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Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Presented by

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"The Role of Mindfulness in Early Childhood Educators' Mental Health and Emotion Regulation Outcomes "

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Abstract

Research indicates that teaching is a highly stressful, complex, and demanding profession that is often met with little support (e.g., lack of resources, and professional development trainings). Therefore, teachers consequently experience heightened levels of depression and stress. Mindfulness-based interventions have shown efficacy in reducing mental health symptoms and improving emotion regulation outcomes for teachers. However, there are gaps in the understanding of whether mindfulness-based interventions are good tools and resources for teachers in the U.S., specifically for early childhood educators. Additionally, gaps in the theoretical grounding of mindfulness-based interventions are evident. This dissertation aimed to address these gaps across three separate, but related studies.

Study 1

The first paper aimed to synthesize the current literature on mindfulness interventions for teachers, with a specific focus on identifying modifiable emotion regulation outcomes and most relevant theoretical underpinnings. Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, fifteen articles were selected for review from online databases and were coded across multiple study domains including study design, sample, and intervention characteristics. Results suggest that only 33.3% of the included studies utilize theory [e.g., Flow Theory (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) and the Theory of Change (Roseser et al., 2012)] to inform their work. Most reviewed studies indicated that MBIs significantly improve a multitude of mental health and emotion regulation outcomes. Specific recommendations for future research are made and a mid-level model is proposed to examine the relationships between MBIs, mental health, and emotion regulation outcomes among teachers.

Study 2

The second paper is a qualitative, thematic analysis of early childhood educators' ($n = 22$) stressors, their thoughts on stress spillover, modeling and teaching about emotions/coping behaviors, and useful activities centered around emotions, emotion regulation, or mindfulness. Themes included discussions about child needs, relationship management, lack of resources, modeling and labeling emotions or coping strategies. Findings from our thematic analysis indicate early childhood educators experience various stressors but acknowledge potential spillover effects to their students and are motivated to create fun and engaging developmentally appropriate activities for their students as they approach their role as sources of coping socialization.

Study 3

The third paper evaluated the feasibility, acceptability, and efficacy of an adapted pilot mindfulness-based intervention, Promoting Resilience in Stress Management (PRISM) for early

childhood educators' (n=32) emotion regulation and mental health outcomes following their enrollment in PRISM. The study achieved feasibility with high retention rates (82.05%) and satisfactory acceptability scores (M=29.31, SD=3.14) Results revealed several significant group differences for mental health and mindfulness outcomes. Additionally, regression results indicated significant associations between pre-intervention distress tolerance and post-intervention depression and stress. Research on the effect of mindfulness-based interventions on long-term outcomes is necessary for early childhood educators. Moreover, further research is merited to understand which mindfulness components produce the most prominent mental health and emotion regulation outcomes.

Conclusion

This dissertation proposes a mid-level theoretical model for mindfulness-based interventions. This dissertation also provides valuable insights to early childhood educators' stressors following the pandemic, and ways in which educators can teach their young students about emotions and coping. Results highlight the feasibility and acceptability of a mindfulness-based intervention to bolster emotion regulation outcomes and reduce negative mental health outcomes for early childhood educators. Future Research should focus on incorporating theory into studies of mindfulness-based interventions and focus on strengthening distress tolerance skills for the most robust outcomes.