

**Doctoral Capstone Report: Brain Breaks with the Joseph Maley Foundation**

Marissa LeGault, OTS

Department of Occupational Therapy, Indiana University

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### **Abstract**

In order to address the needs of elementary school teachers and students in the Indianapolis area in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance Model of occupational therapy was utilized to develop Brain Breaks. Brain Breaks in the category of mindfulness were created to be shared with Indianapolis area schools with the goal of addressing both physical and mental health of students in the community while they adhere to social distancing guidelines. To create easily accessible and useful content for teachers, Brain Breaks were developed in the context of videos with corresponding traditional style teacher guides. Literature suggests that students engaging in mind-body activities during the day may improve attention-to-task and overall enjoyment of lessons.

*Keywords:* mindfulness, school aged children, occupational therapy, COVID-19

### **Doctoral Capstone Report: Brain Breaks with the Joseph Maley Foundation**

The Joseph Maley Foundation (JMF) provides programming which aims to serve “...the whole child and those who directly affect the child...” within the Indianapolis area (Our Story, 2021, p. 1). During completion of this project in partnership with JMF the coronavirus (COVID-19) significantly impacted their ability to provide programming, specifically their hands-on activities, to the community. In order to meet the needs of both JMF and the population they serve, it was decided that Brain Breaks be developed and sent out to teachers working in affiliated schools.

COVID-19 resulted in many changes to everyday life thus changing the perspective of many individuals, including children. Changes in routine, concern surrounding the virus, and limited discretion to explore the community and environment had the potential to increase stress and anxiety as well as decrease opportunities to engage in physical activity. “Research suggests that mindfulness training can reduce stress and improve self-confidence, relationships with others, attention, optimism, and self-esteem (Fisher, 2006; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010 qtd. as cited in Rempel, 2012, p. 203). As supported by this evidence, Brain Breaks in the category of mindfulness were developed with the goal of targeting both the physical and mental health of children in the community.

#### **Needs Assessment**

The Joseph Maley Foundation (JMF), a non-profit organization which provides physical activity and educational programs to Indianapolis area schools, was looking to provide teachers with video instructed activities in place of their previously executed hands-on services. New limitations in schools due to COVID-19 changed the way JMF was able to implement programming for school age children in the state. Social distancing protocols put in place also

changed the way children and teachers are able to physically congregate and interact with one another in their classrooms, resulting in restricted opportunities for physical activity and stimulation. The following provides evidence to support the creation and implementation of classroom activities instructed through video as a supplement to curriculum provided to teachers.

One aspect of many schools' new regulations is that students and teachers are limited to where and when they can be active. State regulations are encouraging teachers to keep students as static as possible throughout their school day. While this may be beneficial in reducing the spread of COVID-19, as transmission is known to occur through respiratory droplets, it poses a threat to other areas of health for school aged children. According to Janssen and LeBlanc (2010), the more physical activity youths engage in, the greater the health benefits. For example, acute physical activity has been found to have a positive effect on executive function (Verburgh et al., 2014). Executive functions include attention, impulse control, working memory, and transitioning between tasks - all of which are essential skills necessary to succeed within a school setting. Evidence also suggests that sitting for prolonged periods not only has negative effects on general health, but it also decreases the amount of on-task behavior displayed by school age children (Tan Leng Goh et al., 2016). This supports the theory that current COVID-19 social distancing regulations in schools may have an impact on students' ability to attend to their learning environment and retain the information being presented. Tan Leng Goh et al. (2016) noted:

Long periods of instructional time without a break may reduce students' on-task behavior and can become counterproductive to academic performance. Off-task behavior, inattention-to-task, or fidgety behavior, may also be related to poor academic performance. Moreover, students who display persistent disruptive behavior fail to

internalize valuable academic lessons, are a distraction for classmates, and cause stress for teachers. (p. 712)

Considering the amount of stress and distraction that is present due to COVID-19 and corresponding changes, it would be beneficial to provide relief to classrooms in the form of Brain Breaks which are simple to implement and allow students to rest between their typical academic responsibilities. Implementing activities provided by JMF into the school day would allow for students to remain socially distanced while also continuing to participate in health promoting activities. Tan Leng Goh et al. (2016) found that implementing this type of compound curriculum can improve on-task behavior in students as young as preschool and as old as 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Creating a curriculum which integrates physical activity into a mindfulness lesson would benefit students' general health as well as their ability to learn in the classroom.

### **Literature Review**

Restrictions put into place due to COVID-19 have significantly increased the amount of virtual learning materials being distributed to school age children. Cerrito et al. (2018) found that both web-based and traditional guidance can result in knowledge gain, however traditional guidance has shown more significant improvements. Since children today have a significant amount of experience utilizing technology, pairing virtual learning opportunities with traditional guidance may provide unique benefits for students (Cerrito et al., 2018). Providing teachers with virtual materials including corresponding teacher guides would allow for integration of virtual experiences into traditional techniques in order to enhance the learning experience for students. These virtual-based materials are to be implemented as a supplement to the educational curriculum already being provided to each school by JMF. Lessons are to be categorized based on grade level, as research has suggested web-based materials may be most effective when



implementing this method with elementary students (Cerrito et al., 2018). Utilizing games, simulations, and other behavioral strategies in combination with didactic coursework has also shown to be associated with better outcomes than focusing on one method alone (Tokolahi et al., 2016). This evidence supports the creation of a curriculum including mindfulness as a behavioral strategy being implemented through multiple methods of distribution.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced abrupt modifications to the way people go about their everyday lives and has limited occupational participation for many. Children's daily lives have been affected in terms of participating in in-school activities as well as extracurriculars. Changes to multiple aspects of daily life can have significant effects on mental health and behaviors. Evidence suggests that the use of productive occupations and life skills, sports, and yoga are effective in promoting mental health, positive behavior, and social participation in children (Cahill et al., 2020). This supports the implementation of interventions from the occupational therapy perspective as described by American Occupational Therapy Association (2015) as follows:

Occupational therapy practitioners collaborate with clients to identify both strengths and barriers to health, well-being, and participation. As part of this process, practitioners consider a variety of environmental and contextual factors to inform the clinical reasoning process that guides client evaluation, intervention, and targeting of outcomes. Occupational therapy practitioners analyze the environment and context to understand how these elements can best support learning and performance. Solutions are then generated to reduce identified barriers or build on supports through modifications and adaptations. (p. 1)

The utilization of occupations as therapeutic interventions is a method unique to the occupational therapy profession. In this case, the occupational therapist analyzes the occupation of school in order to determine what solutions would be effective in supporting the person (students) in participating to the best of their abilities.

Evidence suggests that participating in physical activity which supports the mind-body connection, such as yoga and mindful activities, can enhance mental health and social participation (Cahill et al., 2020). Implementing these types of interventions into a curriculum would enhance students' ability to remain on task as well as benefit mental health while learning a desired lesson. Childhood is a time in which children are learning behavioral and emotional regulation skills, making it an ideal timeframe to implement mind-body activity participation and education (Cahill et al., 2020). This evidence supports the idea that mindfulness activities which require physical participation target, and may benefit, both physical and mental health thus supporting children in their role of being a student.

### **Theoretical Basis**

Tokolahi et al. (2016) found that interventions result in better outcomes when based on theoretical knowledge. The Person-Environment-Occupation-Performance (PEOP) model of occupational therapy was utilized in creating a curriculum for JMF in order to base lessons on a sound theory. The PEOP model places focus on the importance of occupational performance. The model takes into account the intrinsic factors of the person, the extrinsic factors of the environment, the action taking place (occupation) and the actual process of participating in order to encompass each component of occupational performance.

One aspect of the person that the PEOP model considers is the resources they have available (Smith & Hudson, 2012). When creating a curriculum, it was essential to determine the

resources available in a typical classroom setting including but not limited to technology, tools, and equipment. It was assumed that the typical classroom would have a desk and a chair for each student. It was also assumed that teachers would have access to the internet in order to receive teacher guides as they were created via Google Documents. Teachers would also need to have a method of displaying videos in a manner that allowed for each student to see and hear the demonstration so that they are able to follow along successfully. When creating the content, it was important to provide activities which didn't require extensive materials but rather utilized the common resources assumed to be in a typical classroom.

It was also important to note the diversity of the population being served. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), from 2014 to 2018 Indianapolis Public Schools population by race/ethnicity was 45% White, 37% Black, 13% Hispanic or Latinx, 2% Asian, and 3% under the category of two or more races. In addition, 8.2% of the school population was recorded to be living with a disability. This amounts to an estimated 3,550 students that require modification to participate in typical school related tasks (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Smith and Hudson (2012) found that factors such as disability, race, and cultural differences are not to be controlled, but instead to be explored. This supports the idea that the JMF curriculum should incorporate methods of learning for various abilities and backgrounds to ensure lessons are client-centered.

Mindfulness practices originated from Eastern traditions and perspectives such as those practiced in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism (Singla, 2011). Many of the mindfulness teachings we see in the United States today are based on various interpretations of Eastern practices that have since been infused with Western perspectives. When looking at a practice that involves such deep history and complex conceptualizations of the mind and body, it was

important to note the cultural connotations involved in teaching these ideas to children. In order to create a culturally conscious product that could be digested by school age children, the activities provided were simplified to encourage basic awareness of the physical and emotional feelings the practices brought up. This was reflected in the types of questions that were suggested to teachers in their teacher guides. One particular activity, Sun Salutation Yoga, has direct links to Eastern traditions. To address this, education regarding the history of Sun Salutation sequences was included in the teacher guide (see Appendix A)

In regard to students with disabilities, it was important to provide modifications and accommodations for various physical and mental disabilities. Each video that required physical exercise included demonstrations for participation from standing and from sitting. Videos also included suggested materials, typically found in a classroom setting, that could be utilized as adaptive tools to assist with movements. Suggestions included using books, blankets, or sweatshirts to increase ease and comfort throughout the activity. One activity was created specifically for Lifeskills classrooms. The provided Lifeskills activity, Silly Senses, also included suggestions for modifications for those who have sensory aversions.

When taking into consideration the environment, it was essential that the curriculum was conscious of the typical space available for students and teachers in the Indianapolis area. Contexts of the environment were noted in order to increase ability to participate in provided activities. It was assumed that teachers would implement these videos between academic lessons when all students were present, thus having an environment in which social contexts were involved. This was reflected in the types of questions that were provided as suggestions during discussion. For example, reflecting on the fact that each student experiences the activity differently. It was also assumed that there would be enough space in a full classroom for students

to stand an arms length apart from one another. For classrooms where this isn't the case, teachers may utilize the seated versions of activities. It was also necessary to adhere to the current methods of maintaining social distance in schools. Though regulations changed a number of times over the months it took to complete this project, it was decided that activities provided should be able to be completed individually with only contact from a teacher as needed.

When deciding on the type of therapeutic activity to focus on, research was done on various activities that could be implemented during the school day. Mindfulness activities were decided on due to the significant evidence supporting their benefits for children in their role as a student, as detailed in the Literature Review section of this report. Mindfulness activities best fit the needs of the population as well as the goals of the Joseph Maley Foundation. They are also easily adaptable to a range of age groups, physical abilities, and mental abilities. Overall mindfulness activities support children in their occupation of being a student, which was a projected outcome of this project.

Occupational performance was supported by analysis of and considerations made regarding the person, environment, and occupation of the participants (students). In addition to previously mentioned modifications provided, the instructor in the videos made sure to clearly state that each student should perform the physical activity in a manner that feels best for them. It was noted that each student is different, therefore they were encouraged to make their own decisions as to how they participate. Corresponding teacher guides also included questions which encouraged students to actively participate in discussion. Various levels of questions were included to encourage all types of students to share with either the whole class or a small group depending on their comfortability.

## **Project Plan and Process**

In order to guide the process of this capstone project a student learning plan was developed. The student learning plan included three goals with corresponding objectives which detailed criteria for a successful product and ensured meeting curricular standards.

Project goal one was to provide a client-centered, inclusive, equitable, and research-based curriculum to be implemented through JMF programming. In order to accomplish this it was essential to begin by completing a literature review to determine what methods were best supported by significant evidence. Next, it was important to provide activities which people of all abilities can participate in. This looked like providing adaptive strategies with each video provided to JMF affiliated schools. As supported by the evidence previously discussed, this was also accomplished by facilitating learning through active participation during the school day.

Project goal two was to improve school age students' knowledge of mindfulness and indications for utilizing mindfulness techniques. In order to accomplish this goal this author aimed to educate students on how to participate in mindfulness by providing videos which demonstrated a range of mindfulness activities. This encouraged the active participation which was discussed as an objective for project goal one. Along with this it was important that the students were educated on various mindfulness options in order to meet the different needs of all types of students. In order to educate students on the benefits of mindfulness it was also essential to provide teachers with lesson plans which detailed client-centered positive outcomes of participating in each activity.

Project goal three was to maintain or improve the mental and physical health of students in relation to participation in the classroom. In order to meet this goal it was essential to educate students on the benefits of taking breaks during their work day. It was important for students to

understand what they were doing and why they were doing it. This was done through discussions and modeling. Next was providing activities which are beneficial for both physical and mental health to be implemented as brain breaks. Also, providing education pieces within the lesson plans to educate students on empathy and encouraging understanding of others. This goal was accomplished through utilizing mindfulness as a mental and physical health promoter while pairing discussion questions which allowed students to share their different experiences.

In order to evaluate the results of this project and determine whether or not goals were met, a survey was created. Surveys were to be sent out to teachers and staff utilizing the previously discussed curriculum and videos at the time of distribution. Questions included in the survey followed closely with the project goals and objectives detailed in the student learning plan (see Appendix B).

### **Project Implementation**

A total of nine mindfulness videos with corresponding teacher guides were developed. Activities were created based on three different age groups: grades K-2, 3-4, and 5-6. This author has completed all edits and finalized all teacher guides and is currently awaiting JMF staff finalization and distribution of materials. Teachers are to implement the curriculum as directed in provided teacher guides and supplement with corresponding video demonstration activities. After utilizing the lessons provided, teachers are to complete the survey that was created and sent via a link in their email with the JMF curriculum. Results of the survey are then to be analyzed to determine whether or not the provided content met the needs of the teachers and met the goals of the project.

## **Project Evaluation**

The evaluation plan for this project was to analyze the results of the survey provided to JMF staff and teachers who utilized the product. As of April 16, 2021, the completion date of this doctoral capstone project, there were zero recorded responses to the surveys. Due to timeline changes within the JMF organization, the program developed has yet to be sent out to students. Working within a community setting, it is common that changes such as these may occur and disrupt anticipated results.

Though there is no data to back up the outcomes of this project, the content provided can be evaluated based on the proposed goals of the project. Project goal one was to provide a client-centered, inclusive, equitable, and research-based curriculum to be implemented through JMF programming. Evidence provided in the Literature Review supports the use of the content created as an evidence-based program. Utilizing the PEOP model helped to achieve this goal by ensuring that the materials provided were client-centered and inclusive of the population being served.

Project goal two was to improve school age students' knowledge of mindfulness and indications for utilizing mindfulness techniques. This goal was met by providing at least two demonstrations of mindfulness activities for each grade. An additional two activities were provided for all students to be able to complete in their homes. Corresponding questions provided in teacher guides encouraged discussion surrounding implications for mindfulness techniques.

Project goal three was to maintain or improve the mental and physical health of students in relation to participation in the classroom. This outcome was significantly difficult to measure due to lack of survey data. Though there is not significant evidence to show the benefits of this



particular program, Tan Leng Goh et al. (2016) found that implementing this type of compound curriculum can improve on-task behavior in students as young as preschool and as old as 5th grade. Significant evidence was also discussed to support the use of Brain Breaks as a means to improving the amount of on-task attention for students.

### **Capstone Discussion and Impact including Sustainability Plan**

Despite lack of data supporting the implementation of provided programming, methods of completion of this project resulted in all capstone goals being met. The purpose of this capstone was to provide teachers and students with activities which would target physical and mental health and enhance students ability to participate in school related activities, all while meeting the needs of JMF. JMF was looking for a way to implement programming while adhering to social distancing protocols put into place due to COVID-19. JMF was provided with three yoga videos, four breathing exercise videos, one sensory activity video for Lifeskills classrooms, and one progressive muscular relaxation video. Corresponding teacher guides were completed for each of the videos, all of which included instructions, breakdowns of the activities, and discussion questions with example answers. The product is simple to execute for teachers and meets typical COVID-19 classroom guidelines. JMF has all the content needed to implement their programming in a socially distanced classroom.

This product is easily sustainable due to the virtual nature of the components. Teacher guides were all created on Google Documents which were created in a JMF folder as well as shared with multiple JMF staff members. JMF staff has the ability to edit teacher guides as desired. Videos were recorded with JMF staff equipment and uploaded by JMF to Youtube, making it easy for them to later access and make edits as needed. Videos were recorded during a mask mandate, however the instructor in the videos remained socially distanced without a mask

during recording in order to encourage use of the videos post mask mandates. There was no budget necessary for this project as JMF staff had all equipment required to film and edit the videos. Additionally, this report which contains an evidence base for benefits of the content provided will be shared with JMF staff in order to encourage further education on mindfulness and occupational therapy.

### **Conclusion**

Mindfulness activity Brain Breaks were developed in partnership with the Joseph Maley Foundation (JMF) in order to address their limited opportunities to implement programming during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mindfulness activities have the potential to address both mental and physical health of students while improving their participation in school related tasks. Evidence suggests that including physical activity and breaks from typical academic activities may decrease off-task behavior displayed thus improving student learning and teacher related stress. The created Brain Breaks were successful in supporting the need of JMF. JMF Brain Breaks are evidence-based and client-centered, they educate students on types and implications of mindfulness, and they address the overall health of students. Results from surveys may provide additional information once data is collected.

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## Appendix A

### Sun Salutation Teacher Guide



#### Sun Salutation

##### *A Brain Break Activity for Fourth and Fifth Grade Students*

- ★ This activity is a fun and active brain break for students. During the video, the instructors will go through a yoga flow from standing and from sitting. Students should use whichever form best meets their needs.

#### Sun Salutation Background

*Sun Salutations come from traditional yoga practices based on Eastern philosophies such as those found in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. In these cultures it was typically used to thank the sun for everything it provided people with on Earth. Modern practices of sun salutation are often used to wake up the body and greet a new day. It is a flow that includes poses which activate muscles from all parts of the body and provides an energizing flow of energy from your feet to your head.*

#### Directions:

1. Project this video (8:44) so that students are able to view it with ease. Make sure students are at least an arms length away from one another.
2. Play the video. Students should follow along with the instructions.
  - Introduction (0:05)
  - Yoga flow from standing (on each side) (0:33)
  - Yoga flow from sitting (on each side) (3:25)

3. Discuss the activity using these questions to help you.
  - How does your body feel after doing sun salutation yoga?
    - Each answer may be different. Mindfulness increases self-awareness which can result in someone feeling: tired, energized, calm, heavy, light, etc.
  - How has your mood changed after doing this activity?
    - May have similar answers to the first question. Encourage discussion on how students felt before compared to after and the benefits of doing this type of activity.
  - Why do you think this is a good activity to do in school?
    - Mindful movement helps our brain and our body work together at the same speed. When working on school work all day our brains can get tired and either slow down or speed up to try to make up

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- for the loss of energy. This activity should help clear our minds and start fresh.
- When are other times outside of school that you could use this activity or one similar?
    - Before a test, in the morning to wake you up, before playing a sport or other physical activity, when you are upset, etc.
  - What pose was the hardest and how can you make it easier?
    - Practice makes it easier to get into yoga poses. It's also always OK to adapt the pose so that it feels good to you. Yoga teaches you to be patient and breathe through things that are difficult.

## Appendix B

### Survey Provided to JMF Teachers and Staff

#### Curriculum Survey

##### Letter of Consent

Thank you so much for completing this survey so that we can continue to better serve students across Central Indiana! Your feedback is greatly appreciated.

*By completing this survey you are voluntarily participating in a research study. The information provided will be used to evaluate the curriculum presented. It would be helpful to review all items in its entirety, however, if you do not want to answer a question - simply go on to the next one as your participation is on a voluntary basis. In completing this survey you are giving consent that we are using your responses in order to improve our curriculum to benefit both you and your students ability to participate and learn. There are no known risks associated with participating in completion of this survey. No personal data will be collected. Any questions may be sent via email to malegaul@iu.edu. In the following survey you will be asked to answer 9 multiple choice questions and 1 open-ended response.*

To what extent do you agree with the statements in the following questions:

1. I would consider the content provided to be valuable to students learning.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. I would consider the quality of the content provided to be outstanding.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree

- 
- Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

3. I feel that the content provided was appropriate for my students grade-level.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

---

4. I feel that the content provided was effective in teaching my students that everyone feels things differently.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. I feel that the content provided was effective in acting as a brain break which resulted in improved classroom participation shortly after.

- 
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

6. I feel that the content provided was effective in teaching my students strategies assessing how they feel.

- Strongly agree
- Agree



Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

7. I feel the activity provided was effective in helping students to experience the benefits of mindfulness.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

8. The content provided kept my students engaged in learning.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

9. I feel that the guide provided was designed in a way that was easy to follow and implement as a teacher.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

10. What suggestions do you have to improve this curriculum?

