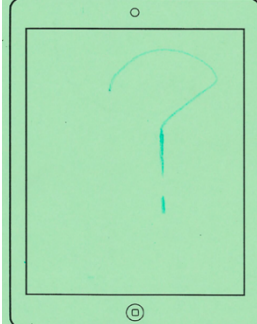
Student Perceptions of Ineffective Mindfulness Practices

A few responses indicated that a particular mindfulness practice embedded in L.A.U.G.H. may have been less effective for specific respondents. As one student in Figure 26 voiced, some participants had critical feedback regarding certain aspects of the L.A.U.G.H. intervention. This student felt

disappointed not to see his drawings projected, had difficulty sitting still for breathing exercises, and disliked the verbal feedback provided through the app. Overall, the most common critique of L.A.U.G.H. was a lack of interest in practicing deep breathing. Figure 27 contains feedback about the breathing exercises from eight students, five from a third-grade classroom and three from a second-grade classroom. Along with two of the responses from the student mentioned above, the following responses were written for the prompt, “When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:” *“happy and calm, sometimes bored;”* *“I feel bored because we have to wait to draw;”* *“bored because there is nothing to do;”* *“mad;”* *“bored;”* *“bored to the bones;”* and *“calm and bored.”*

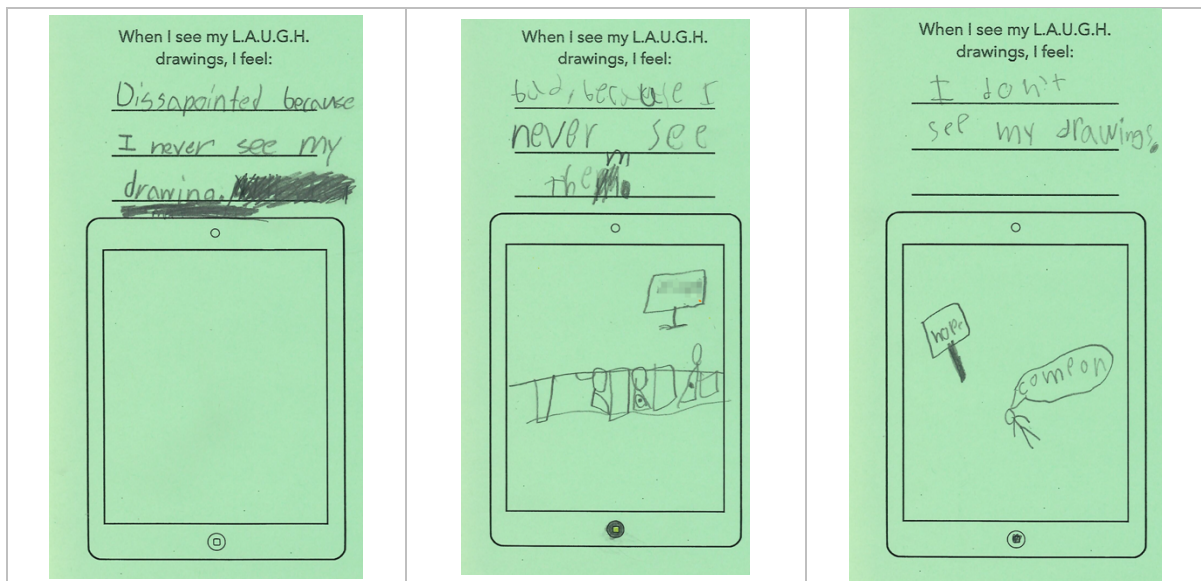
For most of these students, their criticism of this aspect of the intervention was that it prompted feelings of boredom. The first example of the figure provides a clear perspective on why the exercise might prompt boredom. This student identified himself as a “move around person” and found sitting still while engaged in deep breathing challenging. Students who shared this perspective often reported positive feelings about the free-drawing component of L.A.U.G.H., which was more hands-on and required active engagement from the participant. These responses indicate that seated, deep breathing may not have been effective for all students, and a more active mindfulness activity may be more appropriate.

Figure 27: Student Feedback for Breathing Exercises

<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>bored because it takes forever and breathing is not really what I'm good at.</p> <p>I'm not a sit and wait person I'm more like a move around person.</p> 	<p>When I draw in the L.A.U.G.H. app, I feel:</p> <p>Ok, its fun and all but when Ambi says you're doing great or good job its kind of cheesy and its annoying</p> 	<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>HAPPY AND CALM AND sometimes BORED</p> 
<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>I feel bored because we have to wait to draw.</p> 	<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>Bored because there is nothing to do.</p> 	<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>Mad</p> 
<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>Bored</p> 	<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>Bored to the Bones</p> 	<p>When I breathe with Ambi, I feel:</p> <p>calm and bored</p> 

Aside from a lack of interest in deep breathing, most survey responses reflected positive feelings towards L.A.U.G.H. Three third-grade students, however, were also unhappy with the drawing projection component of the intervention. Figure 28 contains responses from these students to the prompt, “When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel:” *“disappointed because I never see my drawing;”* *“bad, because I never see them;”* and *“I don’t see my drawings.”* This last response is accompanied by an individual looking at a screen that says, “Hope,” whose speech bubble reads, “Come on.” In all these responses, their dissatisfaction with this component of the intervention appears to be a sense of perceived exclusion, as the participants reported that they had not seen their drawings on the projection screens.

Figure 28: Student Feedback for Perceived Exclusion



Cultivating Pride in Self

Many students' responses indicated that L.A.U.G.H. fostered self-esteem and pride, especially through sharing their work through the projection screens. Figure 29 contains examples reflecting this theme from three second graders and six third graders from all four participating classrooms. Responses to “When I see my L.A.U.G.H. drawings, I feel:” include: *“happy and proud because when I look at it I say,*

‘That’s my work,’ *‘famous,’* *‘happy, scared, proud,’* *‘proud, happy,’* *‘excited because I can’t wait to hear the comments,’* *‘happy, famous, good,’* *‘proud because I put effort into my drawings. It’s good work,’* and *‘happy and proud of myself.’* Another example reports drawing in the L.A.U.G.H. makes them feel *“special.”*

It appears the method of sharing work through projection screens played a significant role in fostering participants’ self-esteem and pride. One student’s report of saying, “That’s my work,” reflects a sense of ownership and accomplishment, with the student taking pride in recognizing their contribution. Students’ use of the word “famous” suggests these participants felt a heightened sense of recognition or importance when their drawings were showcased. Another participant expressed seeing their drawings makes them “excited because I can’t wait to hear the comments.” The response indicates that the participant, not only values the act of creating their drawings, but also looks forward to receiving feedback. This suggests an eagerness to share their work and engage with others’ perspectives. Another student’s more nuanced response of “happy, scared, and proud” implies a blend of joy and pride, recognizing both the vulnerability and reward of having one’s work shared.

These responses reflect L.A.U.G.H.’s positive impact on participants’ emotional well-being and self-perception. Participants expressed happiness, pride, a sense of recognition, and acknowledgement of their efforts. In particular, the act of showing their drawings on projection screens instilled a sense of ownership and generated excitement and anticipation for feedback from peers. Overall, L.A.U.G.H. created a space for participants to foster their self-esteem and celebrate their contributions and those of their peers.

Figure 29: Building Emotional Resilience through Pride in Self



Teacher Interpretations of Emotional Expression and Regulation

Teachers found the L.A.U.G.H. intervention helpful for students who experienced challenges with emotion regulation in the classroom. They reported that students often would arrive at school emotionally dysregulated or become dysregulated after specific times of the day, such as lunch and recess. Amy reported, “There was a lot of turmoil at the school. I mean, kids would come in fairly triggered from home or from recess or from the lunchroom, and they’d come into the classroom triggered and not really ready to focus and learn.” Students’ reactions to emotional distress manifested in several ways, such as conflict with peers, fidgeting, or work refusal: “There were some peer-to-peer disagreements or conflicts. There were students who came in dysregulated - pacing back and forth, or fidgeting with their hands, refusing to do work, that sort of thing. And some defiance, I would say, as well.” Rather than interpret students’ emotional states, teachers named specific behaviors most salient and indicated potential emotional distress. Teachers notably identified conflict and noncompliance as indicators of emotional dysregulation.

Teachers also observed that students were often emotionally triggered by adult staff members. Amy recalled, “Kids crying, being upset about something that was happening, that’s kind of the way they had been treated out at recess or in the lunchroom, and some privilege had been taken away, or if they’ve been scolded for something, [they] come into the classroom dealing with that emotionally.” Indeed, while L.A.U.G.H. was a school-based intervention, it worked at odds with other aspects of the school environment, and following L.A.U.G.H. time in the morning, there was potential for students to become re-triggered later in the school day. There were reportedly some tensions in the community between home and school as well, particularly when racial differences were present between students, families, and staff: “There’s a lot of distrust between African American families, certain families, and White teachers, about whether their students are being understood and how they’re being treated. Especially the African American male students, whether they’re being disproportionately punished or

getting in trouble more often. There's a lot of tension around that, for sure." These tensions further complicated the overall climate of the school, and environmental factors impacted students' psychological wellness outside the scope of L.A.U.G.H.

When asked whether students utilized any coping strategies practiced during L.A.U.G.H., Amy noted the deep breathing exercises that students engaged in at the beginning of every L.A.U.G.H. session: "Part of the intervention was...deep breathing. And I think a lot of students were able to use that as a way to stay regulated throughout the school day." Madison also observed that L.A.U.G.H.'s free drawing component helped students to self-regulate. "Some students [come] in appearing to be anxious. They're overwhelmed, and... on the days that we had L.A.U.G.H., and they were prompted to draw, I saw them start to relax, and their body language, in general, seemed to rest a little bit, and just let go." Taken together, both the free drawing and deep breathing components of the app were observed to impact students' moods positively. Although access to the iPad app and free drawing component was limited to L.A.U.G.H. time, deep breathing was a strategy that was accessible and could be utilized throughout the day.

While teachers observed students appearing calmer during and after L.A.U.G.H., Amy expressed a wish that L.A.U.G.H. could be available at other times of the day. "Maybe it would have been helpful to have some sort of cooldown component like if students needed to take a break, they could have accessed it. So, some way to make a free choice or a free draw time after that, at another time in the day, might have been helpful. We only did it in the morning. Doing it after lunch, for example, could have been helpful, perhaps." This teacher specifically noted the potential benefit of L.A.U.G.H. if used during a time of the day when students became emotionally dysregulated, such as after lunch.

This first subtheme, emotional expression and regulation, described the ways in which L.A.U.G.H. promoted emotional development in its participants. By incorporating mindfulness

exercises from L.A.U.G.H. throughout the day, participants were able to generalize these practices into their daily routines. The following subtheme will examine another means by which mindfulness can be meaningfully incorporated into overall routines: through connection with nature.

Nature-Inspired Mindfulness

A unique and notable subtheme that emerged in students' work was nature, with these drawings featuring subjects such as outdoor landscapes and animals. Madison observed, "*I remember a lot of nature, a lot of trees and flowers and water... nature really stood out.*" The relationship between nature and mindfulness has been examined in recent research, with findings indicating a reciprocal relationship where mindfulness can enhance individuals' connection to nature (Nisbet et al., 2019) while natural environments can strengthen the effects of mindfulness interventions (Ma, 2022).

Madison speculated participants may have drawn inspiration from their view out the classroom window, "*Our school also had a window in my classroom that overlooked trees, and I think even the mountains you could see on a clear day.*" Several participants appeared to find inspiration from natural environments that were personally relevant or meaningful. Figure 30 contains images of such images from nine participants from all four classrooms. Many of these examples contain features commonly associated with the Pacific Northwest, the location of their school and where the study took place. These elements include mountains, rain, and native trees such as the Madrone. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, these elements were observed by Madison to be visible from the classroom window. One Ethiopian - identifying participant created a landscape that represented his home culture, including an Ethiopian flag and a giraffe eating from a tree. Overall, these images indicate the impact of the natural environment on participants' artistic expression. By drawing meaningful environmental contexts, participants could convey their personal and cultural identities. Further, many students drew inspiration from the environment outside their classroom window, encouraging mindful observation of their surroundings.

Figure 30: Culturally Relevant Outdoor Scenes

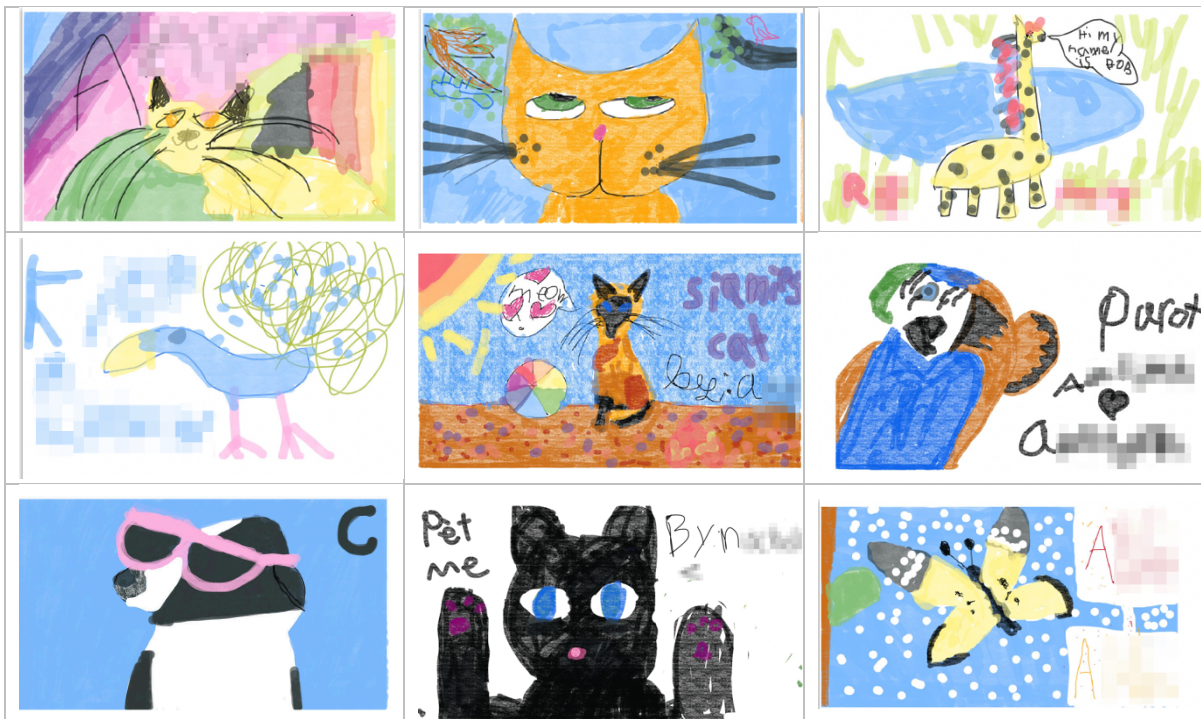


Animals

Animals, in particular, were often represented within the theme of nature. As discussed in the previous section, mindfulness has been found to foster a connection with individuals' natural surroundings. Animals present as symbols of nature's vitality and diversity. Animals can also serve as powerful symbols, allowing an accessible means for individuals to represent emotions, experiences, and individual interests. Previous literature has asserted that humans display an innate tendency to relate to other living things, especially animals (Born, 2018). Further, contact between children and animals has been found to support the development of social-emotional skills such as emotional regulation and empathy. Children regularly in contact with animals have also been shown to have reduced anxiety levels. (Prewal et al., 2017). Examples of mindfulness drawings featuring animals are shown in Figure 31. These drawings came from five second-graders and four third-graders from all participating

classrooms. It can be observed that the animals depicted were both pets and wild animals and that the pictures sometimes included playful details such as accessories and speech.

Figure 31: Animals Represented in Mindfulness Drawings



Throughout the previous sections of this chapter, it has been demonstrated that participating in arts-based mindfulness led to the emergence of common themes that reflected the development and expression of emotional awareness, cultural and individual identity, appreciation of others, and positive symbolic representation. These benefits can be maintained when teachers integrate the principles of L.A.U.G.H. into their regular teaching practice.

Generalization to Teaching Practice

Teachers were asked to reflect on the relationship between L.A.U.G.H. and their general teaching practices. Amy expressed that participating in L.A.U.G.H. helped to refine her own SEL practices: “[L.A.U.G.H.] was kind of similar to something I was trying to do, which was have students come in and journal using the Mood Meter and using RULER... they would plot where they were on

the Mood Meter... and then they would draw why they were there. And they would write a little explanation... And so, when L.A.U.G.H. was introduced to us, I thought, oh, great, this is just an online way of doing that with the twist of having TV and more of a focus on the art process. And kids didn't have to draw something that had to do with how they were feeling. It was a lot more creative in that way." A survey respondent also incorporated journaling, drawing, mindfulness, and Mood Meter ratings into her SEL practices: "Students in my class had a journal where they would draw a picture relating to how they were feeling and write a few sentences after placing themselves on a mood meter. We also used to start our day with a mindfulness activity. I feel like L.A.U.G.H. combines these activities." This teacher utilized aspects of mindfulness in her teaching but observed through L.A.U.G.H. how multiple practices could be combined into a single activity.

Teachers also noted the ways that L.A.U.G.H. connected to school-wide SEL practices: "The Mood Meter was a school-wide thing that we'd see, and it was posted, so I could see them using that language, like 'I'm in the red' or 'I'm in the blue.'" By incorporating the Mood Meter into the intervention, students could make connections between practices they were familiar with pre-intervention and continue to utilize aspects of L.A.U.G.H. post-intervention. Madison encouraged students to use the coping techniques practiced in L.A.U.G.H. during other parts of the day, using classroom structures and norms that were already in place: "We had a calm down corner in the classroom where they could practice [deep breathing] if they were feeling like they needed it." Teachers identified connections between L.A.U.G.H. and existing practices. They found ways to continue supporting the development of students' mindfulness without a designated time of the day to focus on L.A.U.G.H.

Madison reflected on how L.A.U.G.H. has continued to impact their teaching practices: "I think [L.A.U.G.H.] taught me the importance of a soft start in the morning, and something I carried on with me to this day, that I don't rush into instruction. I really value a simple morning. They'll work,

and I let them settle in and chat with each other so that they're in the space to move forward with the day... I don't do SEL work every day, but when I do, it's right in the morning. So [L.A.U.G.H.] definitely influenced me to prioritize that from the start. And I feel like I get more of the student when we're having a conversation in the morning." This teacher interviewee continued to prefer focusing on morning mindfulness to facilitate the transition from home to school and for students to begin the day feeling calm and supported.

Along with personal teaching practices, Madison also combines techniques from L.A.U.G.H. with programs provided by her school district: "Our district subscribes to the curriculum for PurposeFull People. It's a character trait curriculum. Every month we have a new focus on a word, and there are these great songs, and prompts to get students to talk, and a lot of built-in connection games. So, it helps build community in the classroom, and it has structures for community circles. And then, we use feelings journals. So that's something I brought from L.A.U.G.H. There's a place for them to draw a picture and write how they're feeling and explain why, if they want to. And I typically would use that for morning work, and sometimes after recess when they're feeling high energy and need to settle back in." The teacher was able to integrate mindfulness into her teaching in a more comprehensive manner using the district's curriculum. She continued to dedicate time for mindfulness in the morning and other parts of the day, particularly following transitions back to the classroom.

Conclusions

This chapter contains the results of the analysis, connects the analysis back to the research questions, and links the analysis to previous research and theory. In this qualitative study, 84 second and third-grade participants engaged in an arts-based mindfulness intervention, producing free drawings and surveys included in this analysis. Further, surveys from four participating teachers and follow-up interviews with two of these teachers were analyzed. This analysis explored themes that emerged from participants' free drawings, participants' reported experiences and reactions to participating in the

L.A.U.G.H. intervention, and teachers' interpretations of the process and outcome of the intervention.

The analysis of themes derived from the measures used in this study yielded three overarching categories: 1) free choice and open expression, 2) navigating independence and interdependence, and 3) adopting mindfulness as a routine practice. Each broad theme encompassed several subthemes. Within "free choice and open expression," subthemes identified included the transition from imitation to creative risk-taking, exploration of the non-representational, and transcending academic norms, with further divisions into topics like pop culture, fantasy, and exploring the taboo. "Navigating independence and interdependence" introduced the subtheme of "student perspectives of community," encompassing representations of students' home and school lives and artistic themes that emerged within the community of students participating in L.A.U.G.H. The final overarching theme, "adopting mindfulness as a routine practice," unfolded subthemes such as emotional distress and regulation, nature-inspired mindfulness, and generalization to teaching practice. Within this theme, participants regularly participating in mindfulness depicted their emotions in visual and written form and expressed pride in themselves for their work. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the critical analysis and discussion of the three themes identified in the findings as they relate to the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative critical inquiry study aimed to identify themes and patterns that emerged as students engaged in an arts-based mindfulness intervention and to explore teacher and student participants' experiences throughout the intervention. This chapter examines prominent findings related to the literature on mindfulness, school-based social-emotional learning, culturally inclusive wellness practices, and arts-based therapeutic interventions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations, areas for future research, and a summary of this study.

In the following chapter, the study findings will be interpreted through the context of the three research questions. The first research question asks, "What themes were observed in participants' art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?" The themes and thematic changes identified included increased creative risk-taking and autonomy, exploration of non-representational forms, challenging academic norms, representation of personal identities and shared themes, and connection with nature.

The second research question asks, "How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?" Findings related to this question highlighted the role mindfulness plays in developing emotional awareness. Participants identified positive effects L.A.U.G.H. had on their self-esteem and social engagement and reported challenges and frustrations, such as difficulties in sitting still for deep breathing exercises and wanting more visibility of their artwork.

The third research question asks, "What are teachers' impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?" Teacher data discussed the nuances in their roles of finding the balance between structure and freedom and promoting both independence and interdependence. Additionally, teachers' discussions on L.A.U.G.H.'s role in supporting emotional regulation underscore the intervention's efficacy in addressing students' emotional needs. Their reflections on the influence of

L.A.U.G.H. on their overall teaching practices demonstrate the broader implications of L.A.U.G.H. on their pedagogy and social-emotional learning integration.

Altogether, the diverse range of subthemes and categories provide insights into the multifaceted aspects of participants' experiences and perspectives as they engaged in L.A.U.G.H. The following section will interpret the research findings within the context of the three research questions posed, offering deeper insights into the themes that emerged in participants' artwork, their experiences with arts-based mindfulness, and the impressions of teachers regarding the intervention's impact. This exploration aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the integration of mindfulness practices in educational settings and their potential for fostering holistic well-being for diverse groups of students.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings expand on previous research on psychological wellness interventions and mindfulness practices. Cowen (1991) identified four concepts associated with promoting wellness: competence, resilience, social system modification, and empowerment. Competence is defined as "doing well the things that a person's givens and life role suggest that she or he should be doing" (p. 406). By allowing students autonomy through open-ended artistic activities without specific guidelines or evaluative criteria, all students were set up to succeed at the intervention. Resilience, the ability to cope with stressful life events, was promoted through students' ability to use the strategies introduced in L.A.U.G.H. to cope with emotional dysregulation. Cowen also describes the importance of social institutions in promoting psychological wellness. Study findings indicate that L.A.U.G.H. supported the development of a more positive and supportive classroom environment. Finally, empowerment, a sense of control over one's life, can be observed in L.A.U.G.H.'s potential to reduce school staff intervening to control student behavior, instead providing students with opportunities to regulate more independently.

The analysis's three overarching themes reflect L.A.U.G.H.'s impact on fostering psychological wellness, mindfulness, and community among participants. The positive influence of L.A.U.G.H. could be observed in students' artwork, students' surveys, and teachers' reports. Each theme as it relates to the research questions is described in detail in the following sections.

RQ 1: What themes were observed in participants' art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time?

Several themes emerged over time in the artwork produced in the context of L.A.U.G.H. These subjects included increased creative risk-taking over the year, exploration of non-representational and abstract drawings, and depictions of topics traditionally discouraged in academic contexts. Student works also included representation of student identities in multiple forms, including depictions of their home and school experiences, cultural symbols, and individual interests. Frequent recurrences of subjects across participants and classrooms indicated the emergence of a shared artistic "language" where participants were influenced by the work of their peers. Many participants gravitated toward nature as a theme, with many preferring to draw animals.

Increased Risk-Taking and Autonomy

Some students demonstrated significant thematic changes in the content and elements of their artistic expression throughout the school year. Initially, the presence of a beach ball in drawings indicated reliance on model pictures from the L.A.U.G.H. app, which can be related to a teacher's statement describing the initial discomfort and uncertainty some students experienced while engaging in unstructured drawing. However, as students were continually provided with opportunities for unstructured drawing, the beach ball image faded, indicating the development of creative risk-taking over time. This development is consistent with the argument that artistic practices enable the formation of critical thinking, autonomy, sensitivity, tolerance, and creativity (Menescardi & Bernabé, 2022).

Additionally, the observed changes in students' artistic expression can be associated with the need for educators to create an environment that allows students the space and autonomy to take risks (Choi et al., 2018).

Exploration of Non-Representational Forms

Some participants used L.A.U.G.H. to experiment with non-representational forms, shapes, colors, and lines as a means of self-expression. This type of artistic expression supports psychological wellness in several ways. Abstract drawing has been shown to be associated with stress reduction. (Weintraub, 2020, Martin et al., 2018). Abstract drawing also holds potential as a means of expressing complex emotions that are difficult to put into words (Rose, 1991). Abstract drawing lends itself to mindfulness, encouraging creators to focus on the present moment rather than a specific end product (Zabelina et al., 2020). Creating abstract art can also support psychological wellness by boosting self-esteem and confidence. There are no rules in abstract drawing, so there is no right or wrong way to do it. This can be incredibly empowering for individuals who may feel self-conscious about their artistic abilities (Nicholls, 2014).

Challenging Academic Norms and Free Choice

The study identified that many drawings fell outside of academically normative subject matter, including pop culture, fantasy characters, and taboo topics. The ability of students to exercise free choice in art-making has been linked to the development of self-determination in students with diverse learning needs (Hoover, 2018). Including traditionally off-limits topics in academic settings can also be conceptualized as a political act. Ayers and Ayers (2011) discuss how mainstream values and beliefs inform what is considered taboo. Creating space for students to explore non-academic and taboo subjects promotes a more democratic classroom environment where students' ideas are not censored by an authoritative standard of what is acceptable and what should be avoided.

Representation of Personal Identities and Shared Themes

Many students participating in L.A.U.G.H. chose to represent scenes of their homes, their school, and aspects of their identities. Engagement with art has been found to evoke personal emotions and experience (Leder et al., 2012), and representational art, in particular, is more likely to provoke a shared positive emotional response in viewers, making it suitable for expressing personal experiences and identities (Schepman & Rodway, 2021). The representation of scenes and subjects with personal meaning invites viewers to appreciate and relate to the creator of the drawing. Sharing of individual identities can contribute to the development of a collective identity, which can lead to increased social support and emotional engagement. These benefits have been found in diverse populations, including English language learners (Al-Amri, 2020) and individuals with autism (Cooper et al., 2017).

The collective identity of the L.A.U.G.H. participants was evident in the emergence of common themes, such as food, hearts, and rainbows, frequently used in students' works from all participating classrooms. These shared themes indicate the development of a common visual "language" where participants were influenced by one another's work. The prevalence of food-themed drawings aligns with the notion that food can be seen as a reflection of culture and an art form in itself (Neely, 2007). Referencing local food establishments and well-known brands suggests a blend of personal and environmental influences in students' artistic choices, and the universality of the theme of food resonates with literature emphasizing the accessibility of certain artistic themes across diverse backgrounds (Duncum, 2006). Some of the common symbols present in the drawings hold positive connotations, with hearts associated with love, friendship, and positive emotions (Yalom, 2018) and rainbows with joy, diversity, and optimism (Lee & Fraser, 2001). The prevalence of these symbols in students' artwork suggests an innate understanding of these positive connotations and support the idea that certain symbols can carry widespread emotional resonance (Dissanayake, 1995). The commonalities between drawings utilizing these shared themes aligns with research emphasizing the

role of social interactions and observational learning in shaping artistic preferences and styles (Hetland et al., 2007).

Connection with Nature

Finally, many participants created art that featured themes from nature. The connection between nature and mindfulness has been a subject of interest in recent research. Several studies have highlighted the relationship between mindfulness and nature connectedness, indicating that mindfulness can enhance individuals' connectedness to nature (Nisbet et al., 2019; Sadowski et al., 2020).

Similarly, nature-inspired art has been linked to positive emotional experiences and aesthetic pleasure, contributing to psychological well-being (Mastandrea et al., 2019). Animals were a prevalent subject represented within this category. Research has shown that animals are often perceived as symbols of specific traits or emotions, and their depiction in art can serve as a form of symbolic expression and emotional representation (Yli-Panula et al., 2022). Furthermore, animals are commonly associated with specific qualities and characteristics, and their representation in art can evoke emotional responses and facilitate self-expression, aligning with the principles of mindfulness and emotional awareness (Carsley & Heath, 2018).

Conclusion

In summary, the L.A.U.G.H. intervention revealed a dynamic evolution of themes in participants' artwork, reflecting a journey towards enhanced psychological wellness. Throughout the intervention, students demonstrated a remarkable increase in creative risk-taking, evident in their exploration of various subjects, both representational and abstract. For some students, their initial reliance on model pictures gradually gave way to a more autonomous and innovative approach, highlighting the transformative impact of unstructured drawing on students' artistic expression. This evolution aligns with the argument that artistic practices foster critical thinking, autonomy, and creativity, supporting the development of aspects crucial for psychological well-being. Participants'

experimentation with non-representational forms reflects the therapeutic benefits of abstract drawing, such as stress reduction, expression of complex emotions, and mindfulness. Including traditionally discouraged topics and exploring personal identities underscored the importance of free choice in artmaking, challenging academic norms, and promoting a more democratic classroom environment.

Moreover, depicting scenes from home, school, and individual identities, and the emergence of shared themes across classrooms and participants, contributed to emotional engagement and the development of a collective identity, fostering social support. Lastly, the prevalence of nature-themed art, mainly featuring animals, echoes the connection between mindfulness, nature connectedness, and positive emotional experiences explored in recent mindfulness literature. The overall thematic changes and developments observed over time highlight the transformative potential of open-ended art activities in promoting psychological wellness.

RQ 2: How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness?

Role of Mindfulness in Emotional Awareness

L.A.U.G.H. participants conveyed their emotional experiences engaging in the program through diverse means, offering rich insights into L.A.U.G.H.'s impact. Participants utilized various methods to represent their emotional experiences, such as facial expressions, environmental depictions, and verbal descriptions, reflecting the multifaceted nature of emotional engagement in mindfulness. The use of facial expressions to represent emotional states resonates with the role of mindfulness in emotion regulation and emotional well-being, as engaging in mindfulness can build emotional awareness (Hülshager et al., 2013). Additionally, the integration of environmental contexts and meaningful symbols in participants' responses aligns with the holistic approach of mindfulness interventions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of emotions and environmental stimuli (Alshirawi & Hajji, 2023). Furthermore, the verbal descriptions provided by participants offer insights into the

rationale behind their feelings, reflecting the cognitive and reflective aspects of mindfulness (Zenner et al., 2014). These findings underscore the comprehensive nature of emotional reflection in arts-based mindfulness, highlighting the interplay between emotional expression, environmental influences, and cognitive processes.

Positive Effects on Self-Esteem and Social Engagement

Several responses from student participants emphasized the feelings of pride that emerged in the intervention, highlighting the impact of mindfulness on self-esteem and emotional well-being. The participants' expressions of happiness, pride, and a sense of recognition from seeing their work displayed indicate the positive effects of mindfulness-based interventions on self-perception and emotional resilience (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The act of sharing their work through projection screens provided a platform for participants to cultivate a sense of ownership and accomplishment, reflecting the principles of mindfulness that emphasize self-awareness and self-acceptance (Crosswell et al., 2017). Additionally, the participants' anticipation of feedback and eagerness to engage with others' perspectives highlight the social and interpersonal dimensions of mindfulness, emphasizing its role in promoting social connectedness and empathy (Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018). Overall, these findings underscore the positive impact of L.A.U.G.H. on participants' emotional well-being, self-esteem, and social engagement, aligning with the existing literature on the multifaceted benefits of mindfulness.

Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

When student responses were examined for negative experiences with L.A.U.G.H., most of such examples were critical of the guided deep breathing component of the app. This feedback from participants underscores the importance of tailoring mindfulness to individual preferences and cultural backgrounds (Proulx et al., 2018). Students' difficulty sitting still for breathing exercises and the reported feelings of boredom during deep breathing highlight the need for mindfulness interventions to consider diverse learning styles and preferences. These findings also emphasize the critical role of active

and engaging mindfulness activities, such as the free-drawing component of L.A.U.G.H. In the research on culturally inclusive teaching practices, incorporating physical activity and kinesthetic learning has been shown to enhance engagement and learning outcomes for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bautista et al., 2023). Similarly, inclusive mindfulness practices incorporating movement-based activities, such as mindful movement, yoga, or Tai Chi, can provide a more culturally inclusive approach to mindfulness.

A Call for Inclusive Practices

Some students' dissatisfaction resulted from perceived exclusion due to not seeing their drawings on the projection screens. This highlights the importance of considering children's emotional experiences and sense of inclusion in mindfulness intervention programs (Bautista et al., 2022). For interventions that include a component of sharing participant works, opportunities for appreciation of peers' works can be increased through strategies such as a rotation of "featured" artists (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), collaborative art projects that result in a collective display (Johnson et al., 1998), or a digital gallery accessible to all participants (Ateca-Amestoy & Castiglione, 2022). By combining such strategies and providing multiple means by which students can share and appreciate one another's work, educators can ensure a more inclusive and positive experience.

Conclusion

Exploring participants' experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness revealed insights into students' emotional engagement with L.A.U.G.H. The diverse means through which participants conveyed their emotional experiences, including the depiction of facial expressions, environmental depictions, and verbal descriptions, exemplify the multifaceted nature of emotional engagement in mindfulness. These findings align with the broader principles of mindfulness, emphasizing emotional regulation, holistic awareness, and reflective cognitive processes. Positive experiences, particularly feelings of pride and accomplishment, underscore the impact of mindfulness on self-esteem and social

connectedness. However, negative experiences related to the guided deep breathing component highlight the importance of tailoring mindfulness to diverse preferences and learning styles. The dissatisfaction resulting from perceived exclusion reinforces the significance of considering participants' sense of inclusivity in mindfulness programs. To address these identified challenges, educators can incorporate multiple modalities of mindfulness and interconnectedness to ensure a positive and supportive environment for all participants. These findings shed light on the nuanced interplay of emotions, mindfulness practices, and the need for tailored, inclusive approaches in arts-based interventions.

RQ 3: What are teachers' impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?

Balancing Structure and Freedom

Teacher interviewees identified a balance between the importance of allowing students free choice and incorporating mindfulness into more structured classroom routines. Teachers recognized the value of unstructured time and the opportunity for creative freedom that L.A.U.G.H. provided. They observed that the unstructured activities in L.A.U.G.H. allowed students to engage in self-directed and open-ended artistic endeavors, fostering creativity and independence. Simultaneously, teachers also appreciated L.A.U.G.H.'s structured routine, as it provided students with a familiar activity to start their day, creating a calm and engaging environment. This aligns with the notion that mindfulness interventions can be effectively integrated into daily routines (Shapiro et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the recognition of the value of unstructured time and creative freedom in L.A.U.G.H. resonates with research emphasizing the positive impact of open-ended artistic activities on fostering creativity and independence (Runco, 2014; Baer, 2015).

Values of Independence and Interdependence

Teachers also discussed their perspectives on balancing the values of independence and interdependence in their classrooms. Teachers saw L.A.U.G.H. as a means for students to control their behavior independently and make choices conducive to learning. It was perceived as a gentle behavior management tool, helping students regulate their emotions and behavior. The notion that L.A.U.G.H. provides students with the opportunity to control their behavior independently aligns with the role of mindfulness as a tool for self-regulation and emotional management (Baijal et al., 2011). However, teachers also recognized the importance of the social connections and collaborative work facilitated by L.A.U.G.H., which contributed to community building and positive social interactions among students. The recognition of the importance of social connections and collaborative work in L.A.U.G.H. is consistent with research highlighting the role of mindfulness in promotive positive social interactions and community building (Zoogman et al., 2014).

Support for Emotional Regulation

Teachers spoke to their students' challenges with emotional distress and the role L.A.U.G.H. served in supporting students' self-regulation. Teachers observed that L.A.U.G.H. was beneficial for students who struggled with emotional regulation. Dysregulation often occurred upon arrival at school and after challenging times of the day, such as lunch and recess. Teachers noted that activities like deep breathing and free drawing in L.A.U.G.H. helped students relax and self-regulate while expressing themselves creatively. This finding aligns with the broader literature on the positive impact of mindfulness interventions, including activities like deep breathing and creative expression, on promoting relaxation and self-regulation in students (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Influence on Teaching Practices

Finally, teachers acknowledged the impact of L.A.U.G.H. on their overall teaching practices. Teachers recognized the alignment between L.A.U.G.H. and social-emotional learning (SEL) practices they had already incorporated in their classrooms and how L.A.U.G.H. influenced their future SEL practices. L.A.U.G.H. enhanced teachers' understanding of the importance of a calm start to the day and influenced their prioritization of SEL activities. Teachers mentioned combining L.A.U.G.H. techniques with district-provided programs, such as character trait curricula and feelings journals, to promote further community building, emotional awareness, and student engagement. This resonates with the idea that mindfulness interventions can enhance teachers' ability to prioritize SEL activities (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Combining L.A.U.G.H. techniques with other SEL programs reflects the integration of diverse approaches to promote community and individual emotional wellness (Durlak et al., 2011).

Conclusion

In summary, teachers' perspectives reveal a multifaceted impact of L.A.U.G.H. in the classroom, highlighting its role in balancing structure and freedom, promoting self-regulation, and influencing overall teaching practices focused on social-emotional learning. These findings contribute valuable insights to the broader understanding of integrating mindfulness interventions in educational settings.

Integration of Theory and the Research Study

The integration of relevant theoretical frameworks into the interpretation of these findings prompts further insights into understanding the interplay of community, culture, power, and privilege within the context of this intervention. Drawing from Critical Race Theory (CRT) tenets provides a critical lens to examine how structural racism and power dynamics intersect with the experiences and outcomes of students engaging in L.A.U.G.H. CRT tenets two, five, and six were applied to examine

how interventions like L.A.U.G.H. hold the potential to either challenge or perpetuate inequities. Additionally, the study findings align with DisCrit tenets 4 and 7 by highlighting the voices of marginalized communities and applying alternative forms of activism within the intervention context. By privileging the voices of the second and third-grade participants, the study amplifies the experiences and perspectives of young students whose voices and autonomy are often overlooked in educational settings.

The findings align with Disability Justice principles 8 and 9, as the key themes identified in the analysis emphasize the importance of interdependence and collective access as L.A.U.G.H. fostered a supportive and inclusive environment. Table 6 lists the connections between the theoretical framework tenets and principles, key themes from the findings, and examples from the data. The following sections address how the study findings specifically apply to the select tenets and principles from each framework.

Table 6: Connecting Theoretical Frameworks to Findings

Theoretical Framework	Tenet/Principle	Themes	Examples
Critical Race Theory	Tenet 2: Racism is normalized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Navigating Independence and Interdependence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student Perspectives of Community ● Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emotional Distress and Regulation ○ Generalization to Teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>There's a lot of distrust between African American families, certain families, and white teachers, about whether their students are being understood and how they're being treated</i> ● <i>"[I'd like] more instruction on mindful drawing at the beginning. Some students spend their LAUGH time playing tic tac toe or writing messages to each other."</i> ● <i>"And I think a lot of students were able to use [mindfulness] as a way to stay through regulated throughout the school day."</i>
	Tenet 5: Intersectionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Navigating Independence and Interdependence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student Perspectives of Community ● Mindfulness as a Routine Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nature-Inspired Mindfulness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student art depicted numerous facets of participants' identities, including individual interests (Fig. 11 & 20), home culture and family traditions (Fig. 17, 18, & 19), and experiences as students (Fig. 14 & 15). ● Nature-inspired drawings demonstrated connectedness between students, their environment, and other living beings (Fig 30, 31).
	Tenet 6: Counter-storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free Choice and Open Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Transcending Academic Norms ● Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emotional Distress and Regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Several students explored subject matter typically discouraged or considered taboo in academic settings (Fig. 13). ● Despite positive teacher feedback regarding deep breathing exercises, several students did not feel this practice was effective (Fig. 27).

DisCrit	Tenet 4: Voices of marginalized populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free Choice and Open Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Transcending Academic Norms ● Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emotional Distress and Regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Content of free drawings sometimes went against what is typically expected in classroom settings (Fig. 11, 12, 13) ● Student feedback was elicited through mid-year surveys (Fig. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29)
	Tenet 7: Diverse forms of activism and resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free Choice and Open Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Transcending Academic Norms ● Navigating Independence and Interdependence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student Perspectives of Community ● Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emotional Distress and Regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Drawings of taboo subjects demonstrated resistance against what is considered appropriate in school settings (Fig. 13). ● Students voiced appreciation of the projection screen component of L.A.U.G.H. (Fig. 29), while some teachers found it to be a distraction. ● Students were given opportunities to voice critiques of L.A.U.G.H. (Fig. 27, 28). ● <i>“I’ve also noticed a lot of students wanting to show other students their work or draw with a partner. For example, some students play tic-tac-toe with one another. I also notice some students writing.”</i>
Disability Justice	Principle 8: Interdependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free Choice and Open Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ From Imitation to Creative Risk-Taking ● Navigating Independence and Interdependence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student Perspectives of Community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“I definitely think they got a lot of enjoyment about noticing each other’s creations, even the ones that they have done themselves, like “oh, that’s yours,” or I think there was a lot of excitement, especially initially. And as things got more detailed.”</i> ● Commonalities in themes across student works (Fig. 21, 22, 23).
	Principle 9: Collective access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free Choice and Open Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ From Imitation to Creative Risk-Taking ○ Exploring the Non-Representational 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of model pictures to build confidence and creative risk-taking over time (Fig. 5, 6, 7). ● Non-representational drawing as a low-stakes method of creative expression (Fig 8, 9, 10).

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Emotional Distress and Regulation○ Nature-Inspired Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Students expressed need for more inclusive mindfulness practices (Fig. 27, 28).● Nature-inspired themes as an accessible source of inspiration (Fig. 30, 31).
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Critical Race Theory

The integration of Critical Race Theory (CRT) into the interpretation of these findings offers a framework for understanding the interplay of race, power, and privilege within the context of this intervention. Drawing from CRT tenets provides a critical lens to examine how structural racism and power dynamics intersect with the experiences and outcomes of students engaging in L.A.U.G.H. Applying CRT tenets provides insight into how interventions like L.A.U.G.H. hold the potential to challenge or perpetuate inequities. In particular, tenets two, five, and six were applied to these findings.

The second tenet of CRT states that racism is a normalized aspect of society, deeply ingrained in social structures and institutions. In the context of the study, the teacher interviewees, who both identified as White, acknowledged the impact of the racial tensions in the school community on students' emotional well-being. Teachers' responses also indicated some biases in how students engaged in the intervention, with some teachers being critical of students who felt compelled to interact with one another during L.A.U.G.H. time and felt the projection of participants' drawings was a distraction from learning. Teachers also reported utilizing components of L.A.U.G.H. as a behavioral management tool, indicating that there were aspects of the intervention that inadvertently reinforced inequities within the educational setting.

The fifth tenet, intersectionality, emphasizes the interconnected nature of social identities and how they intersect to shape individuals' experiences. Throughout the intervention, participants expressed multiple facets of their identities, including representing their families and home lives, their experiences at school, their cultural backgrounds, and their individual interests. In doing so, participants were able to gradually represent themselves in a holistic manner. A diverse range of subject matter was observed among students of the same racial background, gender identity, and classroom

environment, highlighting the role intersectionality plays in shaping each participant as a unique individual.

Tenet six of CRT, counter-storytelling, encourages marginalized groups to tell their own stories to challenge dominant narratives. The findings of the study, particularly the themes related to “Free Choice and Open Expression,” indicate opportunities for counter-storytelling by allowing students to express themselves freely without the constraints of traditional academic expectations. Through their free drawings, students explored themes that diverged from typical school subject matter without fear of punitive consequences. The criticisms of deep breathing in the student surveys present a counter-narrative to teachers’ evaluations of deep breathing as a behavior management tool, as several students expressed that this practice was not in alignment with their preferences and needs.

DisCrit

The results of this qualitative study align with DisCrit tenets 4 and 7 by highlighting the voices of marginalized communities and applying diverse forms of activism within the intervention context. The findings align with DisCrit tenet 4 by privileging the voices of marginalized populations, specifically the second and third-grade participants who engaged in the intervention. A majority of the analysis focused on participant drawings and surveys, with teacher perspectives incorporated to contribute additional insights. In doing so, the study amplified the experiences and perspectives of young students whose voices and autonomy are often overlooked in educational settings. The study challenges traditional research practices that may prioritize the perspectives of adults or fail to accurately capture the nuanced experiences of children through biased interpretation. The analysis sought to identify patterns in student-produced data without imposing inaccurate interpretations of their work, with the aim of contributing to a more inclusive and equitable research context that acknowledges and values the diverse perspectives of all individuals, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

The findings of this study also align with DisCrit tenet 7 by emphasizing diverse forms of activism and resistance within educational contexts. Through creative expression, exercising autonomy, and practicing inclusive forms of mindfulness, participants engaged in acts of resistance against rigid academic structures and expectations, advocating for more holistic and inclusive approaches to social-emotional learning. This is exemplified by actions such as exploring taboo subjects in their art, appreciating one another's work on the projections screens even though some teachers found them to be a distraction, and engaging in collaborative drawing such as tic-tac-toe despite teachers' beliefs that L.A.U.G.H. should be an independent exercise. Additionally, the study itself was intended to be a form of activism, as it seeks to challenge dominant narratives and structures of power within educational research by centering the voices and experiences of marginalized populations and advocating for social justice and equity in education.

Disability Justice

The findings of this study align with Disability Justice principles 8 (interdependence) and 9 (collective access) in several significant ways. One of the key themes identified in the analysis is "Navigating Independence and Interdependence," which directly relates to the principle of interdependence. This theme includes the subtheme of "student perspectives of community," highlighting how students view and experience their roles within their communities, both at home and school. By documenting and analyzing how students express their relationships and interconnectedness through art, the study emphasizes the importance of interdependence. It shows that students' experiences are contextualized within their larger community and those around them. This supports the idea that interdependence is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

Additionally, the emergence of communal artistic themes among students participating in L.A.U.G.H. underscores the principle of interdependence. This phenomenon indicates that students' creative expressions are influenced by their interactions and relationships with peers and illustrates how

their experiences are collectively shared. The commonality in themes across students' works emphasizes the mutual support and inspiration they provide to each other, further reinforcing the concept of interdependence.

The principle of collective access is reflected in the theme "Free Choice and Open Expression." This theme includes the subtheme of the transition from imitation to creative risk-taking. By allowing students the freedom to take creative risks, L.A.U.G.H. fostered an environment where individual differences were not impacted by specific academic criteria. This approach aligns with the principle of collective access by ensuring that all students, regardless of their starting point, have the opportunity to express themselves freely and without concern for judgment. This accessibility in self-expression is crucial for an inclusive environment where all participants can fully engage. Furthermore, encouraging students to explore beyond traditional academic norms and representational art allows for a broader range of expressions and experiences to be validated. This inclusivity ensures that students with diverse abilities and ways of thinking can participate fully and authentically, reinforcing the principle of collective access.

The theme "Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice" also aligns with the principle of collective access. By addressing emotional regulation through mindfulness, the intervention provided tools that a majority participants could use to manage their emotions effectively. However, there were aspects of the intervention, such as deep breathing, that did not resonate with some participants, indicating that it could be effective to introduce students to a diverse range of coping strategies that can be individualized to their needs and preferences. Additionally, the integration of mindfulness practices into routine teaching ensures that these practices become a normalized part of the classroom environment. This integration enables access to the benefits of mindfulness techniques throughout the day, going beyond the time and duration limits of the intervention.

Free Choice and Open Expression

The L.A.U.G.H. intervention emphasized the importance of free choice and open expression in fostering psychological wellness. This aligns with the conceptual framework's focus on creative liberation, or the path up the mountain. By allowing students the freedom to choose their artistic forms and subjects, the program promoted personal expression and emotional exploration. Encouraging free choice and open expression not only fosters individual growth but also strengthens the community by valuing diverse voices and perspectives.

The transition from imitation to creative risk-taking is a critical component of the L.A.U.G.H. program. There were students who initially started by imitating model pictures but gradually moved towards taking creative risks, which aligns with the framework's emphasis on creative liberation. This journey is crucial for both personal empowerment and collective progress, as it cultivates a culture of innovation and mutual support. This progression helped students build confidence in their abilities and encouraged them to explore new ways of expressing themselves.

The L.A.U.G.H. program encouraged students to explore non-representational art as a means of expressing emotions and ideas that may not be easily articulated through words. This approach ties into the framework's depiction of the sea, representing the vast and often unexplored depths of mental health interventions. Non-representational art allowed students to deepen their means of expression in an accessible manner, without requiring advanced technical artistic ability.

Participants in the program transcended traditional academic norms by incorporating elements of pop culture, fantasy, and taboo subjects in their art. This aligns with the framework's emphasis on culturally responsive interventions, the river. By providing students with a space to validate their interests and cultural backgrounds, the program helped them to feel more connected and engaged. Incorporating pop culture topics created relatable and engaging drawings that were meaningful to students' lived experiences. Exploring fantasy themes in artwork allowed students an escape from

reality, aligning with the framework's emphasis on creative liberation. Finally, by addressing taboo topics in L.A.U.G.H., participants could confront and process difficult emotions and experiences they are typically discouraged from talking about. By challenging academic norms, the intervention also promoted a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of broader areas of knowledge.

Navigating Independence and Interdependence

The L.A.U.G.H. program helped students navigate the balance between independence and interdependence, reflecting the framework's emphasis on student expressions, or the evergreen trees, and teacher impressions, the flowers. This balance, particularly fostering interdependence, is crucial for developing a sense of community and belonging among students. Emphasizing interdependence highlights the importance of community support and shared responsibility for one another's well-being. Student perspectives of community were reflected in scenes of school and home life, as well as shared themes that emerged from their experiences in L.A.U.G.H.

The drawings from L.A.U.G.H. captured student perspectives of community through scenes of school, home, and shared themes in their artwork. This aspect aligns with the framework's depiction of the mountain's plant life, illustrating how student voices and experiences are interconnected and nurtured by their environments. Students' depictions of school scenes in their artwork highlighted their experiences and relationships within the school community. This aligns with the framework's emphasis on student expressions, showing how their voices and perspectives are central to understanding the impact of school-based interventions. Artwork depicting scenes of home reflected students' personal and cultural backgrounds, emphasizing the importance of culturally inclusive interventions - the river in the framework. Examining such depictions can help implementors understand participants' diverse experiences and tailor the support they receive. Shared themes in students' artwork illustrate common experiences and emotions, reinforcing the sense of community

and interdependence that emerged within the intervention. This aspect of the findings supports the framework's emphasis on student voices and the interconnectedness of their experiences.

Adopting Mindfulness as a Routine Practice

The L.A.U.G.H. intervention incorporated mindfulness practices to help students regulate their emotions and cultivate a sense of well-being. This aspect aligns with the framework's depiction of the sea, representing the potential benefits of mental health interventions. For example, the program addressed emotional distress challenges within the student population and taught students regulation techniques to help them manage their emotions more effectively. Mindfulness practices not only help individuals manage their own emotions but also create a more compassionate and supportive community environment. Students' depictions of emotions in their artwork provided insight into their internal experiences, highlighting the importance of creative expression in mental health interventions. This aligns with the framework's focus on student expressions – the evergreen trees.

Understanding students' perceptions of ineffective mindfulness practices informs how to refine culturally inclusive mindfulness programs to ensure they meet the participants' needs. This aspect aligns with the framework's emphasis on culturally inclusive practices, the river, ensuring interventions are tailored to participants' experiences and preferences. On the other hand, the L.A.U.G.H. intervention helped students cultivate pride in themselves through mindfulness and creative expression, supporting their journey towards reclaiming psychological wellness – the summit of the mountain. This aspect of the findings aligns with the framework's focus on creative liberation and student voices as well.

By incorporating nature-inspired themes in their work, students practiced mindfulness through connection with their environment. While this theme was not considered in the original theoretical framework, it offers an additional theoretical lens that can be added to the soil at the mountain's base, which represents the theoretical foundations of CRT, DisCrit, and Disability Justice. The research around nature-based mindfulness is emergent, but promising (Djernis et al., 2019). In relation to the

other theoretical frameworks, practicing mindfulness in nature-based contexts serves as an alternative to receiving mindfulness training in more institutional settings such as schools and medical offices. The connection to nature reinforces the idea of collective well-being, as it encourages students to see themselves as a part of a larger ecological and social system.

Finally, the generalization of mindfulness practices to teaching strategies underscores the importance of integrating these approaches into everyday educational practices, and emphasizes the developing perspective of the teacher, depicted as flowers in the framework. This integration ensures that mindfulness becomes a sustainable and effective tool that sustains the learning environment as a whole. By embedding mindfulness in teaching practices, educators can help cultivate a culture of mutual care and collective well-being.

In conclusion, the conceptual framework components encapsulate the multi-faceted nature of the L.A.U.G.H. intervention findings, illustrating how creative expression, cultural inclusivity, and mindfulness converge to promote psychological wellness in diverse populations. By aligning the study results with this framework, it is possible to obtain a deeper understanding of how these components work together to create a holistic and nurturing experience. A focus on collective well-being emerges as a crucial element, recognizing that the health and success of individuals are deeply intertwined with the strength and support of their community.

Applications to Practice

Several significant meanings and overall conclusions from these findings can be used to enhance the practices of those engaging in mindfulness interventions with youth. Firstly, incorporating arts-based mindfulness into the school day can provide students with a balance between free choice activities and predictable, comforting routines, offering both unstructured creative opportunities and familiarity for students. Mindfulness practices can support students in developing independence and regulating their behavior while fostering social connections and collaborative interactions. Arts-based mindfulness

interventions also have the potential to help students cope with emotional distress and promote emotional regulation in the classroom. Teachers can benefit from integrating arts-based mindfulness practices into their teaching, aligning them with existing SEL initiatives and emphasizing the importance of a calm and supportive start to the day.

The experiences reported by L.A.U.G.H. participants lend support to implementing inclusive forms of mindfulness and developing an expansive definition of what can “count” as a mindfulness practice. On the one hand, setting rigid criteria for what qualifies as legitimate mindfulness practices can ensure consistency and the ability to set standards that align with the established efficacy of specific practices. However, as reflected in students’ critical feedback, more “traditional” forms of mindfulness may result in exclusion if they do not align with a student’s abilities, background, or preferences. Such restrictions may also inhibit participants from exploring innovative or emerging mindfulness practices that could hold potential benefits. By allowing participants agency to choose how they participate in mindfulness, they can tailor their practices to their individual preferences, increasing engagement and sustainability. This autonomy also fosters a sense of empowerment, encouraging participants to take ownership of their mindfulness journey and adapt practices to suit their evolving needs.

These findings suggest that arts-based mindfulness interventions like L.A.U.G.H. offer students a balanced experience by combining free-choice activities and comforting routines, fostering creativity and familiarity. This approach supports the development of independence, emotional regulation, and positive social connections among students, contributing to a holistic and supportive learning environment. The findings also emphasize the importance of an inclusive definition of mindfulness practices, allowing students agency to tailor their experiences and fostering engagement, empowerment, and adaptability in their mindfulness journeys. Mindfulness interventions may also positively impact teachers’ perceptions of classroom dynamics, the importance of creative freedom, student independence, emotional regulation, and community building. Overall, the findings highlight

the potential benefits of incorporating arts-based practices and mindfulness into educational settings to promote students' global development and well-being.

In addition to these individual benefits, fostering collective wellness through mindfulness practices is crucial for creating a supportive and cohesive school community. Collective wellness emphasizes the interdependence of individual well-being and the overall health of the community. By integrating arts-based mindfulness into daily routines, schools can cultivate an environment where students and teachers support each other's wellness journeys. This collective approach not only enhances individual outcomes but also strengthens the bonds within the community, promoting a culture of empathy, understanding, and mutual support.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Potential study limitations are reflected in a critique provided by Arthington (2016). Arthington's article argues that mindfulness as a psychological technique coopts Eastern practices to reinforce capitalist ideologies. The literature on psychological mindfulness emphasizes individual autonomy and places responsibility on the individual to improve one's psychological well-being. Teacher data focused on the ways L.A.U.G.H. improved individual skills. These included coping independently with elevated emotions, engaging in a self-directed morning routine, and self-managing their behaviors. Some teacher comments were critical of students interacting with one another during L.A.U.G.H. time and expressed concerns that the screen displaying student drawings was sometimes distracting. Further, while one of the teacher interviewees indicated the role of community racial dynamics in students' emotional dysregulation, her response emphasized the role of individual emotion regulation skills in coping with challenging interactions with staff.

Future research can examine arts-based mindfulness from a more critical standpoint. While the study findings indicate mindfulness is helpful in learning to cope with emotional distress and self-regulation, teachers expressed less awareness of how the intervention could promote collective well-

being. Further studies of arts-based mindfulness could include critical analyses of how mindfulness practices may unintentionally reinforce or challenge existing power structures and social inequalities, particularly classroom management, in the context of educational research. In terms of exploring culturally inclusive mindfulness, more attention could be paid to the development of mindfulness interventions that place more explicit emphasis on collective well-being and social transformation.

Conclusion

This research study sheds light on students' and teachers' perspectives regarding the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention in their classrooms. Incorporating arts-based mindfulness into the school day offers several potential benefits, such as creative freedom and comforting routines, to support their overall social-emotional development and psychological well-being. Mindfulness practices were found to promote independent emotional and behavior regulation while fostering social connections and collaborative interactions among students. Moreover, teachers benefitted from integrating the mindfulness practices of this study into their ongoing teaching, aligning them with existing social-emotional learning practices and initiatives.

Further research should critically analyze the implications of mindfulness practices, explore how they can enhance collective well-being, and explore social inequalities within mindfulness interventions. By further examining these aspects, arts-based mindfulness interventions can be developed to prioritize both individual skill development and the development of collective well-being and social transformation. Schools, educators, and mental health providers are encouraged to place a greater emphasis on collective wellness, recognizing the interconnectedness of individual and community well-being. By doing so, educational environments can become more inclusive, supportive, and conducive to the holistic development of all students.

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Appendix A: Teacher Interview Protocol

Research Question	Interview Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What themes were observed in participants' art in terms of content and elements of artistic expression as they fostered their psychological wellness? What thematic changes can be observed over time? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What differences did you notice between art created during L.A.U.G.H. and art produced during academic periods? 2. What common themes did you notice in the drawings? 3. What environmental influences did you see reflected in their work? 4. How did you see students represent themselves and their identities in their work?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do participants describe and evaluate their experiences engaging in arts-based mindfulness? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did students react to the components of the intervention (free drawing, projections)? 2. What notable conversations did you have with students about L.A.U.G.H. and the art they produced during this time? 3. How did L.A.U.G.H. facilitate students connecting with one another and building community?

<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What are teachers' impressions of the impact of an arts-based mindfulness intervention?	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How did students react to the components of the intervention (free drawing, projections)?2. What notable conversations did you have with students about L.A.U.G.H. and the art they produced during this time?3. How did L.A.U.G.H. facilitate students connecting with one another and building community?
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Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reclaiming and Redefining Wellness Through an Arts-Based Mindfulness Intervention

Investigator: Miu Ezra Hart, EdS, NCSP | miuhart@uw.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Janine Jones, Ph.D., NCSP | jjones2@uw.edu

Investigator's Statement

I am asking you to be in a research study that I am completing as part of my doctoral coursework at the University of Washington. The purpose of this consent form is to give you all the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is unclear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students participating in L.A.U.G.H., a mindfulness intervention implemented at Madrona Elementary during the 2017-2018 school year. This work addresses gaps in the research literature regarding how to adapt social-emotional learning (SEL) to be culturally relevant, center student voices, and expand what is defined as wellness in SEL. Your participation will provide valuable input regarding firsthand experiences and observations during your involvement in the L.A.U.G.H. intervention and the program's impact on class climate and relationships.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you, either by Zoom or in person, for about an hour. Our conversation will be structured around the following research questions: *What themes are present in student art in terms of content and methods of artistic expression? How did student participants express an understanding of mindfulness? How did students from racially/ethnically minoritized backgrounds express their unique experiences with wellness?* I realize you participated in L.A.U.G.H. three years ago, and I understand that you will be responding to my questions from memory.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape your interview so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation. I will transcribe this recording without identifiable information and destroy the recording after the study is over. Only I will have access to the recording, which will be kept in a secure location. If you would like a copy of the interview transcript, I will gladly provide you with one.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when notes are taken, or interviews are recorded.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You may not directly benefit from participating in this research study. One benefit of this study is contributing to expanding the research base for equity-focused SEL and arts-based SEL. This research will also advocate for the expansion of mental health supports in school settings.

OTHER INFORMATION

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate and are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Information about you is confidential. I will assign you a pseudonym and code the study information. I will keep the link between your name and the pseudonym code in a separate, secured location until the study is complete. Then I will destroy the information linking your information to the pseudonym. If

the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name or any other identifying information.

I may want to re-contact you for future related studies. Please indicate below whether you give me permission to re-contact you. Giving me permission to re-contact you does not obligate you in any way.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Miu Ezra Hart at the email listed at the top of this form. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact my doctoral advisor, who is overseeing this project: Dr. Janine Jones, 206-616-6370, jjones2@uw.edu.

Signature of investigator

Printed Name

Date

Participant's statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, I can ask the investigator listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact one of the course instructors. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_____ I give permission for this researcher to audiotape my interview.

_____ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview.

_____ I give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

_____ I do NOT give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

Signature of participant

Printed Name

Date

Copies to: Investigators' file

Participant