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## Mindfulness and Teen Behavior: Teenagers' Perceptions of Behavior that led to Expulsion

Michelle L. Lee

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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**MINDFULNESS AND TEEN BEHAVIOR: TEENAGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
BEHAVIOR THAT LED TO EXPULSION**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and Agricultural  
and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Art

in

The Department of Liberal Arts

by

Michelle Lanius Lee  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1999  
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of teaching specific mindfulness techniques to teens who have difficulty functioning in the classroom, using the Mindful Schools Curricula; the course includes 18 lessons on being mindful of sound, breath, movement, thoughts, and emotions. Specifically, the study was designed to determine whether a mindfulness course would be beneficial for South Parish High School teens who are expelled. The study design was mixed methods. Participants were administered pre- and post- scientific validated survey scales that measure mindfulness characteristics as one data source. Participants' parents were given a questionnaire to return and interviews were attempted for all. Participants were guided in mindfulness sessions held twice a week for one hour per week for ten weeks during the 2017 fall semester. Benefits for participants in the study include increased awareness of their behaviors in present time in the hopes for them to respond rather than reacting.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Do you ever wonder what happens to the students after they are expelled from school? South Parish High School is a traditional high school in Louisiana (pseudonyms are used throughout). When students are expelled they must attend an alternative program. An alternative program is an educational setting where students go when their behavior needs cannot be met in the traditional school setting. At this particular school, they are enrolled in a computer software program, PLATO that stands for Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations. It is on this software that expelled students can continue to earn high school credits. They no longer have teachers, instruction, or feedback. As they complete a task, activity, or test, they move to the next task, activity or test. They work at their own pace through assignments and tests in isolation. Expelled students have been through a set of interventions that may include parent meetings, counseling sessions, detentions, and suspensions. Once expelled, the interventions are over. They have the chance to earn credits, but are on their own. A report published by the Louisiana Department of Education in 2017 outlines the case for changes in alternative programs, consequences of inaction, and a call to action. This report leaves no doubt that the system currently being used is under question. Research questions that guided my study:

1. How do expelled students perceive their own behavior?
2. What factors influence perceived behavior?
3. Does a course in mindfulness impact negative behavior of expelled students?
4. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, will expelled students' self-esteem, self-awareness and mindfulness increase?
5. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, will expelled students' impulsivity decrease?

## **Delimitations**

I used a convenient sampling of six expelled students. The principal at South Parish High School did not want students to be taken outside of their curriculum classes to take a course on mindfulness. The students who were available to take the mindfulness course were students who had been removed from the school setting, expelled students.

## **Expulsion**

Expulsion is defined as, “a removal from all regular school settings for a period of not less than one school semester” (South Parish District Student Handbook, 2017). School educators and administrators must keep a safe learning environment; it is a basic human need to feel safe, but all students have a right to an education. These two absolutes clash when a student disrupts the learning environment and threatens safety.

As a secondary English teacher of more than 15 years, one of the most frustrating parts of my profession has revolved around student behavior. It would be a different profession if, as teaching professionals, we could walk into the classroom and teach our hearts out all day. But, the reality is much different. Teaching cannot begin until you have student’s attention and you garner engagement. Teachers have influence on student’s behavior in their classroom, and it is a job requirement to manage student behavior. Yet, for the students who cannot manage their own behavior we set them on a path of consequence and punishment. When students are removed from the classroom, they are moved to an alternate setting for a “time-out” period. The length of the “time out” is dependent on or the severity of the behavior. If they don’t alter their behavior

then they are set on a path to learn on their own. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of six teenagers who had been expelled as they participated in a mindfulness course. My interest in how to better manage student behavior as a secondary teacher led me to this timely study. Through my personal experience with mindfulness,

## **Mindfulness**

For the purpose of this study, Mindfulness is defined as being aware of the present moment without judgement. Mindfulness is rooted in the Buddhist tradition. Buddha would never have thought that it should be examined under a microscope, a neuroimaging scanner or MRI. In order to understand how this practice spread into the classroom, I first trace it back to how it came to the West. The mindfulness meditation research started with Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979. He is known as the one who brought mindfulness to the US, the grandfather of mindfulness. As a Ph.D. student in Molecular Biology, he was on a meditation retreat in the East. During meditation he had the epiphany that he must bring this practice back home to the U.S. to study. Upon returning, he convinced medical doctors to give him space in the basement of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He had zero dollars and recruited existing staff and workers from the medical school to volunteer for pilot studies. Kabat-Zinn created an eight week mindfulness program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). He added “stress reduction” because everyone could relate to the term “stress.” His specific take on it would secularize the practice, which was a necessary step before it could ever be implemented in the classroom setting. There are many different forms of meditation, but mindfulness meditation “has received most attention in neuroscience research over the past two decades” in part because of Kabat-Zinn’s and UMass Medical School’s success (Tang, Hozel, & Posner, 2015). I



reference two non-profit organizations and use them as a framework for my study. Mindful Schools and The Holistic Foundation are two organizations thriving in the Mindful community. They both are long-standing; serving students and teachers since 2007 and 2012 respectively. They both have data and statistics showing progress. Mindful Schools has produced two documentaries on their work with youth in schools: *Room to Breathe* and *Just Breathe*. Students and teachers report increased mindfulness and self-awareness and decreased stress. The Holistic Foundation has reported decreased suspensions and increased attendance as a result with working in the K-12 system in Baltimore, Maryland.

The Mindfulness Course taught in this study is from Mindful Schools, an organization founded in 2007. On their website, the group who co-founded Mindful Schools describes their background as an eclectic integration of education, social justice, and mindfulness. Three years later, they were in 50 schools in the Bay Area. In 2011, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the grandfather of mindfulness, offered a benefit talk supporting Mindful Schools, giving his seal of approval. Mindful Schools' website currently claims the organization reaches all 50 states, 100 countries worldwide, and 1.5 million children and adolescents (Cowan, McKenna, & Ferraro, 2017). Prior to teaching the mindfulness course to six expelled students at South Parish High School, I took an online course for educators, Mindful Educator Essentials. After paying a reduced fee of \$250 (I applied for a scholarship based on my income) I was introduced to a mentor, Aarie, who I submitted homework to and who was available to answer any questions I had through email. Over a six-week period, I was introduced to a new topic each week that consisted of demos, lessons, articles and homework. Often, the subjects of my homework assignments were my two teenage sons. Mindful Schools is one of many organizations serving school-aged students in Mindfulness.

The Holistic Foundation, a nonprofit based in Baltimore, Maryland, also serves students at local elementary and high schools in the practice of mindfulness. The Holistic Foundation staff trained youth within the high school to “foster a student led culture of Mindfulness within Patterson High School” (Smith, Smith, Gonzalez, 2016). The “Mindfulness Moment Room” was implemented at the high school as a place where students can self-refer or go by teacher referral instead of detention or suspension. The Mindfulness Moment Room is structured with “5 minutes of targeted discussion, and 15 minutes of mindfulness practice. The mindfulness practice is chosen based on the needs of the student at the time of referral or by student request. Most often students are led through a series of breathing exercises but some scenarios may call for yoga” (Smith, Smith & Gonzalez, 2016). Because of the huge student population (1,100) and small staff, the focus has been on incoming freshman.

Table 1 presents statistics that highlight suspensions decreasing and positive outcomes increasing reported by The Holistic Foundation in a Baltimore, Maryland high school. Over the course of one year the “Mindful Moment Room” shows it positively affected attendance, physical and verbal fights, GPA, promotion and suspensions. If this could be replicated at South Parish High School, it could affect the school score and the graduation rate - something local school boards, superintendents and principals would be interested in doing.

Table 1. Before and after results of the “Mindfulness Moment Room” in Baltimore, Maryland high school. Retrieved from The Holistic Life Foundation website.

<b>Statistics</b>	<b>2012-2013</b>	<b>2013-2014</b>
Suspensions for fighting dropped	49	23
Students in the halls were referred to the Mindful Moment Room, this helped reduce suspensions in the hallways and stairwells	62	35
Students getting into verbal or physical altercations in the classroom were referred to the Mindful Moment Room, this helped reduce suspensions in the classroom	36	27
The attendance rate went up	71.3%	74.2%
The number of 9th graders being promoted to the 10th grade increased	45%	64%
The average GPA of first time 9th graders increased	1.06	1.51

## **Chapter 2. Review of the Literature**

If you google Jon Kabat Zinn, almost 2 million videos, articles and reviews will surface. Most studies, research, and articles on mindfulness meditation will reference his work. To better understand the students who are participants in this study, I have included additional studies along with mindfulness meditation; including racial and gender disparity in school discipline, how the achievement gap relates to behavior, and the school to prison pipeline. The literature review focus began with mindfulness in the classroom and how mindfulness affects behavior. As I worked with the participants in this study and continued to read the literature, I found they were directly connected to national trends to other areas of research. The research is presented in sections titled “Qualitative,” “Quantitative,” and “Mixed Methods” for organization purposes.

### **Qualitative**

In Nora Luna’s qualitative study, “Understanding Latina/o School Pushout: Experiences of Students Who Left School before Graduating” voices of students are heard about why they left school through focus groups and interviews (2013). Themes from student voices cover two large categories: school issues and personal issues. An example of a personal issue reported through Luna’s qualitative interviews was cultural, “Participants who came to the United States related stories about missing their country...” (Luna, p. 31). This directly relates to a participant in this study. Other personal issues in Luna’s study that relates to a participant in this study are hanging with the wrong crowd and drugs. These categories were coded as “peer pressure” and “drugs” in the Data Analysis section of this paper.

Differing from Luna's study, Johanna Wald and Daniel Losen's research, "Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline" questions the gross correlation between school discipline and youth incarceration, "approximately 68 percent of state prison inmates in 1997 had not completed high school. Seventy-five percent of youths under age eighteen who have been sentenced to adult prisons have not passed tenth grade... 33 percent read below the fourth-grade level" (p. 11). The researchers make connections that students who are incarcerated are not leaving the school successfully. The "school-to-prison-pipeline" is where students are disciplined in the school setting starting them on a path of juvenile detention to adult incarceration. This research directly applies to the expelled students in this study who shared stories about breaking the law or entering military structured programs.

Participants in this study reflect the trends of school pushout and school-to-prison presented in the literature during the open coding of interviews. The code categories are presented in the data analysis section in Chapter Three.

### **Quantitative**

In order to truly understand mindfulness, consider how child and adolescent brains function differently than adult brains and are still developing until the early twenties (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011). Additionally, the child's brain develops at different times because "the parts of the brain responsible for.... controlling impulses, and planning ahead - the hallmarks of adult behavior - are among the last to mature" (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011). If the adult brain shows positive changes in before and after meditation studies, imagine what it can do for the developing brain? Wisner, Jones & Gwin report on eleven different research studies with adolescents in schools who find "students experiencing high levels of stressful life circumstances,

physical or emotional health concerns, learning problems that involve difficulty paying attention or concentration, or low self-esteem may be particularly helped by this type of intervention” (2010, p. 155). One report shows pre- and post- tests on “systolic blood pressure” showing “decreases in daytime and after-school... blood pressure” (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010, 154). Another finding provides evidence, “taken from teacher ratings,” that indicate “improved in behavioral and emotional strengths” (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010, p. 155). These findings offer significant implications for teachers.

In the article, “Student attitudes and behaviors as explanations for the Black-White suspension gap”, Huang explores the reasons Black students receive out of school suspension at a higher rate than white students. According to Huang, students most at risk for expulsion are students of Color, male students, and students with disabilities (2017). Huang administered surveys to Virginia students on their behavior and attitudes. He states in the discussion that there is not direct evidence of racial bias, but concludes, that schools should revisit their school discipline systems (2017, p. 304) based on suspension rate differentials. Huang continues to question how we can further measure the differences in behavior between groups.

In Arcia’s quantitative study, “Achievement and enrollment status of suspended students”, the correlation of suspensions and expulsions and that of achievement is brought to light versus Huang’s focus on expulsion rates by race. This quantitative study compares disproportional disciplining and the achievement gap; it is unclear however, if it is lower achieving students who are being suspended and expelled more or if the suspension and expulsion rate is affecting achievement, “students with lower achievement were subsequently suspended more than students with higher achievement....The more days that students spent in suspension, the less students gained in reading” (Arcia, 2006, p. 367).

In the article “The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation”, Tang, Holzel, and Posner (2012) review 21 studies that indicate alterations in the brain related to mindfulness meditation. The studies include cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

Examining both a frontal view of the brain as well as a schematic view of brain regions, Figure 1 presents six common regions or area of the brain affected during mindfulness: the prefrontal cortex (PFC), hippocampus, amygdala, anterior and posterior cingulate cortex (APC and PCC), and insula. The studies in this review use neuroimaging and MRI’s of the adult brain. There are not any neuroimaging and MRI studies done on school aged children using mindful meditation.

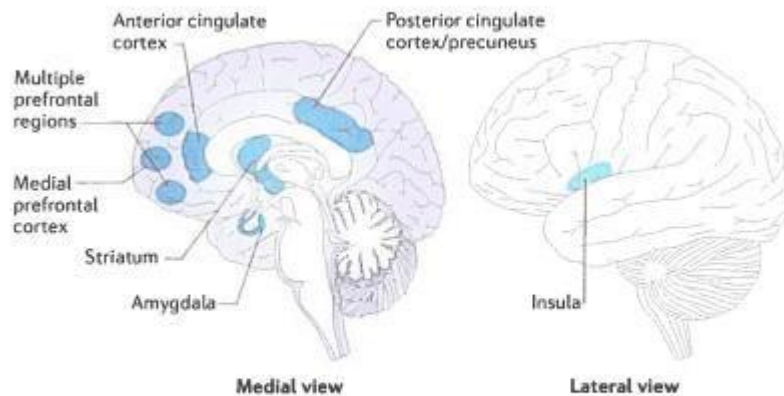


Figure 1 | Brain regions involved in the components of mindfulness meditation. Schematic view of some of the brain regions involved in attention control (the anterior cingulate cortex and the striatum), emotion regulation (multiple prefrontal regions, limbic regions and the striatum) and self-awareness (the insula, medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus).

Figure 1. “The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation” by Tang, Holzel, Posner (2012).

The three areas these studies focus on are increasing attention, emotion regulation, and mindfulness; the areas of mindfulness meditation training. A great website for those who need science broken down in basic chunks is *Neuroscientifically Challenged* ([www.neuroscientificallychallenged.com](http://www.neuroscientificallychallenged.com)). The following sections define and explain the areas of the brain that have shown changes in the studies presented in the review.

### **Prefrontal Cortex**

*Neuroscientifically Challenged* explains the prefrontal cortex as largely controlling memory, perception, and diverse cognitive processes. Diverse cognitive processes include receiving, selecting, storing, transforming, developing, and recovering information, which are processes that are essential in the classroom (2014). Kabat-Zinn's eight-week MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) is enough time to show changes, "Prefrontal activations are often enhanced as an effect of mindfulness meditation in novice meditators" (Tang, Holzel & Posner, 2015, p.220). In a similar study, "Compared with controls, meditators showed significantly greater cortical thickness in the anterior regions of the brain including the medial prefrontal cortex, superior frontal cortex, temporal pole and the middle and inferior temporal cortices....These findings indicate that long-term meditators have structural differences from controls in both gray and white matter" (Tang & Posner, 2012, p.3).

### **Hippocampus**

The hippocampus largely controls processing of long-term memory and emotional responses describes *Neuroscientifically Challenged* (2014). Another study shows, "media analyses of gray matter concentration changes in the ROI analysis supported significant increases in the left



hippocampus in the MBSR group, confirming that structural changes in this region are detectable within eight weeks following the participation in this mindfulness training program” (Hozel, et al., 2011, p.42). Harvard Women’s Health Watch posted an article, “Mindfulness meditation practice changes the brain that discusses MRI images of meditators versus the controls had increased concentrations of gray matter which signals structure areas important for learning, memory, and the regulation of emotions. Additionally, changes in other regions associated with remembering the past and imagining the future, and empathy (Harvard Women’s Health Watch, 2011). “MBSR is thought to reduce emotional reactivity and enhance emotion regulation in patients with social anxiety disorder (SAD)” (Tang & Posner, 2012, p.2). These studies show that concentration can improve by practicing simple meditation techniques. I shudder to think of the massive number of children on medication to improve concentration. Why aren’t doctors prescribing holistic alternatives before medicating?

### **Amygdala**

*Neuroscientifically Challenged* illustrates the amygdala as responsible for the response and memory of emotions, especially fear (2014). When something traumatic happens this area is activated. Meditation has shown to decrease the activation of the amygdala, thus indicating impact. One brain study finds, “A frequently reported finding is that mindfulness practice leads to (or is associated with) a diminished activation of the amygdala in response to emotional stimuli during mindful states” (Tang, Holzel & Posner, 2015). Co-Founders of The Holistic Foundation claim there is a strong connection between this region of the brain and the drop in suspensions for fighting and a decrease in verbal and physical altercations reported at a Baltimore high school who has implemented a “Mindfulness Moment Room” (Smith, Smith, & Gonzalez, 2017). This

is reminiscent of the fight or flight response from the premodern days when we saw a cheetah and knew fear instantly, then knew we must run. “The amygdala has been implicated in both human and animal studies as playing a crucial role during stress responses, including the detection of stressful and threatening stimuli and the initiation of adaptive coping responses” (Hozel, et al., 2011, p.37). Three of the six students taking the mindfulness course in this present study expressed traumatic experiences in their life that are detailed in a later section of this research. The same study posits, “As predicted, there was a significant correlation between changes in PSS scores and changes in amygdaloid gray matter density. The more participants’ stress levels decreased, the greater the decrease of gray matter density in the right amygdala” (Hozel, et al., 2011, p.40). This highlights brain changes in the area that focuses on the stress response, a repeated complaint of students and teachers alike. The Harvard Women’s Health Watch emphasizes that researchers found that meditation practice reduced the concentration of gray matter in the amygdala, a region associated with fear, anxiety, and stress. This corresponds to lower stress levels (Harvard Women’s Health Watch, 2011).

### **Cingulate Cortex**

The cingulate cortex is a crucial structure in awareness and attentional focus, “brain regions involved in attention control” (Tang, Holzel & Posner, 2015, p.223). Attention and focus are essential skills needed in the classroom. Behavior problems in the classroom often begin the moment the student’s attention and focus shift from the lesson to something else.

Social Worker, Jena Ourso, who works with the high school students in this study sees a handful of kids who have great difficulty keeping their attention focused for a whole class period, “I see students wanting to be entertained and if the lesson doesn’t have bells and whistles

attached, they get bored and disengaged. The structure of the classroom needs to evolve with the current research of the developing and changing brain. Students need this part of the brain activated” (personal communication, Ourso, 2017).

What does student engagement look and sound like? On Edutopia’s website, the article “Strategies for Getting and Keeping the Brain’s Attention” is what any teacher would label as “best practices”: build curiosity, make material relevant, ask questions, and evoke emotion to name a few. Edutopia’s website prides itself as having, “evidence and practitioner-based learning strategies that empower you to improve K-12 education”. These best practices compliment mindfulness practices, but are not the same. Mindfulness practices keep the practitioner in the present moment through breath, sound, movement, thoughts, and emotions.

### **Insula**

The insula captures “self-awareness (the insula, medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus)” (Tang, Hozel & Posner, 2015, p.223). Tang, Hozel & Posner also states, “Meditation predicted greater Interoceptive Attention (IA) related activity in anterior dysgranular insula regions, consistent with greater integration of interoceptive sensation with external context” (Tang & Posner, 2012). If students can become more self-aware, they may be able to self-intervene - changing their behavior before receiving negative consequences.

### **Mixed Methods**

A study on incarcerated youth is the only mixed method study included here. The results of this study indicated, “significant increase in self-regulation” and “overall reported positive experiences” but “long-term benefits remain unknown” (Barnert, Himmelstein, Herbert,

GarciaRomeu, & Chamberlain, 2013, p.70). Much of this study served as a model for the study presented here, including surveys used, mindfulness meditation, and length of program

### **Limitations**

Despite all of the research, meditation is still in the infancy stage. Studies need to be replicated. Longitudinal research needs to be conducted following students across several years. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of teaching specific mindfulness techniques to expelled students. The study on incarcerated youth is most similar. The brain research presented in this chapter shows the science behind mindfulness. Additional research on racial disparities in school discipline and the achievement gap further support the positionality of the participants in this study.

## **Chapter 3. Methods**

The present study design was mixed methods, accessing both qualitative and quantitative data as it seemed to be the most appropriate design. Data were collected over an eight-month period, just one month shy of an academic year; I began collecting quantitative data at the beginning of October 2017 and ended with qualitative data in May of 2018. Research questions that guided my study:

1. Does a course in mindfulness impact negative behavior of expelled students?
2. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, will expelled students' self-esteem, self-awareness and mindfulness increase?
3. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, will expelled students' impulsivity decrease?
4. How do expelled students perceive their own behavior?

### **Participants**

At the time of selection, there were seven students expelled and the sample included all seven. At the time of the interviews, one of the seven students dropped and entered a military-structured program. Of the six, two were Black males, two Black females, and two Hispanic males, reflective of national trends. Usually before students are expelled, there are a number of interventions that take place. When committing minor offenses (being tardy for class, dress code violations, breaking classroom rules, etc.) lunch detention or after school detention is assigned. If a student does not attend detention, it could lead to a suspension. After four suspensions, an expulsion hearing is scheduled. This scenario was true for only two of the six students in this study. The remaining four students had more serious offenses. Two of the six students had drug offenses that resulted in an immediate hearing and expulsion. The remaining two students

participated in a fight that resulted in a suspension, then they continued the fight during suspension which resulted in a hearing and expulsion.

The participants in this study are six expelled high school students from South Parish High School. Participation was voluntary. Table 3.1 represents the school in this study and correlates with the literature on disparities regarding expulsion with students of Color. White students represent roughly 18% of the student body, but zero are expelled. While Hispanics represent a much smaller proportion of the student population, but more than 7% are expelled. Black students represent roughly 75% of the student body and ten were expelled.

Table 3.1. South Parish High School Expulsion Rate, Fall 2017

	Whole school	Expelled Students	Study Sample
Black	309, 76%	10, 3%	2 M Cain & Kabe 2 F Mya & Sara
White	72, 18%	0, 0%	0
Hispanic	27, 4%	2, 7%	2 M AJ & MC

## **Sara**

Sara is a Black girl who turned seventeen during this study. Sara was first suspended for fighting. On her first day of suspension, she fought the same girl and was expelled. Her mother was upset with the school; she felt that her daughter should have never been placed in the same vicinity with the girl she fought. Misbehaviors her teachers reported include: disruptive talking in class, talking about other students, peer pressure, and dealing with conflict. During expulsion,

she earned credits through a computer-based program passing with C's and D's. Once back in the classroom she was still passing with grades slightly below average.

## **Mya**

Mya is a Black girl who turned eighteen during this study. Mya was first suspended for fighting Sara. On the first day of suspension, the two girls engaged in another fight, resulting in their expulsion. Mya had failed multiple core classes and was a year behind. During the eighteen week mindfulness course she was waiting to hear about her acceptance into a job corps program; she was accepted at the end of the course and started the program in January of 2018. She "hated" school and couldn't wait to get started in a new environment. She talked of anxiety, depression, and how the losses of her father and grandmother were deep blows to her life. Mya's mother confirmed in July 2018 that Mya had successfully completed the job corps program and was waiting to hear on graduation date.

## **Cain**

Cain is an eighteen year old Black male who was expelled due to a series of minor offenses (cell phone, continuously out of his seat in the classroom, habitually tardy, leaving school at lunch, skipping after school detention). He had failed multiple core classes and was a year behind. He was very straightforward on three ways his life could go: he could get his act together, end up in jail or dead. Cain's mother consented to him participating in the mindfulness course, although Cain was adamant that being eighteen he didn't need his mother's permission. After calling multiple times to set up an interview, messages were never returned.

## **Kabe**

Kabe is a Black male who turned sixteen during this study. Kabe had not been in trouble before the day he brought marijuana to school. This mistake cost him a school year excluded from the regular school setting. His transcript consisted a range of A's to C's; he had never failed a class. His mother was disappointed in his behavior and said he had never been in trouble on as scale like this. She was appreciative for his participation in the mindfulness course.

## **M.C. & A.J.**

I elect to discuss M.C. and A.J. together because they live in the same household, share the same guardian, and are cousins. A.J. turned eighteen during this study. His family immigrated from Mexico before he was born and Spanish is the primary language in the home. Since A.J. has always gone to American school, he is bilingual. He was expelled for a series of minor offences (habitually tardy and absent, disrespect against authority, skipping lunch and after school detention). After four minor offences, detention is assigned. If you habitually miss detention, then it adds to a suspension. After four suspensions, an expulsion hearing is scheduled. This was A.J.'s fate. He wasn't fazed because he had been suspended in elementary and middle school. He had failed multiple core classes and was at least one year behind.

M.C. turned seventeen during this study; he immigrated from Mexico at the age of fifteen to live with A.J, cousins, uncle and aunt. He left his mother, siblings and many cousins behind. His father is in the U.S., but works between Texas and Louisiana. He sees his father at least a couple times a month. M.C. lit a marijuana joint on the school bus. With a zero tolerance policy for drugs, he was immediately expelled. M.C. had failed multiple core classes and was at least one



year behind. I tried to talk with A.J.'s mom and M.C.'s aunt, Paz, but with language barriers it never happened.

### **Setting**

The ten-week, eighteen-session mindfulness course took place on South Parish High School's campus in a building located behind the main building. Walking into the main building you would see a typical high school set up like many in the U.S. The 400 students that attend have breakfast each morning in the cafeteria. Every student takes core classes in English, Math, Science and Social Studies along with electives in Health, Music, and Art. The school offers dual enrollment and advanced placement courses; students can earn college credit and alternative certifications. The alternative program is housed in the building behind the main building. In the state of Louisiana there are alternative schools and programs. An alternative school is a school site that houses suspended and expelled students only. An alternative program is a site housed within a traditional school site. The site for this study is an alternative program. The building that holds the alternative program consists of one hallway and several rooms, including the clinic room (that houses suspended and expelled students), professional development room (where teacher meeting and workshops are held), office space and a couple of classrooms. The mindfulness course took place mainly in a classroom across the hall from the clinic room. The clinic room has two teacher desks in the front of the room. There is always two disciplinarians running the clinic room. The disciplinarians range from teachers to coaches to paraprofessionals. There was one particular paraprofessional that always took the time to talk and counsel the students that ended in the clinic room. Unfortunately that was not the norm. Many times you will find the disciplinarian on his or her phone or computer, not paying much mind to the students

in the room. The classroom across the hall where the mindfulness course took place wasn't being used at the time and was not decorated with usual class and school themes. Our main props were enough desks for participants and a large white board. Oftentimes though, if the weather was nice, we would take class outside behind the alternative building. We would sit in a circle on yoga mats under a big oak tree. Everyone especially liked these times because it was a chance to leave the four walls that isolated them from the rest of the student body.

### **Data Sources**

Participants were administered pre- and post- scientific validated survey scales that were used in studies done through Mindful Schools and were included in the online training I took was a major data source. Student interviews (see Interviews below) were also considered a major data source. Participants' parents were offered twenty dollars an hour for an interview. Only Sara and Mya's moms obliged. Teachers were given a questionnaire to fill out that some returned. Parent and teacher feedback are considered a minor source of data.

### **Surveys**

Four scientifically validated surveys were administered as a pretest in October and posttest in December: *Impulsivity Teen Conflict Survey*, *Rosenberg Self-Esteem*, *Stress PSS-10*, and *Mindfulness* (mindfulschools.org, 2018). These surveys were suggested by mindfulness.org where I received my training to teach the mindfulness course in this study. Of the six students in this study only four have pre and post test scores. M.C. and A.J. took the pre-test in October, but not the post-test in December. They stopped coming to school a week before the fall semester ended. M.C. left to go visit family in Mexico.

## **Participant Interviews**

I realize that prior to starting the mindfulness course I had failed getting to know each of the students. I had taught two of the students previously and knew their behaviors and personalities pretty well, but I hadn't taken the time to see what they thought of their own behaviors. Halfway through the course, student interviews were conducted with the guiding question, *Why and how did you get expelled?* Each student was interviewed twice, with the first interviews varying from six to 33 minutes and the second interviews varying from two to six minutes, totaling in 50 double-spaced, transcribed pages.

Two recording devices were used to ensure accuracy; I checked out an audio recording device from university's studio and used my phone's audio recorder. Attention was exercised to record pauses, body language, tone, and silences while transcribing.

Attendance was inconsistent during the Mindfulness course. I scheduled to teach the course on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 10AM. However, I go to school an hour early to make-up classes when students are absent, as is the case regularly. Only one of the six students was present every Tuesday and Thursday. I knew the week of interviews would be challenging and doubted that I could get all six interviews done in one day; I was right. In combination with absences and getting students to return parental consent forms to audio record, I interviewed one student on Monday, one on Tuesday, two on Thursday, one on Friday, and one the following Monday during the week of November 6th -13th, 2017. Second interviews were given when students were present on subsequent days.

## **Procedures**

The 18-lesson mindfulness course began on October 3, 2017 and ended on December 14, 2017. The classroom across the hall from South Parish High School alternative center was available for use, although often we spent class outside in the sunshine sitting on yoga mats. When the course began, class was held on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 10 AM. As the course continued, the students talked me into coming in the afternoon. They complained how the day is so long and it gets especially hard after lunch, which I find significant as it speaks to the lack of engagement and isolation in which students find themselves. What students need most in an alternative setting is additional academic, behavioral, and social attention, no less as in this study. The lessons in the Mindfulness Course do not take more than 15-20 minutes, but I elected to stretch the lessons, making them longer by journaling, taking mindful walks in the fresh air, and directing informal conversation on that day's lesson, making each class 30 minutes long. Of the two classes a week, I was with participants for an hour each week. Of the 18 lessons, there were only four classes where all six students were present, which speaks to the lack of consistent attendance. The make-up strategy involved arriving at the alternative center approximately half an hour early to pull out students who were absent for the previous class.

A typical lesson would begin by introducing the technique. For example, counted breathing. I would model counted breathing and we would practice together. After practicing, we would discuss when the best time to use counted breathing, how it made us feel, and benefits. After discussion, the participants would reflect in their journal. Each class would build on one another. If our last class was on the technique cooling breath, during our discussion I would ask participants if they used that particular technique since. If our next technique practiced was walking meditation, I would ask participants if they used counted breathing since we last met.

## **Data Analysis**

According to Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Jude Smith, and Hayes (2009), qualitative inquiry should align analytic processes with a researcher's recognized paradigms and methods. My analysis was based on Denzin and Lincoln's constructivist paradigm (2011). A coding system was developed on two data sets of interviews with participants. The following research questions were the framework at the beginning of this study:

1. How do expelled students perceive their own behavior?
2. What factors influence perceived behavior?
3. Does a course in mindfulness impact negative behavior of expelled students?
4. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, will expelled students' self-esteem, self-awareness and mindfulness increase?
5. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, will expelled students' impulsivity decrease?

Through the process of coding and recoding through first cycle and second cycle methods, what emerged were blocks the students encountered as they reflected on their behavior.

Employing Creswell's constant comparative method (2007) inspired a continuous cycle of conception and categorization, I coded instances broadly using inductive, open coding, noting patterns occurring most commonly in words and phrases in participant interviews. Parent and teacher interviews and questionnaires were minor data sources and are not included in the coding process. The transcribed interviews were read line-by-line and coded by identifying specific words and phrases and labeling them. For example, when participants used words "purple", "dealing", or "marijuana", these were collapsed to the code of "drugs". My next analysis step with interview transcripts was to review all codes and decide if any codes could be combined and to then determine code concepts. These codes were clustered into the code category of "Social-Emotional" which was then categorized under the theme of "Personal Issues". In tandem, similar coded student responses related to overall feelings about school were categorized as

“Attitudes and Behaviors Impacting School Success” under the theme of “School Issues”.

Literature reviews, especially Luna’s research helped develop themes in the coding process.

Table 3.3 provides code instances, how those codes were clustered and determined code categories, and resultant final themes.

The pre- and post- surveys administered to participants were comparatively examined on a student-by-student basis. This allowed me to holistically compare each participant’s pre- and post- survey responses to create a snapshot of their state of mind, as evidenced by responses, during the course.

Table 3.3. Themes, Code Concepts and Code Instances.

School Issues	Attitudes & Behaviors Impacting School Success	Negative School Environment -teacher, school culture, classroom -Disrespect Authority -Responsibility -Unengaged -Racist comments	Mya Cain III M.C. II A.J. Sara
		Tardies, Skipping, Excessive absences, dropout	M.C. II Cain A.J. Sara
		Peer pressure	Cain Kabe M.C.
		Prior school history in elementary & middle school	Cain
Personal Issues	Social-Emotional	Traumatic -Loss of family/friends -Separation from family	Cain II M.C.
		Drugs	Cain II Kabe M.C. II
		Fighting (outside of school)	Sara
		-”bad temper”/flash out “anxiety, depression, Stressed” -negative feelings about life (mad, lonely)	Cain Sara Mya II M.C. II Kabe A.J.
		Negative Home Environment -”street life” -theft, breaking law	Cain III M.C. II Kabe

## **Researcher's Positioning**

Prior to interviews, partial trust is established with students. Not only had I already been working with the six students for five weeks, two of the students I had taught in previous years. I taught M.C. and A.J. in Reading Intervention for two years prior to the course. I taught Sara's twin sister honors English her freshman year. Additionally, South Parish High is a relatively small school, with about 100 students per grade. If you didn't directly teach a student, often students knew you from their friends. The teachers are close-knit and work with students in different capacities. Along with the students that I taught, I also was involved in the Creative Writing and Yoga Clubs. My classroom was open for tutoring before and after school a couple times of week. During the fall semester of 2017, when the mindfulness course took place, I was on sabbatical. My position at South Parish High School that started in the fall of 2012 briefly was on a break.

It had been the ritual since the beginning of the Mindfulness course to bring a snack, whether a piece of fruit, small bag of chips, or a piece of candy. This incentive continued during interviews. I collected the parental consent and child assent forms to audio record which were approved by South Louisiana University's (a pseudonym) Institutional Review Board. I adopted a full participant position as per Spradley.

## **Bias**

Bias is inherent because of my full participant status: I teach the course, so I am both the researcher and practitioner. I started my mindfulness journey in 2014 when I attended my first meditation session. The following year I went through yoga certification training. Many people



don't realize that the physical part of yoga, the assana training, is only 1/8 of yoga. More than half of the practice of yoga involves mindfulness meditation. During that year, 2015, I visited Magnolia Grove Monastery for the first of many visits. Magnolia Grove is a mindful community of Buddhist monks and nuns practicing under the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. He may be unfamiliar to you, but in 1967 Martin Luther King Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for a Nobel Peace Prize. They were both fighting the fight for peace simultaneously, Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States and Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam. In Magnolia Grove's gardens in northern Mississippi, you will find a life sized statue of the two men. In their meditation hall, you will see photographs framed of the two men working alongside each other. And this is what I have grown to be most familiar with through the mindful community; that we are all interconnected. Last summer, 2017, I found myself at the top of a mountain in the jungles of Sri Lanka, meditating with people from all over the world. I have my beliefs of the power of this practice. But along with my personal bias, The Louisiana Department of Education Alternative Education Study Group Report noted what is happening in school discipline is not working. It is urgent that changes be made to the system.

## **Chapter 4. Results/Findings**

All six student responses were in the negative when asked how they felt about being expelled; “Mad, sad, lonely, disappointed” were descriptions of how they felt about being expelled. They all seemed to understand the logic behind the expulsion. Whether the student lived with only the mother or in a two-parent family, all students responded with the mother being the main disciplinarian.

The four students who thought their punishment was fair were the students who had the more serious offenses. The two students who thought their punishment was unfair had the series of minor offenses that led to expulsion. They felt the minor offenses should not have led to expulsion from school. Their minor offenses consisted of multiple tardies, breaking classroom rules, disrespect against authority, cell phone violations, missing lunch detention and/or after school detention. The study group report by The Louisiana Department of Education agrees with the students. The report determines that home schools should offer remediation. The report does not define “evidence-based behavior remediation.”

When I asked participants if any of the lessons from the course were helpful in everyday life, their responses were mostly positive:

Sara says, “When we was like... we sent messages out to people who like, don’t like and people who we love - stuff like that... and sitting down for a couple of minutes and listen to everything around you”. The first part of Sara’s response refers to Class Three: “It’s Not Just About Me - It’s About Us. Heartfulness”. In this lesson we read research on how happiness is a mirror and we spread it through us. This was the lesson where we shared a loving-kindness meditation. I remember drawing a “happiness machine” on the board and asked them to draw their own in their journal. In Sara’s journal she writes, “I send good wishes to my mom and a

certain someone who I fell off with and someone who I just don't like at all. I felt good because even if I don't like someone I know I learn to be kind to them without getting out of character".

The second part of Sara's quote refers to listening meditation; which started with lesson one and continued throughout the course. The idea is that our difficult emotions and thoughts are often center stage, but if we step back and pay attention to the present those emotions and thoughts will fizzle in the background. We start with the lesson of mindful listening by closing our eyes for one minute and observe how many sounds we notice. After one minute, we discuss. So simple, yet profound, we incorporated this into every lesson. Sara lists in her journal on October 13, 2017, "talking, birds, train, air conditioner, and bell". Simple, yet profound, because she remembers it months later in our interview in May, 2018.

In addition to listening to sounds, M.C. said, "It works - the breathing... when I'm stressed. I breathe, count my breathing". Although it was lessons two, five, and ten that focused on breathing techniques, I incorporated it in our daily mindful walks.

Cain responds, "Who wouldn't want to take a class on peace?" after I asked what he thought about the class. At no time was the mindfulness course referred to as a class about peace, but that was his summarizing thought.

See Table 3.2 below for highlights of course content.

Table 3.2. Mindfulness Curriculum taught in this study from mindfulschools.org

	Theme	Source
Class One	Emotions/Punching Bag. Mindfulness of Sound	p. 7
Class Two	Response vs. Reaction. Breath 1 - Anchor	p. 10
Class Three	It's Not Just About Me - It's About Us. Heartfulness	p. 13
Class Four	Thoughts	p. 16
Class Five	Fairy Tale Ogre. Breath 2 - Counting	p. 18
Class Six	Pleasant/Unpleasant	p. 20
Class Seven	Mindful Eating	p. 22
Class Eight	Trees in a Forest. Connection to Others	p. 24
Class Nine	Past/Present/Future	p. 26
Class Ten	Breath 3 - and more	p. 28
Class Eleven	Guest House Poem. Body Scan	p. 30
Class Twelve	Soaking in the Good. Loving Things	p. 33
Class Thirteen	Judgment. Body Awareness	p. 36
Class Fourteen	Mindful Walking	p. 38
Class Fifteen	Help Yourself First. Heartfulness for Oneself	p. 40
Class Sixteen	Letting Be. Mindfulness of Emotions	p. 42
Class Seventeen	Mindfulness in Conversation	p. 44
Class Eighteen	Gratitude and Appreciation	p. 46

During the first interview, MC is the only student who said that expulsion would not change his behavior. Although he would not smoke at school, he wasn't planning on quitting.

M.C.: No.

Researcher: Are you going to smoke marijuana on the bus again?

M.C.: No, not on the bus.

Researcher: What about at school?

M.C.: No.

Researcher: Ok. good. So it will change that behavior?

M.C.: That yes.

Researcher: What do you mean... what won't it change?

M.C.: Smoking.

During the second interview, M.C. revealed he smoked to forget about the separation from his family. His mom, brothers, and cousins are in Mexico. He came to the U.S. with his father, but his father has been working in Texas for five years, driving back and forth from Texas to the home M.C. resides, with A.J.'s family. He gets to visit with them twice a year: summer and Christmas break. His family may be his motivation to stay out of trouble.

Researcher: We talked a little about consequences. If you were in jail or a detention center, you wouldn't be able to go see them, right?

M.C.: No... yeah.

Researcher: Is that motivation to behave differently? M.C.: No. (laughs) Researcher: No?

M.C.: Well, yeah kinda. Researcher: Kinda? M.C.: Yes.

When students were asked, "Where/Who did you learn to act in this way?" their responses varied. You can hear student opinions in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Student Responses

Cain	Cain likened it to a thrill, “It’s a rush or something. It’s like something in my mind -do it - go do it (laughs) I feel like I’m not going to get caught, so I go do it.”
Kabe	Kabe was short and to the point, “Hanging around the wrong crowd”.
MC	M.C. identified with the pressures from peers, “I seen people when I go to parties. I see people doing it and I start doing it.”
Mya	Mya was very clear that she learned from her father. This is a curious selfobservation because her father died when she was three. It was clear that her father’s absence was a mighty presence in her life, “Fighting is never the solution. I know that but my daddy was like that. My mama is the quiet one. I got my ways from my daddy. I’m like him in every way but I’m trying to be better than him because I don’t want to happen to him happen to me”.
A.J. & Sara	A.J. and Sara didn’t feel as if they had learned their behavior from anyone.

Table 4.1 illustrates individual responses. During the coding process, I linked Cain’s response to “negative home environment” because he described this behavior as something he learned in the “streets”. Kabe and M.C.’s responses were codes as “peer pressure”. Mya’s response was coded under the “traumatic” category as opposed to the “fighting” category in this instance because she clearly expressed that the loss of her father has made a lasting impact on her life.

When I asked, “Do your behaviors change from home to school?”, three students said yes.

Table 4.2 explains how behaviors vacillate from home to school.

Table 4.2. Student Responses

Cain	Cain describes school and home as opposites, “Yeah. School - I feel like I’m confined and I’m more calm here. But, when I get off that bus everything just come out. Explode. Excited. Because at home I be thinking ... what am I gonna do? I can do this, I can do that”.
M.C.	M.C. expresses pent up anger, “Yes. When I’m at school, just chill. When I get home I get mad about anything. If someone makes me mad at school you can’t really tell. But when I get home I get mad”.
A.J.	A.J., the student who has some minor infractions as being disrespectful responds, “At home, I got more respect towards like my mom, my parents”.

A.J.’s response in Table 4.2 hints that he has more respect for his mom than the authority figures at school. I coded this as “negative school environment”. Neither A.J. nor any other participants commented directly on teacher relationships. I conclude that this is due to bias as being both teacher and researcher. His comment and infractions infer that he lacks respect for authority figures at school which includes his teachers. M.C.’s response was coded as “negative home environment”. A.J. and M.C. live in the same home, but M.C. is living with extended family members and not his own family. He expressed sadness about his separation with his family which was coded as “traumatic”. Cain’s response shows the enormous amount of freedom he has at home. I code this as “negative home environment” because it is this freedom that gives him the time to engage in behavior that has led to theft and what he calls “street life”. Table 4.3 indicates where students see themselves in the future. I asked each student where they saw themselves in one year and then, in five years. Cain is the only student who had two scenarios for each question. One scenario he calls “flying straight”; by this he means if he is doing everything he is supposed to: following rules and staying out of trouble. The other scenario he labels, “same path”; which refers to his at-the-moment status of getting into trouble.

Table 4.3. Student Responses

	1 year from now	5 years from now		
Cain				
	Flying straight	In college	Flying straight	About to grad from college, prob found someone to settle down with
	Same path	Barely making it in life		
			Same path	Dead or in jail
Kabe	Back in school, learning, 11th grade	technical college, mechanic work		
MC	Working, I don't know yet (plan to leave school in May 2018)	Have a family, a house, working, got my own car, truck		
AJ	Graduating, go to college, electrical mechanic	I want to own my own business, mechanic shop		
Mya	Graduating	going to college for Business Management.... ULL		
Sara	graduating and getting ready for college	I should be a nurse 5 years from now.		

All students except for M.C. expressed a desire to graduate as shown in Table 4.3. He confided he did not like school and would rather work. He said he can work in roofing with his uncle. After questioning further on needing a high school diploma, he says he will think about it. With his 18th birthday soon approaching, the “push out” age is getting closer. As mentioned in the literature review section, Luna prefers the term “push out” rather than “drop out” “because



the data reveals that students' decisions to leave school are not solely an individual choice but rather a result of factors, including institutional practices/policies and social forces that push students out" (2013). Through Luna's data analysis on the experiences of Latina(o)'s who left school she found, "students frequently mentioned missing their country" and " participants engaged in self-defeating resistance" (2013). M.C. had a "don't care" attitude when lighting a marijuana cigarette on the bus that led to his expulsion. He also expressed the reason for smoking was to ease the pain of being separated from his family:

Well like when I smoke I feel like uhh if I got something on my mind that I don't like and I be thinking about it too much and I want to smoke because it make me like forget all that stuff. All the negative stuff and I just don't worry bout nothing cause sometimes I be thinking about stuff like ... like my family and why do I have to be right here you know. I be getting sad and then when I smoke, I don't think about it and it make me feel good.

Cain sees clearly that if he doesn't straighten, he could be on the path of the school-to-prison pipeline. He gives two scenarios when responding to where he'll be in one and five years from now. His "flying straight" scenario takes him on a path of graduating high school, college and settling down where if he keeps on the same path, "death or in jail:

I got people in my family didn't make it to see my age. I got friends they didn't see my age. My friend that died in 2015, he wasn't even at school. His birthday just passed, he would have turned 18. He didn't get to see 18. That's why I said that right there. He died a freak accident. They in the house with a gun and the gun go off. Pow (softly). The whole time your mama think you at school and I could relate to that cause some days... Some days... I didn't go to school and she (his mama) didn't know that I skipped school and that is the same thing that happened to my friend. His mom didn't know he wasn't at school. Can you imagine? Your mama think you at school and get a call to find out you dead?

## **Attitudes & Behaviors Impacting School Success**

Mya and Sara were expelled for fighting each other. They both confess that their attitudes are bad. Interestingly, when asked about behaviors they do not like in others they both responded referring to bad attitudes. Mya says, “I hate my little sister behavior. I feel like she following behind me and I don't want her to you know be like me. I want her to be better than me. I really do. I don't need her following my footsteps. She want to be grown, but she not”. Sara responded with, “Rudeness and disrespect”. When I asked Sara at the end of our first interview if she wanted to add anything regarding her behavior she said, “My attitude bad”, stretching out the /a/ sound in bad. When interviewed, Mya and Sara’s mothers both disagreed with how the school handled their daughter’s punishment. Both felt that the girls should not have been placed in the alternative program together because that is what led to the second fight and ultimately the expulsion.

MC has a “don’t care” attitude with drugs and finishing school. He admits to succumbing to peer pressure when smoking marijuana, “I see people doing it and I start doing it.” He was ready to dropout, and waiting to turn 18 to do so. His parents want him to stay in school as long as possible to learn as much English as he can, but after 18, M.C. says they can’t tell him what to do. During the mindfulness course M.C. mentioned racist comments. This was a time when building the wall between the U.S. and Mexico was in the news daily. When I asked him if he worried about that, he responded with, “Not that much, but it’s kind of racist. When they call Mexicans rapist and all that things.” He said, “not that much” about how life events affects him, but it clearly affects him enough to bring it up and comment.

A.J. was expelled for a series of minor offences. His discipline report was by far the longest, at seven pages, dating back to August of 2016. The most common infraction was being tardy.

School policy states after four tardies, you are given after school detention. If you don't go to after school detention you are assigned an additional day. If you still do not attend, it is a suspension. When I asked him why he has so many tardies, he shrugged his shoulders not sure what to say. By observing A.J. over the couple years I have known him, I have concluded avoidance. In addition to the seven page discipline report, there is three additional pages showing records that repeatedly list, "late to school", "early departure", "checked out by parent", "unexcused absence". It is unclear how much school he has actually attended. When administering the post- surveys in December, at the end of the mindfulness course, A.J. & M.C. had started their Christmas break early. They didn't come the last two weeks of school.

### **Social-Emotional**

Cain reflected on life events that led him to where he is today. He knows well that skipping school isn't right. He knows between right and wrong. Yet, he says, "It's something about doing something bad and getting away with it. It's something about it. It's like a rush." During our interviews, he talked about street life and growing up in a negative environment. He had a hard time answering the question, Where do you see yourself in the future.

You ain't gonna turn out good from doing bad stuff. Nothing turns out good for you. My grandma done told me that, my mama told me that, my daddy done told me that . A lot of people told me. If I keep ... that's where I'm gonna be and that's 100% true. I got people in my family didn't make it to see my age. I got friends they didn't see my age. My friend that died in 2015, he wasn't even at school. His birthday just passed, he would have turned 18. He didn't get to see 18. That's why I said that right there. He died a freak accident. They in the house with a gun and the gun go off. Pow (softly). The whole time your mama think you at school and I could relate to that cause some days... Some days... I didn't go to school and she (his mama) didn't know that I skipped school and that is the same thing that happened to my friend. His mom didn't know he wasn't at school. Can you imagine? Your mama think you at school and get a call to find out you dead? .....That's why I told you that - it's like - it's real... especially like If you grow up

in a bad neighborhood - it's all you see - it's all you see outside - people - negative people - that's all you see.

Cain sees clearly a path leading to death and jail like some of his friends who live on the streets, "My friend K, he was in the streets, he was getting money from the streets - he was a teenager selling drugs and somebody saw it and they wanted it, somebody wanted it so they tried to take it and guess what both of them ending up dying". M.C. and Kabe both were suspended for having marijuana at school. Unlike M.C., Kabe was adamant about what a stupid mistake it was and he would not do anything stupid like that again.

M.C. and Mya also speak of traumatic events in their life. M.C. smokes to ease the pain of being separated from his family by long distance and a long time, "I love my family." Being separated from his family at an age where he is figuring out who he is and developing an identity has been clearly difficult for M.C. Mya doesn't want to end up like her father, "he got killed in a shoot-out. You know - stuff - beef and all that. And I just don't want that to happen to me. He was in jail, back and forth in jail. And stuff and I don't want to be like that". There is no way to fully understand each child's experiences before they enter school or attend each teacher's classroom, but if there is trauma it needs to be addressed prior to expulsion. Who is responsible for addressing the traumatic behavior is in question. As learned through interviews, parents or guardians are not always the one students turn to. Mya's mom is more like a friend and her grandmother, who passed away recently, was her primary caregiver. M.C. lived with his aunt and uncle, but turned to friends for guidance.

## Survey Results

Four survey were administered prior to the beginning of the mindfulness course. All six participants took the four surveys on October 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of 2017. Only four of the six participants took the post-test surveys on December 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of 2017. A.J. stopped coming to school on November 30<sup>th</sup>, two weeks shy completing the course. This was a trait of A.J.'s behavior, part of the reason that led to his expulsion. M.C.'s last day was December 14<sup>th</sup>, the last day of the course. The following survey results do not include A.J. or M.C.

Figure 2 presents scores on the Impulsivity Teen Conflict Survey. This survey is a four-item scale ranging from 1-5 (1 = never; 5 = always). This scale was validated with middle school students and inquires about personal self-control (Barnert, 71). To decrease impulsivity, you want to see scores decrease. Mya is the only student whose score went down. Sara's stayed the same and Cain and Kabe's went up.

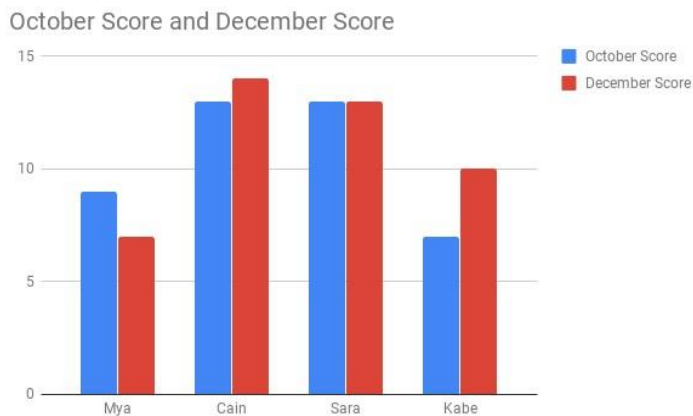


Figure 2. Impulsivity Teen Conflict Survey Intervention Scores

Figure 2 does not show significant changes which correlates with results found in the meditation intervention for incarcerated youth (Barnert, Himmelstein, Herbert, Garcia-Romeu & Chamberlain, 2014). In contrast, studies from [mindfulschools.org](http://mindfulschools.org) do show significant changes. This supports the conclusion that studies need to be replicated and that mindfulness meditation research is in its early stages.

Figure 3 displays scores on Rosenberg Self-Esteem survey. The survey is a 10-item scale that measures self-worth. Items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Rosenberg, 1965). Scores below 15 suggest low self-esteem. A higher score correlates with a higher self-esteem. Sara and Kabe began with scores below the 15 mark, suggesting low self-esteem. The end result shows Kabe's self-esteem improving.

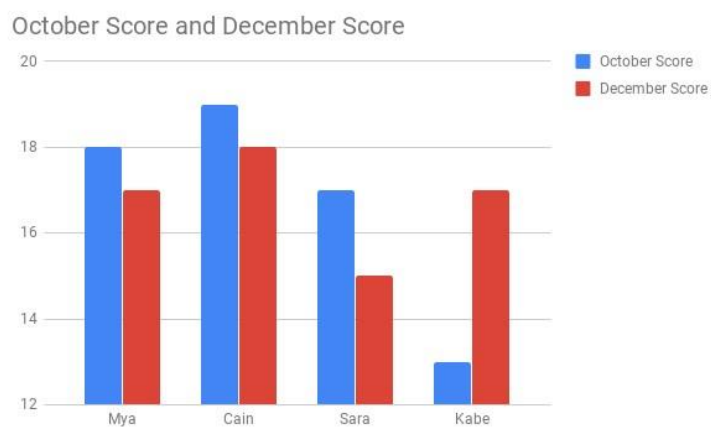


Figure 3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Survey Intervention Scores

Kabe's May 2018 interview showed a very confident young adult, knowing summer was about to begin and the end of his year long expulsion. He was looking forward to returning to the classroom for his junior year in high school which may contribute to the huge increase in his self-esteem shown in Figure 3.

Figure 4 provides scores on Stress PSS-10 survey. The prompts in this survey ask about feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, students are asked how often they felt a certain way. When interpreting scores: 0-7=very low health concern, 8-11 is a low health concern, 12-15= average health concerns, 16-20=high health concern, 21+ =very high health concern (Cohen, 1983). The pre test shows Mya and Cain falling under “very high health concern”. The post test shows Mya moving down two categories to the “average health concern” and Cain moving down a level to “high health concern”.

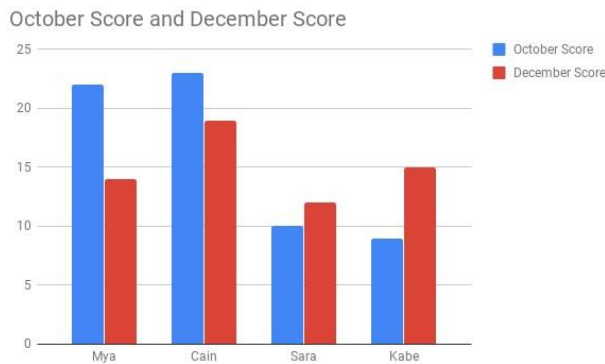


Figure 4. Stress PSS-10 Survey Intervention Scores

It is unclear if the mindfulness course contributed to the decrease in Mya and Cain’s stress level shown in Figure 4.

Figure 5 highlights scores on Mindfulness - MAAS survey. This survey “includes 15 statements that respondents rate on how frequently they engage in the activities described, on a scale from 1 = *almost always*, to 6 = *almost never*.” The article “11 Mindfulness Questionnaires, Scales & Assessments For Measuring” explains that the higher your score, the higher your mindfulness. Typically the average score is around 3.86. The highest score is 6 and the lowest score is 1. Mya and Kabe’s mindfulness grew from pre and post test.

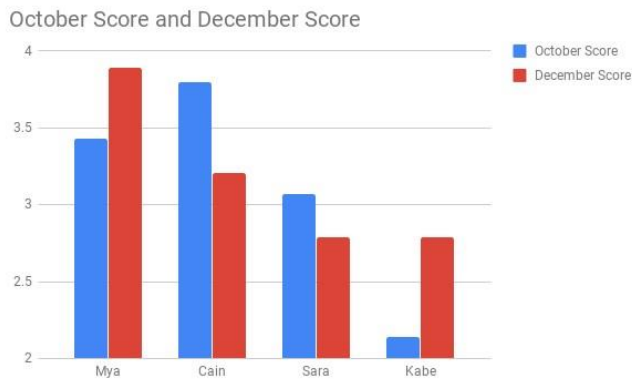


Figure 5. Mindfulness Survey Intervention Scores

Exactly what these pre- and post- scale surveys suggest is mixed messages at best. Can I pinpoint if the mindfulness course helped one student or hurt another? Not with the survey results. It may be that the alternative program made them more anxious or depressed. The lack of behavior remediation within the structure of the day and the pressure of earning high school credits on your own could have lent to lower self-esteem results. The findings in “Innovations in Practice: Exploring an intensive meditation intervention for incarcerated youth” are inconclusive, showing the survey results “did not reach statistical significance” (Barnert, 2013, 70). I can take what they said about being expelled and about what they learned through interviews and piece that information together and combine with the research to paint a picture.



## Chapter 5. Conclusion

Revisiting the leading research question guiding the student interviews, How do expelled students perceive their behavior?, the answers are just as varied as their personalities. Cain attributes it to bad luck or karma,

Small stuff turns into big stuff. Like when it is dealing with me - small stuff turns into big stuff... It's like a chain reaction....I just need to fly straight period. Don't try to do no mischievous things. Small mischievous things turn into big stuff. It's just my luck or karma.

Unfortunately, my interview with Cain in December 2017 is the last time I saw him. He did not return to school in January and did not graduate in May. He didn't go to another school because he never dropped from South Parish High School. Before you can enroll in one school you must first have a drop slip from your previous school. I reached out by calling numerous times over the course of 2018 and wasn't ever able to contact him. His last words ring in my ear and leave me wondering if something small turned into something big. (Update: At the time of final revisions I learned that Cain returned to South Parish High to finish school and plans to graduate in May 2019)

Kabe answers simple and to the point, "Hanging around the wrong crowd". Kabe spent his full sophomore year in the alternative center and returned to South Parish High in the regular school setting for his junior year in the fall of 2018.

MC is a teenager trying to grip his reality, "I be thinking about stuff like ... like my family and why do I have to be right here you know. I be getting sad and then when I smoke, I don't think about it and it make me feel good". AJ never answered the question, but rather smiles and laughs lightheartedly as a response.

Mya is clear and upfront as she repeatedly talks about her late father throughout both interviews, “I’m my daddy’s child”, “my daddy was like that” and “I don’t want to happen to him happen to me”. Sara takes full responsibility, “My attitude bad ....really”.

### **Back to the Classroom**

I have returned back to the classroom, and have new frustrations as I continue my role as teacher. Teacher roles include: curriculum, school scores, grades, management. We don’t have the time to learn the background of our students, especially those who misbehave. We don’t have the time to alter behavior. Managing behavior is at the forefront of teaching. Teaching does not happen without a disciplined student body. Once the student is removed from the traditional classroom setting, many times the student is moved to a setting where their Attitudes & Behavior and Social-Emotional needs are not being addressed. Then, the student returns to the classroom with the same coping skills they left with, continuing the cycle of systemic punishment.

I continue to implement mindfulness techniques, but haphazardly. I have a curriculum to teach and 60 minutes a day is not sufficient. A unit that the state department says will take 30 days, takes twice that long. Learning about student backgrounds in an in depth way and teaching mindfulness techniques has to be more of a “teaching moment”. Those moments that are not in the lesson plan, but happen organically. It is a game of balance in the classroom. Dismissing small behavior issues often turns to bigger issues, but at the same time you have to pick your battles. The classroom is a battlefield and we are all humans.

## **Implications**

This study is significant in that student voices were paramount. Despite more than thirty years of research, “Mindfulness neuroscience is a new, interdisciplinary field of mindfulness practice and neuroscientific research; it applies neuroimaging techniques, physiological measures and behavioral tests to explore the underlying mechanisms of different types, stages and states of mindfulness practice over the lifespan” (Tang & Posner, 2012). The studies in the Literature Review section show that there are significant changes with short term meditation programs, but what about longitudinal studies? Buddhists have criticized programs like the eight week program minimizing it to a quick fix, “mindfulness has increasingly become yet another banal, commercialized self-help consumer product, hawked mostly to rich and upper-middle class white people who still wouldn’t be caught dead in a real zendo” (Mary Sykes Wylie / Psychotherapy Networker, 2015). The term “mindfulness” has become a buzzword lately. You will hear it used in different contexts, printed on the cover of a magazine advertising as the latest trend in selfcare.

In order to implement in schools, resources and funds are needed. Educational systems are political and movements are slow and come and go. Children also have their biases, “negative preconceptions about meditation, difficulty of meditating in groups in a sometimes noisy environment” (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010). Despite these limitations, there is hope. My experience was more idealistic because this course did not take place inside the regular classroom day. I was on sabbatical during the semester the course took place. I was able to come at the convenience of the participants and did not have the usual stress of meeting school and curriculum deadlines.

## **Future Research**

This study led to further questions and ideas to explore such as What is the future for students who have trouble with functioning in the classroom? Also, conducting a longitudinal study, following students from the beginning signs of troublesome behavior through graduation and beyond. Finally, studies that ask expelled students what they hope for in life is warranted and possible.

One of my favorite concrete actions researched was the “Mindfulness Moment Room” from the Holistic Foundation. Essentially, this is a time-out room which is often perceived as a negative consequence. But, the idea that students can self-refer along with a name change gives the perception of positivity. It would be fascinating to see this implemented and followed for several years. For example, if implemented in the middle school and then follow students who accessed the “Mindfulness Moment Room” through high school collecting data along the way. For this to happen, a complete culture change would have to happen at the schools where I have experience. The thought of self-referral is giving students access to something that has been teacher and administrator driven. But, this action would take a culture change. A typical school’s culture is punishment and consequence for misbehaving. Giving the student more control would mean giving authority figures less control. Also, the “Mindfulness Moment Room” was a community effort. The Holistic Foundation is a non-profit who partnered with the school. Without collaboration and partnerships, these efforts are less likely to take place.

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## **Appendix A. Interview Protocol**

Qualitative Participant Interview Study Questions, November 2017

The following questions were asked in one-on-one interviews to answer the research question *How do expelled students perceive their behavior that led to expulsion?*

1. Why did you get expelled?
2. How do you feel about being expelled?
3. Do you think the punishment was fair? Yes/No If no, what should have been the punishment?
4. How did mom/dad/guardian feel about expulsion? Who is the main disciplinarian?
5. Will expulsion change future behavior? Yes/No If no, what could change your behavior?
6. Where/Who did you learn to act in this way?
7. Do your peers influence your behavior? Do you act differently around certain people?
8. Do your behaviors change from home to school?
9. What are some behavior you do not like (that you see others' display in school/public) 10. Where do you see yourself 1 year from now? 5 years from now?

## **Appendix B. Parent Questionnaire**

Parent Questionnaire

September 2017

Please take the time to answer the following questions.

Parent's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the most important thing I should know about your child?
2. What is your child passionate about?
3. What would you love your child to get better at?
4. Overall how does your child feel about school?
5. My child learns best when the teacher is....
6. My child does not work well with...
7. What is your child motivated by?
8. Any additional information you would like to share about your child?



## **Appendix C. Letter to Guardians**

Michelle Lee  
548 Ingleside Drive  
Baton Rouge, LA 70806

May 22, 2018

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Last semester, I had the opportunity to spend time with \_\_\_\_\_ while he/she was expelled working on Mindfulness strategies. Please take a few minutes to fill out the following questionnaire and return in the stamped addressed envelope. I value your feedback about your child's education.

1. Please describe your child's behavior. Include when your child makes positive and negative choices.

2. Do you believe the consequences for your child's (past) expulsion were fair? Explain please.

3. Do you believe being expelled helped improve your child's behavior?  
YES or NO

3a. If yes, in what ways has your child's behavior improved? Please explain.

3b. If no, has your child's behavior stayed the same or gotten worse? Please explain.

4. What do you think are the cause(s) for your child's expulsion behavior?

5. Do you have suggestions on how your child's behavior could have been handled differently?

6. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate how the school handled your child's expulsion behavior? 1 Being extremely unsatisfied and a 10 being extremely satisfied.

- |    |                                                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
|    | 1                                                              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 7. | Do you have any additional comments on your child's education? |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |

### **Appendix D. Teacher Questionnaire**

Teacher Questions re: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How long have you known/taught him/her?
2. What class do you teach him/her?
3. What are your expectations from him/her? Same as other students, higher or lower?
4. What type of misbehaviors have you witnessed him/her perform?
5. What do you feel are his/her main challenges?
6. What do you believe are his/her capabilities, possibilities?
7. How does he/she perform on academic tasks? (A, B, C, D student? Or average, below average, above average?)
8. What does the ideal student look like to you?
9. How does he/she compare to the ideal student?
10. Have you given him/her positive consequences for their behavior? Negative consequences for their behavior?
11. If you have any other information regarding this student that you would like to share, please share below.

## Appendix E. Mindfulness Survey

### (Mindfulness MAAS) – Adolescent version

Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experience. Please answer according to what *really reflects* your experience rather than what you think your experience should be.

Simply circle your response to each item.

1	2	3	4	5			6		
almost always	very frequently	somewhat frequently	somewhat infrequently	very infrequently			almost never		
1. I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until sometime later.				1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else.				1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present.				1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I tend to walk quickly to get where I’m going without paying attention to what I experience along the way.				1	2	3	4	5	6
5. I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.				1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I forget a person’s name almost as soon as I’ve been told it for the first time.				1	2	3	4	5	6
7. It seems I am “running on automatic” without much awareness of what I’m doing.				1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.				1	2	3	4	5	6
9. I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I am doing right now to get there.				1	2	3	4	5	6
10. I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I’m doing.				1	2	3	4	5	6
11. I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.				1	2	3	4	5	6
12. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.				1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I find myself doing things without paying attention.				1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I snack without being aware that I’m eating.				1	2	3	4	5	6

## Appendix F. Teen Conflict Survey

### (Teen Conflict Survey—Impulsivity)

How often would you make the following statements?

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
I have a hard time sitting still.	a	b	c	d	e
I start things but have a hard time finishing them.	a	b	c	d	e
I do things without thinking	a	b	c	d	e
I need to use a lot of self-control to keep out of trouble	a	b	c	d	e



## Appendix G. Self-esteem Survey

### (Rosenberg Self-Esteem)

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please circle the number that best reflects how you feel about yourself

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1 On the whole I am satisfied with myself.	3	2	1	0
2 At times I think that I am no good at all.	3	2	1	0
3 I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	3	2	1	0
4 I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3	2	1	0
5 I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	3	2	1	0
6 I certainly feel useless at times.	3	2	1	0
7 I feel that I am a person of worth, at least the equal of others.	3	2	1	0
8 I wish I could have more respect for myself.	3	2	1	0
9 All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	3	2	1	0
10 I take a positive attitude toward myself.	3	2	1	0

## Appendix H. Stress Survey

### (Stress PSS-10)

Instructions: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, please circle the number that best matches how often you felt or thought a certain way

	0	1	2	3	4
	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	0	1	2	3	4
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	0	1	2	3	4
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	0	1	2	3	4
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	0	1	2	3	4
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3	4
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	0	1	2	3	4
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	0	1	2	3	4
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3	4



## Appendix I. IRB Approval

### ACTION ON PROTOCOL APPROVAL REQUEST



Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu)  
[lsu.edu/research](http://lsu.edu/research)

**TO:** Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell  
Education

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** September 27, 2017

**RE:** IRB# 3916

**TITLE:** The effects of mindfulness on teen behavior

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** Modification

**Brief Modification Description:** Increase number of subjects to 7.

**Review type:** Full ☐ Expedited ☒ **Review date:** 9/27/2017

**Risk Factor:** Minimal ☒ Uncertain ☐ Greater Than Minimal ☐

**Approved** ☒ **Disapproved** ☐

**Approval Date:** 9/27/2017 **Approval Expiration Date:** 9/24/2018

**Re-review frequency:** (annual unless otherwise stated)

**Number of subjects approved:** 7

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable)

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman D. Landin

#### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING – Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: Make sure you use bcc when emailing more than one recipient.**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## **Vita**

Michelle Lanius Lee, born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, taught in East Baton Rouge Parish and West Baton Rouge Parish for sixteen years after receiving her bachelor's degree in English at Louisiana State University. During this time, her interest grew in the intersectionality of family dynamics, creative and investigative writing, spirituality, and education. These combined interests led her to enter the Masters of Liberal Arts program at Louisiana State University. Upon completion of her master's degree, she plans to begin work on her doctorate.