

Exploring Public Perception of Mindfulness in Canadian Schools: A News Media Content Analysis



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Introduction

Mindfulness can be described as “the [non-judgemental] awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness practices have increasingly been adopted across Canadian elementary and secondary schools, often as a “wellness intervention” that targets a variety of “social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive outcomes” (Albrecht, 2014, p. 22). However, mindfulness is often defined, framed, and utilized in very diverse ways (Ergas & Hadar, 2019). The increase in school-based mindfulness interventions has sparked discussion at multiple levels about the varying purposes, contexts, applications, and impacts of mindfulness as an educational tool (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Black, Milman, & Sussman, 2009). Despite the value in understanding the perceptions of diverse stakeholders, parents, educators, and the broader public, little research has been published to explore this understanding. To address this dearth of literature, this study seeks to explore the depiction of mindfulness in schools as it exists within Canadian news media. The news media serves as an accessible source that frames educational topics such as mindfulness that both reflects and influences public beliefs, views, and actions (Aspler, Zizzo, Pietro, & Racine, 2018; Cohen, 2010; Renwick, 2016). In revealing the novel perspectives that emerge from this exploration, it is hoped that light will be shed onto the public’s understanding of the contexts and purposes for which mindfulness is being used.

Methodology

To examine the broad perceptions of mindfulness within Canadian news media, a search was performed on the Proquest database Canadian Major Dailies of news articles published between the years 2014 and 2019. The Proquest Canadian Major Dailies database includes 33 Canadian national and regional newspapers, mainly from more populous provinces and cities. The search included the keywords ‘mindfulness’ and ‘school OR education’ and searched specifically for English language newspaper articles, initially yielding 719 results. Each article was scanned to omit editorials, reviews, or advertisements, and confirm its relevance to the study. After this scan, 71 articles were retained for qualitative deductive analysis to establish a set of themes emerging from the data. To ensure inter-rater reliability, a separate researcher independently coded a sample of the articles to cross reference with the initial coding.

Results

Many descriptions and applications of mindfulness in schools emerged from the data. Mindfulness was most commonly described as an intervention for stress and was also often described as a means of producing “present awareness” for a variety of purposes. Other descriptions included mindfulness as a form of meditation or spirituality or as a physical environment. It was often situated in physical education classrooms, creative contexts, natural environments, specific spaces reserved for mindfulness, with the use of equipment, or as a practice that could occur in any place or context.

Results (Cont.)

Of the 71 articles retained for analysis, only 54 yielded in-depth framings specifically on the purpose of mindfulness in schools. These articles were coded into categories based on emotional, cognitive, physical, and social domains, with many of the articles coded under multiple categories. 94% of the articles acknowledged emotional purposes for mindfulness in schools; 54% described cognitive effects; 30% social effects; and 30% physical. Figure 2 provides a breakdown showing how the articles were coded into these categories and the number of articles in which each sub-theme emerged.

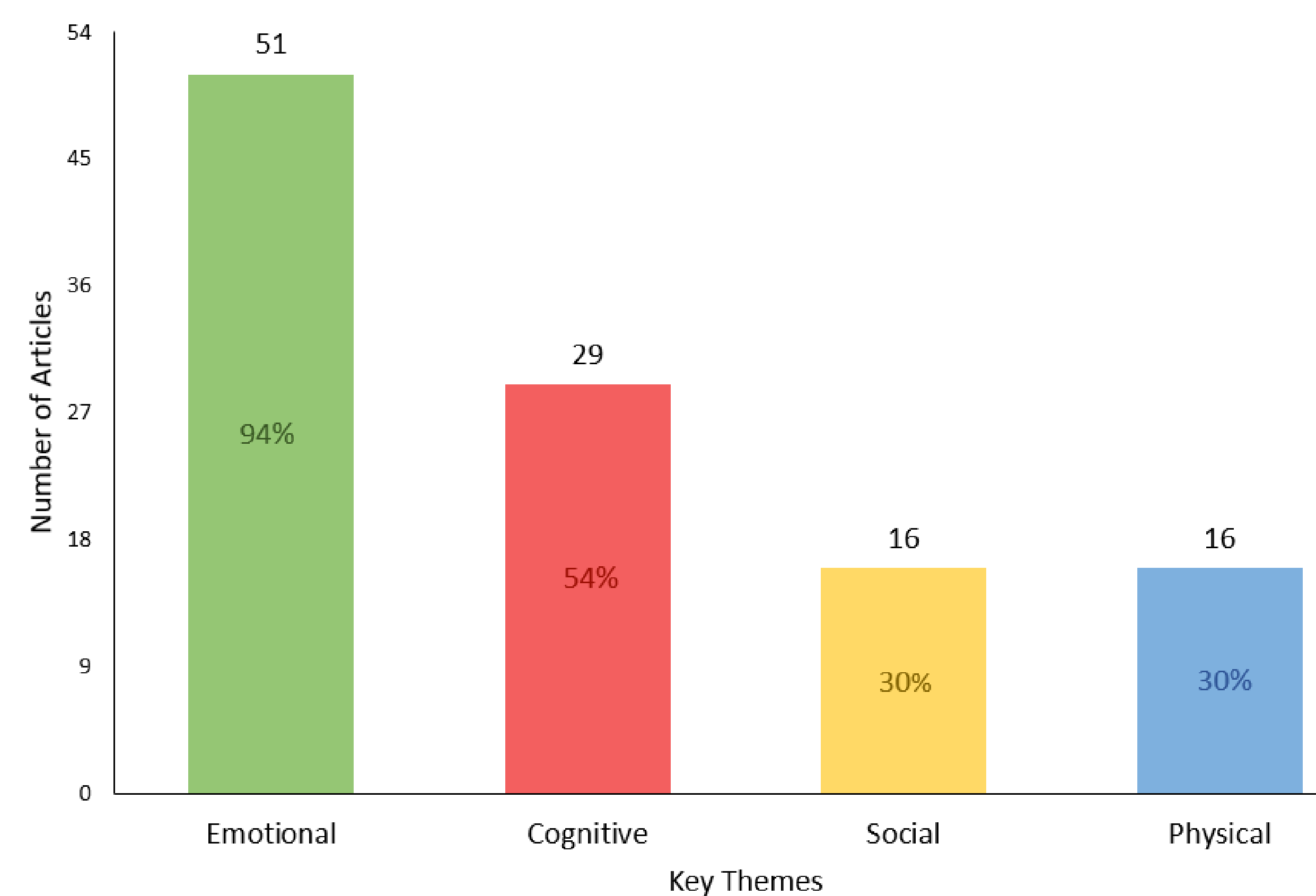


Figure 1. Perceived Effects of Mindfulness in Schools

Key Themes	Sub-Themes	Number of Articles
Emotional	Reducing Stress	34
	Reducing Mental Illness / Disability	19
	Increasing Emotional Awareness	15
	Increasing Emotional Regulation	11
	Increasing Self-Control / Self-Regulation	11
Cognitive	Increasing Self-Esteem / Self-Compassion	7
	Increasing General Focusing	19
	Increasing Meta-cognition / Processing	17
	Increasing Academic Success	7
Social	Effects on Memory (positive and negative)	4
	Increasing Creativity	1
	Strengthening Relationships / Connection to Others	11
	Increasing Empathy / Compassion for Others	7
Physical	Reducing Social Anxiety	1
	Increasing Verbal Expression	2
	Increasing Body Awareness	12
	Easing Physical Ailments	3
	Other Physical Benefits	5

Figure 2. Breakdown of Sub-Themes for Categorization

While most articles demonstrated positive perceptions of mindfulness, 12 of the articles did not view it as a useful practice in schools. Some articles viewed mindfulness as a spiritual practice that did not belong in schools, while others pointed out a lack of teacher training in safely implementing mindfulness techniques. Some articles questioned the use of mindfulness as an intervention and viewed it simply as an unproven curriculum fad.

Limitations

Given that the Proquest database included only English articles from more populous Canadian cities, the data gathered in the study does not fully capture the perceptions of mindfulness existing in more local or French language publications. In the articles themselves, mindfulness was sometimes used interchangeably with other terms such as “meditation,” or “yoga,” making it difficult at times to differentiate references specific to mindfulness. Many “mindfulness programs” only included mindfulness as a small component of the program, while others inserted the word “mindfulness” when describing the benefits of things such as fidget spinners or a Yoga in Schools program, for example. While some articles offered distinct descriptions of mindfulness, a broader number did little to differentiate it clearly from other activities or described it in a limited way that reflected a lack of understanding of what mindfulness was and how it could be used in schools.

Conclusions

The findings reflected the heavy focus of current literature describing the use of mindfulness as an intervention in educational settings for emotional purposes (Albrecht, 2014). Many articles also described mindfulness as “present awareness,” fitting with Kabat-Zinn’s definition, and reflected the increasing development of mindfulness curricula and training programs, although this included many programs of which mindfulness was only a small component (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kuyken et al., 2013). Although a broad range of perceived outcomes emerged, reflecting the range of outcomes described in the literature, few individual articles contained such rich and diverse framings (Albrecht, 2014). Many articles focused solely on emotional or cognitive effects, with less emphasis placed on social or physical benefits, and although some articles described mindfulness as a spiritual practice, few spiritual effects or benefits were noted. The range of framings present in the articles suggests a lack of cohesive understanding and demonstrates the need for a more shared rationale for the use of mindfulness. A more widely shared public understanding could impact whether the use of mindfulness in schools is seen simply as a “new fad” or as a practice with a range of benefits for teachers and students.

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