

5-2024

Improving Mental Health and Well-Being in Elementary School Students through Stress Management Activities

Shya Vasquez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all



Part of the [Elementary Education Commons](#), and the [Health and Physical Education Commons](#)

This Capstone Project (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

Improving Mental Health and Well-Being in Elementary School
Students through Stress Management Activities

Shya K. Vasquez

LS 400

Professor Paoze Thao

Liberal Studies Department

College of Education

California State University Monterey Bay

Abstract

The number of students who are experiencing mental health issues is on the rise. There is a variety of reasons that contribute to the increasing numbers which include the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of support from teachers, the kinds of mental health activities that have not been incorporated into classrooms, and much more. Given this, this capstone project examines how to improve mental health and well-being of elementary school students through stress management activities through the use of literature review, interviews with two teachers, two parents, and two prospective teachers, and classroom observations. The results indicated the many benefits and different perspectives on how to improve students' mental health and well-being through various stress management activities.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Improving Mental Health and Well-Being in Elementary School Students through Stress Management Activities	
Introduction and Background	5
Literature Review	7
Symptoms and Statistics of Mental Health Issues	9
Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health	10
The Effects of Teacher Mental Health & Classroom Climate	11
Solutions	
Integrating Mindfulness in the Classroom	14
Flexible Classroom Seating & Well -Being Exercises	15
School Mental Health Services	16
Transforming Anxious Learners	17
Encouraging Parent & Teacher Relationships	18
Methods and Procedures	19
Procedures	20
Results, Findings, and Discussions	21
Results and Findings	22
Discussion	25
Problems and Limitations	25
Recommendations	26
Conclusion	27

References	29
Appendix A	33
Appendix B	34
Appendix C	35
Appendix D	37

Introduction and Background

Mental Health issues seem to be exponentially rising by the year, especially in younger children at the elementary school age level. There are several causes for this rise, so it is important for educators to figure out how they could support students during this crucial period of development in their lives. Often, teachers disregard their students' personal needs and like to look only at what they need academically. In order for our students to perform well in the classroom, their mental health and well-being needs to be aligned, and healthy which is why it is crucial that mental health activities are put into a teacher's daily routine. There are many factors that can play into the mental health of a child, such as the classroom environment, the relationship between student and teacher, their homelife, the effects of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, and much more. As educators and parents, it is important to realize how crucial a child's development is to their lifelong learning. It is important that teachers are equipped to help students, to ensure that they grow up by providing the correct support and tools to succeed.

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act, and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. According to data from the Children's Hospital Association, there were more than 47,000 mental health visits to emergency departments at 38 children's hospitals around the country in the first three quarters of 2021 – nearly 40% higher than the same period in 2020 (SAMHSA, n.d.a). Studies show the number of students who are dealing with mental health issues is increasing from grades K-12. There are a plethora of ways to lower these numbers according to recent studies. It is important that teachers get creative with their lesson plans and try to integrate unique and hands-on activities that allow students to learn while exploring a fun side to their education. Hands-on learning environments are key to developing certain skills

such as thinking, problem solving, listening, and even the basics like using pencils and scissors (Gratopp, K. 2022). Teachers can improve the mental health of students through these creative lesson plans, stress management activities and making mental health a topic in the classroom. Students face everyday stressors in and outside of the classroom. The stress caused by these day-to-day events may have an impact on children's health that lasts into the future leading to anxiety and other health concerns. Equipping children with coping strategies may allow them to better deal with these stressors and prevent impact on future health (Bazzano, 2018).

Thinking back to my own experiences, I recall the many times I did not feel supported in the classroom by the teacher. I felt as if I was another number, blended in with the rest of my peers, not being given the motivation or comfort to perform well in the classroom. It is essential that educators realize how big of a role we truly play in our students' lives. This capstone will primarily focus on the impact that stress management activities in the classroom has on students' mental health and well-being. It is important as educators, to make our students experience in the classroom very positive, in hopes they will feel eager to come to school and even continue with their education into their adult life. With my own observations in a class environment, the research and interviews conducted, there are many strategies that teachers can incorporate into their students' daily routine that will positively impact their student learning. By the end of this paper, sufficient evidence will be provided to answer the following research questions: What is mental health and what are stress management activities that improve the well-being of elementary school students? Why is mental health a growing crucial issue in elementary students? What does research say about how schools improve mental health and well-being of elementary school students through stress management activities? How do teachers implement

stress management activities for elementary school students to improve their mental health and well-being? How do teachers know that their stress management activities improve the mental health and well-being of their students? What could teachers and schools do to align the mental health and well-being of their students to perform well in their academics?

Literature Review

The valuable research obtained in this paper will be very useful to answer the primary and secondary research questions mentioned above. With the many peer reviewed articles and journals, there will be sufficient information to help the audience understand why mental health is a growing issue and what are some ways educators can support their students in the classroom. While the amount of research on mental health is limitless, the sources perfectly selected and presented in this paper help support the primary questions and will give educators, parents, future teachers, and students an idea of what mental health issues look like and what can be done to support students who may be experiencing this challenge in their lives. While reading this literature review, readers should expect to gain an understanding of how stress management activities can positively affect students' mental health and overall improve their academic performance in the classroom.

When students feel mentally and emotionally supported, they will be able to perform better in the classroom, engage in learning and develop healthy strategies (Cantwell, 2023). Incorporating mental health activities is essential to a classroom routine and will set a strong foundation for a student's overall development and future success. There are many students facing very serious issues because of the many contributing factors in their lives. Almost 75% of adults with depression report that their mental health problems started in adolescence (Simon et. al., 2022). With that being said, it is vital that students are shown how to manage these emotions

from a young age, to reduce the rise of growing mental health problems. The main goal should be to lower these statistics and hope for the depression rates to subside. A great way to start to lower these rates, is to start showing our students from a young age what self-care is and how to identify if they are in need of help of some kind. School is such an important part of a child's life.

School definitely can be overwhelming for students, as everyday they are introduced to new concepts. For most, from the age of 5 we are in school every day up until college. Schools and teachers hold a huge responsibility in making sure that these students grow up with the best school experience possible. Making a comfortable environment for students and incorporating healthy mental exercises for the kids will lead to better results in the classroom. A misconception that people grow up with is "school is boring," and "teachers are mean." But as educators there is room for this assumption to be eliminated. It is important to make a classroom where learning is enjoyable for students, a place where they feel able to express themselves, and also a place where they should not have to feel stressed. There are many risks we take in putting pressure on students. Anxiety, depression, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Tourette syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022,) are some disorders to name a few that can develop. Therefore, the question that lies is how can we lower the chances of students developing these following disorders?

The following subsequent paragraphs will discuss the symptoms of mental health issues, impact of COVID-19, the effects of teacher mental health and classroom climate, along with some solutions to mental health issues.

Symptoms and Statistics of Mental Health Issues

(The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) reported that there are nearly 8 in 10 children (78.1%) with depression receiving treatment, 6 in 10 children (59.3%) with anxiety receiving treatment, & more than 5 in 10 children (53.5%) with behavior disorders receiving treatment. The numbers will increase, especially since there are kids still suffering because of the pandemic. Therefore, it is critical that action is taken to help them. As Simon, et al (2022) indicated, it is important for parents to make sure that their children are receiving an adequate amount of sleep, because it affects their bodies, and mental health in many ways. Students who have been diagnosed with either anxiety or depression among children aged 6–17 years increased from 5.4% in 2003 to 8% in 2007 and to 8.4% in 2011–2012 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022,). The numbers will continue to rise, if teachers do not implement mental health activities into the classroom.

While keeping note of our students; academic progress is important, and making sure they are obtaining the correct knowledge to excel, it is important to make sure that our students are mentally capable of obtaining knowledge and participating in classroom activities. Ensuring that our students are mentally sufficient should be something that a teacher pays attention to everyday and there are several ways to identify this. If students seem to be in self-isolation mode and do not engage with other students, it can be a sign that they may be experiencing anxiety, depression, or other emotional issues. Secondly, students who are involved in harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) may be frequently targeted and may target other children as a coping mechanism. Students who are reluctant to speak in class may be experiencing social anxiety or may have a fear of failure. A recent drop in achievement is a major red flag and may be occurring due to physical, situational, and/or mental health issues. This would be a sign that a

teacher should act to get to the root of the issue. Additionally, students who are showing signs of disorganization, memory issues, and refusing to complete assignments may be experiencing cognitive issues, anxiety, or depression. Frequent visits to the nurse, lack of focus, sleeping in class, compulsive behaviors, irritable moods, panic attacks, interest in substance abuse, theft, assault, and disruptive behavior, are all signs that mental health issues are occurring within a child. Their homelife may be affecting them, which is the reason why it is important to make connections with the parents to get a better understanding of what they may be going through. Taking action and evaluating the situation when any students may be showing the signs above, are very crucial as a teacher, to help students get support if needed (Thrive, 2023,).

Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

As everyone knows COVID-19 was a worldwide pandemic that affected all lives ranging from children to adults. Everyone's lives changed in drastic ways and for students that was changing from the normal classroom format to online learning. Many have noted that since the pandemic, there are children who are still adjusting back to life in the classroom. Bhogal et al(2021) explains how students have developed fears of catching the virus, compounded with social stressors, such as school closures, lifestyle changes, social isolation, and caregiver stress, which had adversely affected children's short- and long-term mental health. The shutdown of schools led to the students becoming more dependent on their electronic devices, which also can lead to unhealthy behaviors. Also, some students struggle with socializing because of the period of time where there was no contact. The students who were in school when this happened may suffer and develop depression or anxiety being in a social setting. Children who have experienced traumatic events have been shown to exhibit greater symptoms of anxiety and

depression (Graham-Bermann, et al, 2021). The impact of the pandemic definitely can be considered traumatic for some, which can lead to these disorders. Another finding from (Graham-Bermann, et al, 2021) is that many children experience serious mental health problems that, if left untreated, have long-term consequences for their optimal development. Children completed a mental health screening form prior to the pandemic (October 2019) and at two time points during the pandemic (May, August 2020). We examined the impact of SES on mental health changes over time, COVID-19 fears and behaviors, and perceived impact of the pandemic (Bhogal, Borg, Jovanovic, & Marusak, 2021).

There are students dealing with trauma on a daily basis stemmed from the pandemic, which has left everlasting effects on them. Many of these children are referred to as “COVID Kids” because of the extreme differences between this generation and previous generations who did not experience this worldwide pandemic. The pandemic has caused this generation of students to experience an abundance of mental health issues and even issues like socializing with their peers or feeling more comfortable using technology as a source of learning. That is why in the classroom, the mental health of the student should be the main priority, as not everything is visible to the teachers’ eyes of what the student is dealing with internally. Teachers are approaching this situation by integrating different types of support into the classroom, such as having one on one meetings with each student to ensure they are performing well as talking about COVID-19 and addressing fears that may arise.

The Effects of Teacher Mental Health & Classroom Climate

Harding, S. et al., (2019) discusses the effects of teachers' mental health on their students. There are major studies found such as how better teacher wellbeing is associated with better student wellbeing and with lower student psychological difficulties. Also, lower teacher

depressive symptoms are associated with better student wellbeing. The mental health of children is known to be slowly deteriorating, but with a positive teacher and environment, the rates are positively increasing in many ways. According to the text, teachers should aim to foster good quality relationships, and contribute to student mental health and wellbeing through identification of and intervention with students at risk of mental health problems. The mental health of a teacher impacts students in many ways. A positive teacher will set a positive tone for the classroom. A teacher who is struggling mentally should remember to take time for themselves, as their emotions can affect the children in many ways, since they spend an abundance of their day with each other. Harding et al (2019) further discusses the impact of teachers from Canada with positive relationships being an important source of enjoyment, motivation, and positive emotions. Teachers must take action by implementing self-care routines into their daily routines to ensure the success of their students.

The mood of a teacher can definitely impact a student, and will set the tone of the classroom. A positive teacher will lead to a student to performing better and enable them to grow in a positive environment. Research suggests that teachers' use of praise and reprimands is a malleable classroom factor that influences children's behavioral and socio-emotional development, morning greetings to students, healthy communication skills, and thorough language are great ways for teachers to set the tone of a positive classroom environment. Additionally, school districts can consider making it a requirement for teachers to attend mental health trainings to make sure they are given guidance on how to identify mental health issues within themselves and with their students (Harding et al 2019). It is important that teachers can get the support they need, to make sure they are giving their students useful classroom exercises and also so they are able to teach as best as they can for their students. Additionally, it is

important that teachers have knowledge of student anxiety and anxiety treatment (e.g., core manifestations of anxiety such as physiological arousal, behavioral avoidance, and anxious thoughts), and use of anxiety reduction strategies in the classroom (e.g., relaxation strategies, encouraging the use of coping self-talk, and gradual exposure to feared situations) (Ginsburg et al, 2022). Being able to identify the signs and also give solutions to the students will make the job for a teacher more effective and also useful for the students.

Additionally, another important component of a successful classroom is maintaining a classroom environment that is comfortable and inclusive, making all students feel welcome and encouraged. Classroom climate can impact student achievement, motivation, well-being, and engagement (Hughes & Coplan, 2018). There are many ways to build a classroom that will positively impact student learning. Some examples of this would be simply painting the walls a certain color, to display a vibrant energy for the children. Hanging posters that reference ideas that students of this age would relate to is another great idea. Additionally, hanging posters that are motivational and even pertaining to different cultures is a great way to make all the students feel seen and heard. Teachers who display teacher detachment, which often means the teacher is disengaged and has rigid and less flexible classroom routines, often will face dealing with students who are having trouble focusing or completing their work. Maintaining a well-organized classroom with classroom management looks like having smooth transitions between lessons, as well as having warm and clear exchanges between the teacher and the students. There is a plethora of ways to make a classroom environment comfortable and inviting for kids of all ages. Maintaining a classroom environment has shown to significantly improve students attitude toward school and gives them something to look forward to (Tian, Du, Huebner, 2015).

The following subsequent paragraphs suggest some ways to improving the mental health and well-being of elementary school students which include the integration of mindfulness in the classroom, incorporation of flexible classroom and well-being exercises in the classroom, providing of school mental services in the school, transforming anxious learners, and encouraging parents and teacher relationship.

Solutions

Integrating Mindfulness in the Classroom

Integrating mindfulness is a great technique to help lower mental health issues from occurring in the classroom. It can help students focus, reduce stress and improve their emotional well-being. Most importantly, it can help create a more positive and productive learning environment. Essentially, incorporating mindfulness activities into the classroom will show students how to collect their thoughts, staying in the moment, and taking one thing at a time. One mindfulness activity that has been proven to be successful in the classroom is a “sound activity” (Klinger-Krebs, 2023, p.112). This activity would begin by asking students to close their eyes (only if they are comfortable) and place their palms on their desk. Have students focus on the sounds around them and ask them to raise their hand when they hear a sound coming from the bell or CD player. Next, slowly lower the volume and ask them to put their hands down when they no longer hear the sound. Another activity would be having students “draw their happy place” (Klinger-Krebs, 2023, p. 87). Have students sit quietly and draw a place that makes them feel happy and safe. This helps them focus on that place, and less on everything else around them. This is a great way to get them thinking about their personal likes, dislikes, and what they may need as an individual. In addition, using TIPP (Temperature, Intense exercise, Paced breathing, and Progressive muscle relaxation) (Klinger-Krebs, 2023). Using Mindfulness

exercises is a great stress management activity to promote healthy student mental health and well-being. Making sure the students remain grounded and content at all times, will ensure better academic performance and attitude during the school days. A fun way to practice keeping them staying grounded is by having them state 5 things in the room, 4 things they can feel on or in their body, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can or could smell and 1 thing they can taste (Klinger-Krebs, 2023). There are so many ways to incorporate these activities into the classroom and as a teacher, it is a great idea to get creative and think of ways that you can help your students be content and successful.

Flexible Classroom Seating & Well -Being Exercises

Flexible classroom seating has become a popular tool that teachers have been integrating into the classroom. Flexible seating is the practice of allowing and providing students with different seating options. Some teachers use yoga balls, chairs, couches, stools, etc. and students of all ages seem to really enjoy this idea. According to Bluteau, et al (2022), flexible seating improves students; mood, behavior, and overall mental health in the classroom. Additionally, the research provided shows how flexible seating can contribute to the development of certain personal skills, such as self-reliance, self-regulation, and problem solving. It's a great idea to step out of the traditional classroom setting, and try new things for our students that are not distracting, yet effective and fun for the students (Bluteau et al, 2022).

Additionally, some other well-being exercises similar to this would be having students practice yoga in the classroom. The data presented in this study shows that students seem to extremely benefit from using yoga and mindfulness in the classroom. Students; psychosocial, emotional, and academic scores seemed to skyrocket after participating in these activities. (Bazzano, Anderson, Hylton, Gustat, 2018). It has been proven that suicide is currently the

second-leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10-34. Because of this, there are many tips that teachers and parents can use with their children. The first strategy would be talking about mental health and opening up that window for students to engage in this conversation. There is a stigma around people who have mental health issues may look “weak” but it should be instilled in students that it is not weak or bad to express your feelings. Secondly, making sure teachers are receiving training to appropriately identify if students are experiencing mental health issues. Students need to feel comfortable to go to an adult and get support if needed, and the adults need to be equipped with how to take action if needed. Also, incorporating mental health into teaching is a great method. For example, a reading lesson may identify and discuss mental health topics (e.g., trauma, stigma) in books that students are reading. It is important to be cautious and creative while making lesson plans and thinking of how to integrate new concepts. Making sure that teachers are receiving care themselves and are able to give this care and support for their students’ well-being is immensely important (Park, Nakamura, (n.d.).

School Mental Health Services

It is pivotal that all students feel they have an outlet to vent, gain guidance or support from. Not all students have a stable home environment or a home filled with parents. Therefore, it is important that students feel they have a resource to go to if they need help, which is why it is essential that schools have mental health services to support the students if needed. The more aggressive elementary counseling policies make greater test score gains and are less likely to report internalizing or externalizing problem behaviors compared to students with similar observed characteristics in similar schools in other states (Reback, 2010). Additionally, having mental health services has shown to reduce the number of reporting problems with

students physically fighting each other, cutting class, stealing, or using drugs. For example, TIES is a program designed to bring trauma-informed services to early elementary classrooms and this has been proven to positively help students (Rishel et al, 2019). More schools should definitely look into these programs and think of adding more opportunities and resources for the students. Students of all ages should have access to this resource and all school districts should ensure that there is a mental health staff who can effectively make a difference in a student's life if needed.

Transforming Anxious Learners

While there are many great exercises such as yoga, journaling, breathing exercises, calming corners, etc, Oehlberg (2006) indicated that there are also ways to help anxious learners through their school work. Instead of sticking to the status quo and teaching students with the same repetitive lessons, it is a great idea to turn lessons into something really fun where they can use their imagination. According to the book, *Reaching and Teaching Stressed and Anxious Learners in Grades 4-8 : Strategies for Relieving Distress and Trauma in Schools and Classrooms,*” there is a wide range of activities. Oehlberg (2006) he gives a plethora of ideas that can be incorporated into a lesson plan. For example, students can create a fictional comic book about the imaginary return of certain historical figures, like George Washington or Benjamin Franklin. Students can do crossword puzzles instead of spelling tests, have students make their own mini versions of a beach or sandbox, and/or they can create their own plays.

Students can create a mural to express their feelings, have students decorate the outside of a shoebox as how they want others to see them, and have them engage in creative writing such as poems. They can create a character wall filled with all of their favorite characters or try writing a letter to themselves about something that has made them hurt or happy (Oehlberg, 2006). There is a plethora of activities that teachers can do to get students out of their comfort

zone and learn in a fun way. The great thing about learning is that there is no limit or right answer to it. Learning can be taught as anything, as long as you are willing to be creative!

The list goes on and on about all the fun things you can do in the classroom to enhance student well-being. Something that can also help transform anxious learners is incorporating physical activity into the classroom. Physical education can support social emotional learning and students; well-being. It is essential we incorporate outside activities into the daily routine, to get our students to release energy and learn in a unique way (Worrell et al (2020). Physical activity is a great way to get kids off of the computers and off their seats to engage in outdoor activities.

Encouraging Parent & Teacher Relationships

The relationship between the student's parents and the teacher are immensely important to a student's success. There needs to be a connection between the two to make sure both parties know what is going on in and out of the classroom for the child. Having an involved parent with an involved teacher will make a great partnership for the student. For example, a student may be struggling at home or having issues inside the classroom. Whether the issue is at home with the parent or at school with the teacher, these issues can negatively affect the student mentally and academically (Sultan, Hagger Hussain, 2013). Additionally, it is important that teachers and parents use positive reinforcements to encourage the student to keep working hard. Students need this push and this acknowledgement so it is important that they are getting this praise in the classroom and in their homelife as well, to help them gain confidence which will positively affect their mental health (Spilt et al, 2016). Additionally, giving parents tips on how they can help their child outside of the classroom is a great way to support them. Some tips to instill into

your students' parents are: Keep your child on a steady daily schedule. Help your child work through homework problems without getting upset with them or doing it for them.

Set up one on one tutoring for your child and create opportunities for your child to socialize (Gratopp, 2022).

Methods and Procedures

This capstone project gives firsthand information on how stress management activities can positively impact a student's well-being. With the findings from my literature review, I was able to go into my investigation prepared and ready to ask my interviewees questions pertaining to this topic. My interviewees consist of 2 parents, 2 teachers, and 2 future teachers. These interviews were very helpful and allowed me to gain a better understanding from different perspectives on the importance of mental health activities being incorporated into a child's daily routine. My reasoning behind my selection of interviewees simply stemmed from the fact I believe these people can provide me with the most useful information. Interviewing teachers allowed me to understand what kind of activities are being used in the classroom that have been successful in promoting healthy mental health. Interviewing parents allowed me to see what parents' opinions and what they think is best for the children. Additionally, interviewing prospective teachers was useful as many of the future teachers all have done their Service Learning course which enabled them to go into different classrooms and gain different perspectives and methods from different teachers. Some sample interview questions consist of: How do you create a safe and inclusive learning environment for students' mental health? How do you foster a positive relationship between your child and their school to support their mental mental well-being? As a future teacher, how will you promote a safe and inclusive learning environment for your students? The materials I used while conducting these interviews

was my phone to record them, my list of printed out questions and a notebook. I made sure they consented to everything before I began. Having my phone there to record was very useful as I am able to go back and relisten to everything all over again while referencing them in my paper.

Procedures

The way this investigation began was by first creating a list of carefully curated questions to ask, which are documented in Appendix A ~ Interview Questions for Teachers, Appendix B ~ Interview Questions for Parents & Appendix C ~ Interview Questions for Prospective Teachers. Additionally, I observed children in different age levels inside the classroom, to gain firsthand knowledge of what teachers are doing in the classroom to support student well-being. The questions that I used to follow along as I observed, are located in Appendix D ~ Questions for Self to Consider While Doing School Observation. The first teacher who was interviewed was from the South Monterey County school district, while the second teacher was from the San Jose School District area. The point of getting teachers from two different areas was to try and interact with different teachers and students from various backgrounds and cultures, and to see if there were any differences between districts in different areas. Both of the interviewees identified as Mexican- American and have been teaching for 15+ years. Parent one who was interviewed was from South Monterey county and identified as Mexican American. Parent two who was from the San Jose District identified as white. Additionally, the two prospective teachers who were interviewed, identified as Mexican and have been in the teaching program at CSUMB for the last two years. Conducting these interviews was immensely useful while conducting my research as it enabled me to get information directly from the source. Talking to these teachers who make lesson plans everyday and observing what stress management activities seem to be useful for students allowed me to witness everything firsthand.

Results, Findings and Discussions

In the next sections, I will be able to elaborate on my findings and give the information from my interviewees that support my primary question which is: How do teachers improve mental health and well-being of elementary school students through stress management activities? Additionally my research supports my secondary research questions which are: What is mental health and what are stress management activities that improve the well-being of elementary school students? Why is mental health a growing crucial issue in elementary students? What does research say about how schools improve mental health and well-being of elementary school students through stress management activities? How do teachers implement stress management activities for elementary school students to improve their mental health and well-being? How do teachers know that their stress management activities improve the mental health and well-being of their students? What could teachers and schools do to align the mental health and well-being of their students to perform well in their academics? With my research, I was able to find valuable ways that these types of activities can be integrated into the classroom. The responses were very valuable and gave me ideas that myself and other teachers can incorporate it into their lesson plans. While each teacher had a different approach to this issue, they were each useful in their own ways as each classroom and student will learn differently.

Additionally, hearing from parents regarding their students and how they learn best was very useful as parents know firsthand how their children need to be supported. Also, interviewing prospective teachers who are in the credential program and obtaining experience in the classroom through their Service Learning hours and student teaching, was very helpful and allowed me to gain new perspectives and ideas on how to incorporate stress management activities.

Results & Findings

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Mental Health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act, and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. While conducting my interviews, I asked Teacher A from the South Monterey County district why she believed mental health is a growing issue for students? Her answer was “Unfortunately a lot of teachers lack compassion, which reflects onto our students. That is the honest truth” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 29, 2024). With this being said, a discussion that teachers need to be considering is “Am I giving my students the guidance and confidence they need?” As teachers our mood and attitude can completely affect our students which is why it is imperative that we challenge our students while giving them grace, empathy, and compassion. They should feel comfortable enough to approach us with questions.

As mentioned before, teacher behavior is immensely important to student success. Our moods reflect onto our students. Research suggests that stress-management activities are a great way to improve student mental health, as studies have shown that these activities have raised student academic performance by 90% (Tian, L., Du, M., & Huebner, E. S. 2015). When asking the teachers how they implement stress management activities into their classrooms, Teacher A mentioned “I do everything with a purpose. For example if I take the students outside to lay on the grass and look at the clouds, I want them to learn about how clouds are formed, but having them lay on the grass allows them to get that time to relax and learn in an usual way” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 29, 2024). Teacher B reported she starts off test days with different stress-management activities. “Every Friday, we have test days. And my students

perform way better when they start days with something fun” (Teacher B, personal communication, April 2, 2024).

I was intrigued when she mentioned this, so I took the opportunity to observe her fourth grade class on two different test days. Students performed better on their math tests when they started their day with “watercolor mood art” versus the week prior they all scored very low when there was no morning stress management activity. The average score was a 10, then after checking in with the teacher the average soon became a 20 after incorporating art time first thing in the morning. Also, while observing the Kindergarten class, I went on a Monday and Tuesday when paraprofessionals had to work with the students in the back. This cut out some of their interactive reading time which caused a lot of tantrums to occur. Thursday and Friday were normal days where the kids got to do yoga, interactive reading, dance, color, and other stress management activities. With fun, engaging activities there were 0 tantrums, when the students were not glued to a chair all day. It is very important that teachers are able to identify if their students are experiencing mental health issues. “I like to start off the day with a morning greeting so I have a poster and the students can point to their mood. I’ll ask each of them how they are feeling in the morning and with that, it gives me an indication of who needs a little pick me up or who may be experiencing some difficulties” (Teacher B, personal communication, April 2, 2024). Teacher A states “With Kinder students, they wear their emotions on their faces. If they are happy or something super exciting happens I’ll be able to tell. If they are sad or mad, I’ll be able to tell. I do have to say, as a teacher you have to be able to have that radar and read your students” (Teacher A, personal communication, March 29, 2024).

When interviewing the parents and prospective teachers, I asked them if they felt teachers and schools were giving their students the opportunity to align their mental health and well-being

as well as give them the tools to perform well academically. Parent A from South County mentioned that the teacher communicates with the parents throughout the day using the Remind app and updates them on what their child is doing throughout the day. The parent stated when the teacher sends pictures of the students having nap time, dance sessions, brain breaks, mindfulness activities, etc, they know their child is going to come home in a much better mood, ready for school the next day (Parent A, personal communication, March 29, 2024) Parent B from the San Jose School District stated “I am so happy that my student ended up with Mrs. A, because I can tell mental health is a topic in the classroom. She went over a lot of it during our parent conferences. My child struggles with focusing a lot so I do feel my child's teacher focuses on academics but also mental health (Parent B, personal communication, April 2, 2024). Prospective teacher A gave very thorough opinions and gave her insights in regards to what she saw in her experiences this far in the classroom. “From my experiences during my service learning specifically, I remember being in a class where it was work, work, work. I can see the kids passion for learning just wasn't there and that was because of the teacher unfortunately. I went from seeing a class like that, to then going to a class where the kids got to do fun activities but the teacher didn't have control, so I think it is important to have a healthy balance between having these fun activities but also showing them authority” (Prospective Teacher A, personal communication, April 5, 2024). Prospective Teacher B stated “School can become a frustrating place to be in for some students. Our jobs as teachers are to make sure their mental health is first and foremost and they are being given the space to have time to focus on their health and needs, in addition to their learning. So as teachers the question we have to ask ourselves is how can we do this simultaneously” (Prospective Teacher B, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

Discussion

From the literature review, research conducted, and the many interviews, all sources have helped support the claim that stress management activities are essential to our students' mental health and well-being. Many activities have been proven effective such as art, interactive reading, yoga, PE, outside time, journaling, crafting, and much more. From my experiences in the classroom, I can see that these creative lesson plans with interactive activities are extremely beneficial to student academic success. There are many great ways to integrate stress management activities into our lesson plans, but as mentioned from Prospective Teacher A, it is important we let our students have fun while showing them the importance of behaving. With teachers who are motivated to help our students, it is important to look at all aspects. In order for them to excel better academically, they need to be mentally prepared and content. There are so many ways to integrate these activities into the classroom and with committed and creative teachers, this will be something that teachers will find easy to implement.

Problems and Limitations

After analyzing my information and gathering all of my data, a limitation that I have come across is having such a small group of subject participants in my study. Having only 2 of each to interview was challenging at times, as it limits the amount of data I am able to collect and analyze. Another limitation was not having as much time to interview the teachers, due to their schedules. Some of the questions were answered vaguely, and I was not given enough information for certain questions, but I had to make do with what was given to me. Additionally, with more participants I would have been able to gather teachers from different grade levels to gain perspectives from different age groups. Having a teacher from Kindergarten and fourth grade was very useful but also a limitation, as getting more teachers from other grades would

have given even more perspectives and ideas that future teachers could use in their classrooms. Additionally, I emailed many teachers from several different districts and asked if they would be able to participate, but not all responded. I understand that they have busy schedules, so it can be challenging to find time to participate, so I am thankful for those who took the time to participate and allowed me to observe their classrooms.

Recommendations

After reviewing the information, I have gathered from my literature review and interviews, I can conclude that incorporating stress management activities into students daily routine is immensely important and detrimental to their mental health. A suggestion I would make for a teacher is that it is important that they get to know each of their students and try to understand how each student learns best. It is important to be aware of your students' mental health and well-being, and also get to know what their lives look like outside of the classroom. Their homelife can be affecting their behavior at school, which is why it is important that both the teacher and parent build a relationship so both are able to communicate how their students are doing in and outside of the classroom. Some great ways to make this connection is communicating to your students via the Remind app, through email, or setting up conferences if necessary.

Additionally, it is important as a teacher to be educated on mental health and figure out what a child with healthy mental health looks like. Also, being educated on what stress management activities are effective in the classroom is a great place to start, and will positively impact your performance as a teacher and your students' performance and attitude in the classroom. As a teacher, it is also important to be aware of our own mental health as our mood and attitude can immensely reflect onto our students and influence their outlook toward school.

Kids enjoy coming to school when they know they have a teacher who will make the day exciting for them. Something else to take into consideration, is that many students are experiencing trauma from the COVID-19 Pandemic. With this, it is important to keep in mind that there may be some students who need extra support and conversations in regards to this topic.

Ultimately, it is important as an educator to get creative with your lesson plans. Instead of having them read out of a science book, take the kids outside and let them lay on the grass. Have them interact with each other, with nature, with art, and their imagination. It should be encouraged to step outside of the traditional classroom lesson planning, and try new techniques and methods to get students excited about learning. There is a wide range of activities for every subject, so it is important to get to know the students, research different activities, and try new things! With teachers who strive to make school an enjoyable experience for their students, there will be positive results in their lives in every aspect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my Capstone project supports the claim that stress management activities are extremely beneficial to student mental health and well-being. By incorporating stress management activities into students' everyday routine, student mental health will be positively impacted. Unfortunately many students dread coming to school. It may feel like something they “have” to do, when it should become something they “want” to do. Additionally, a student's childhood is the most important part of their development. During this most important part of their life, they spend the majority of their time in school. They spend about 6 hours a day in the classroom, for 5 days out of the week. With taking this into consideration, teachers must strive to make school an enjoyable experience. For some students, school is an outlet. It may be looked at

as an escape from their reality and their homelife. Their homelife may be stressful or there may be other contributing factors to their lives that they may not be able to express and may deal with internally. It is important to be there for your students and let them know you as the teacher can be an outlet for them.

In addition, using these many stress-management activities will allow students to enjoy their time in school and learn in a fun way. Through the many tips and exercises provided, it is apparent that there are ways that teachers can incorporate stress management activities into their classrooms. This project has demonstrated that stress management activities will positively impact students and help them excel in their academics as well as when managing their well-being. It is important that students feel supported, guided and valued while receiving their education. While it is essential that students are taught the school curriculum, it is also important that their mental health is being valued and talked about in the classroom.

References

- Bazzano, A. N., Anderson, C. E., Hylton, C., Gustat, J. (2018). Effect of mindfulness and yoga on quality of life for elementary school students and teachers: Results of a randomized controlled school-based study. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 11, 81–89. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S157503>
- Bhagal, A., Borg, B., Jovanovic, T., & Marusak, H. A. (2021). Are the kids really alright? Impact of Covid-19 on mental health in a majority Black American sample of schoolchildren. *Psychiatry Research*.
- Bluteau, J., Aubenas, S., Dufour, F. (2022). Influence of flexible classroom seating on the well-being and mental health of upper elementary school students: A gender analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 821227–821227. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg>
- Cantwell, E. (2023, Dec 4) Integrating well-being in your classroom - Center for the advancement of well-being. Creative Services, George Mason University. Retrieved from <https://wellbeing.gmu.edu/resources-2/resources/integrating-well-being-in-your-classroom>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, March 8). Data and statistics on children’s mental health. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/index.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, April 19). What is childrens mental health? Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/index.html>

- Graham-Bermann, S. A., Roberts, A., Osbourne, M., Shaughnessy, S., Finkelstein, S. (2021). Enhancing child mental health in school and community settings: A pilot study of the kids' empowerment program. *Psychological Services*.
- Gratopp, K. (2022). How to improve the overall wellbeing of your elementary student: Tips and tricks. Western Michigan University. Retrieved from <https://wmich.edu/publichealth/blog/2022/11/gratopp>
- Ginsburg, G. S., Pella, J. E., Ogle, R. R., DeVito, A., Raguin, K., & Chan, G. (2022). Teacher knowledge of anxiety and use of anxiety reduction strategies in the classroom. *Journal of Psychologists and Counselors in Schools*, 32(2), 174–184. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2021.26>
- Harding, S., Morris, R., Gunnell, D., Ford, T., Hollingworth, W., Tilling, K., Evans, R., Bell, S., Grey, J., Brockman, R., Campbell, R., Araya, R., Murphy, S., & Kidger, J. (2019). Is teachers' mental health and wellbeing associated with students' Mental Health and wellbeing? *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 242, 180–187.
- Hughes, K., & Coplan, R. J. (2018). Why classroom climate matters for children high in anxious solitude: A study of differential susceptibility. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 33(1), 94–102. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000201>
- Klinger-Krebs, J. (2023, October 31). Stress-management activities to improve student mental health. Nasco Education. Retrieved from <https://nasco-education-blog.com/2022/04/25/stress-management-activities-for-students/>
- Park, Y., & Nakamura, J. (n.d.). How can we incorporate mental health education into schools? consider the 5 T's. *Student Behavior Blog*. Retrieved from

<https://studentbehaviorblog.org/how-can-we-incorporate-mental-health-education-into-schools/>

- Oehlberg, B. E. (2006). Reaching and teaching stressed and anxious learners in grades 4-8 Strategies for relieving distress and trauma in schools and classrooms. City, State: Corwin Press. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/csumb/detail.action?docID=1994346>
- Reback, R. (2010). Schools' mental health services and young children's emotions, behavior, and learning. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 29(4), 698–725. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.20528>
- Rishel, C. W., Tabone, J. K., Hartnett, H. P., & Szafran, K. F. (2019). Trauma-informed elementary schools: Evaluation of school-based early intervention for young children. *Children & Schools*, 41(4), 239–248. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdz01>
- Simon, S. L., Ware, M. A., Bowen, A. E., Chandrasekhar, J. L., Lee, J. A., Shomaker, L. B., Gulley, L. D., Heberlein, E., & Kaar, J. L. (2022). Sleep moderates improvements in Mental Health Outcomes in youth: Building resilience for healthy kids. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 36(5), 772–780.
- Spilt, J. L., Leflot, G., Onghena, P., & Colpin, H. (2016). Use of praise and reprimands as critical ingredients of teacher behavior management: Effects on children's development in the context of a teacher-mediated classroom intervention. *Prevention Science*, 17(6), 732–742. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-016-0667-y>

- Sultan, S., Hagger, M., & Hussain, I. (2013). Analyzing academic performance and mental health of elementary school students through parenting practices. *Journal of Educational Research*, 16(1).
- Thrive, S. (2023, Oct 2). Recognizing mental health issues in the classroom. Thrive Alliance Group. Retrieved from <https://thrivealliancegroup.com/recognizing-mental-health-issues--classroom/>
- Tian, L., Du, M., & Huebner, E. S. (2015). The effect of gratitude on elementary school students' subjective well-being in schools: The mediating role of prosocial behavior. *Social Indicators Research*, 122(3), 887–904. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205>
- What is mental health?*. SAMHSA. (n.d.-a). <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health>
- Worrell, A., Hushman, G., L. Gaudreault, K., Mallett, L., & Hushman, C. (2020). Merging social and emotional learning with comprehensive school physical activity programming in an elementary school. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 91(6), 36–40. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2020.1768180>

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Teachers

- 1) How do you create a safe and inclusive learning environment for students' mental health?
- 2) How do you address and support students who may be experiencing mental health challenges?
- 3) What strategies do you use to promote positive mental health and emotional regulation in your classroom?
- 4) Can you share any specific examples of how you've incorporated mental health education into your lessons?
- 5) Does the staff collaborate with other school staff or resources to ensure students mental health needs are met?
- 6) How do you collaborate with students parents or guardians to support their students mental health needs?
- 7) Are there any ways you incorporate mindfulness or self-care practices into your classroom routine?
- 8) How do you foster open communication and create a safe space for students to talk about their emotions?
- 9) Do you think having stress management activities in the classroom is equally important as having educational activities in the classroom?
- 10) Do you have any questions for me or any comments, concerns, suggestions?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Parents

- 1) How do you foster a positive relationship between your child and their school to support their mental mental well-being?
- 2) What strategies do you use to stay informed and academic in your child's school life and academic progress?
- 3) How do you encourage open communication between your child, their teacher and yourself in regards to their mental health?
- 4) Can you share any specific ways you collaborate with the school to address your child's mental health needs?
- 5) How do you create a consistent routine at home that supports your child;s well being and academic success?
- 6) In what ways do you collaborate with teachers to ensure that your child's cultural background is acknowledged and celebrated in the classroom?
- 7) How do you help your child navigate any challenges or conflicts they may face in school?
- 8) Can you share if any, what specific way you promote a positive positive household towards learning and school in your household?
- 9) As a parent, do you hope that your child's teacher is incorporating stress management activities in the classroom to support their mental health and well being?
- 10) What steps do you take to ensure that your child always feels supported and understood by their teachers?

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Prospective Teachers

- 1) How has your service learning experience influenced the methods you will use in your future teaching?
- 2) Can you share any examples you have experienced while working in the classroom, where the teacher has used effective methods of teaching while promoting mental health and wellbeing exercises for the students?
- 3) What are some effective stress management activities you have exhibited in the classroom?
- 4) Would the stress management activities you have in your classroom depend on the grade level you are teaching? If so, what are some good activities for kindergarten that you can also use for fifth grade students?
- 5) Do you think there are benefits to having stress management activities in the classroom? If so, what are some benefits?
- 6) Based on your own personal experiences, do you think that mental health needs to be addressed more in schools?
- 7) As a future teacher, how will you promote a safe and inclusive learning environment for your students?
- 8) Will implementing mental health exercises into your classroom be equally as important to students learning about math, reading and writing? Or will these exercises be more for when there is spare time?
- 9) What are some suggestions you would give to current teachers? Is there anything you would like to see change in the education system?

10) Do you have any suggestions, comments, or questions for me?

Appendix D

Questions for Myself To Consider While I Observe

- 1) How is the teacher creating a positive and inclusive classroom environment?
- 2) What stress management strategies is the teacher using to promote students social-emotional well-being?
- 3) Is the teacher using any relaxation techniques or mindfulness strategies in their lessons?
- 4) How does the teacher respond to issues her students may be experiencing (Ex: tantrums, stress, anxiety)
- 5) Does the teacher provide accessible resources to the students for their mental health?
- 6) How is the teacher incorporating mental health exercises into each lesson plan?
- 7) Has the teacher created a comfortable classroom environment (Ex: is the classroom colorful, decorated, what type of seating arrangements?)
- 8) What techniques seem to be most effective for the students in the classroom?
- 9) How does the teacher engage students and encourage active participation without forcing them or making them feel uncomfortable?
- 10) How does the teacher provide feedback to the students?