

THE INFLUENCE OF GOAL SETTING AND REFLECTIVE JOURNALS IN A POST-PANDEMIC MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The study followed a sample of thirty seventh grade students at a suburban private school in Tennessee and observed the effects of having students start each morning setting goals, describing their perceived mindset, and writing about anything else that was “on their mind” or occupying their attention. Students kept these reflections in a dated journal. The progression of students’ self-perceived levels of stress and how students dealt with stress at school were tracked by the researcher through interviews to determine if creating a morning habit of practicing goal setting and introspective reflection later in the day would help students accomplish more and/ or influence their overall day. Participants engaged in goal setting and journal writing for one full semester (sixteen weeks). The qualitative results generated authentic impressions toward the journal experience and revealed positive feelings, particularly about goal setting and reflecting on their day. Participants also focused heavily on the importance of peer relationships and how they influence stress levels both positively and negatively. Additionally, the qualitative results yielded some perceived decrease in stress and increased feelings of being organized and “ready” for the school day based on the goal setting, journal writing, and reflection.

KEYWORDS

Anxiety, Stress, Middle School, Reflective Journal, Mindfulness

1. INTRODUCTION

Anxiety has become the most common psychiatric struggle faced by adolescents in recent years [6]. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has found that anxiety levels of adolescents have increased exponentially over the last ten years [4]. Reasons given for this explosion include the increase in school violence, perceived social unrest in American society, economic factors, and most recently the COVID 19 pandemic. The National Institute of Mental Health reported that anxiety affected roughly one-third of adolescents and adults in the United States pre-pandemic. That number has increased since the COVID pandemic began in 2019 [13]. Post-pandemic teachers are beginning to implement mindfulness techniques in their classrooms in an effort to reduce student stress and help students focus on the academic and social demands of school. Pre-pandemic research demonstrated that mindfulness exercises in schools had the ability to enhance student performance by lowering stress and anxiety levels [19]. This study aims to explore the influence that using mindfulness techniques; specifically, goal setting and reflective journal writing have on perceived student stress levels and emotional mindset. Teachers at a private suburban middle school in Tennessee began to worry that their students were exhibiting high levels of stress and seemed more negative than usual. In December of 2023, seventh grade middle school students attending a private suburban middle school were asked to participate in a focus group that asked them to reflect on their middle school experience.

Approximately seventy percent of the students used the following terms to describe their current school experience: “stressful, overwhelming, and demanding”.

The problem is that middle school teachers realized that student attitudes were negative on a regular basis and this behavior needed to be addressed. Terms such as “stressful”, “overwhelming”, and “demanding” were being used to describe school and the academic and social experiences tied to it. This has the potential to damage student confidence, demeanor, and productivity if not addressed. Based on diagnostic interview data from the National Comorbidity Survey Adolescent Supplement taken in 2005, an estimated 31.9% of adolescents suffered from anxiety [15]. This number rose during pandemic beginning in 2019, but leveled off slightly and now hovers around the 36% mark [13].

The purpose of conducting research around student stress levels and lack of organization and lack of healthy outlets, was to find potential solutions to reduce and/ or alleviate anxiety. The ultimate hope is to improve students’ quality of life during the school day. Every morning, the researcher had students set goals they would like to accomplish that day in a journal. Students were also tasked with addressing positive experiences or things that they were grateful for within their journal. As homework, each evening, students were to write a reflection that focused on their experiences that day and the ultimate achievement of their daily goals. The progression of students’ self-perceived levels of stress and happiness at school were tracked by the researcher through interviews to determine if creating a daily habit of goal setting and contemplative reflection would help students accomplish more, both academically and socially, as well as improve the overall quality of their school day experience.

The following research questions served as a guide to this study:

- 1.) How will the integration of daily goal setting and reflective journals influence middle school students’ perceived stress levels?
- 2.) How will the integration of daily goal setting and reflective journals influence middle school students’ perceived productivity and organization?

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review covers the concepts of gratitude and mindfulness, mindfulness as a learned habit and its effects, stress and self-efficacy, and goal-setting theory and the influence that this has on a student’s sense of self-efficacy.

2.1. The Concepts of Gratitude and Mindfulness

The term mindfulness refers to the ability to focus on experiences as they unfold with open-minded acceptance [14]. Gratitude is the thankfulness felt by people when somebody does something caring or helpful for them [10]. “Fostering gratitude appears to provide a wide range of benefits across multiple domains, including domains of mental health, physical health, and social well-being” [16].

The use of gratitude as a strategy to combat stress has been recognized in recent years, and various mindfulness techniques are now being used throughout the realm of education [14]. Researchers examined the relationship between gratitude and well-being through a series of three studies [8]. The first compared those who kept gratitude journals and those who recorded aggravations or neutral life events, in a “writing once a week for 10 consecutive weeks” (p. 9) design. The results showed that the group keeping gratitude journals exercised more consistently, felt better about their lives, and were more hopeful about the upcoming week, compared to the

other group. In the second study, participants were asked to write in journals every day for two weeks, rather than once a week. The results showed that participants in the daily group were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or serve as an emotional support to someone, relative to those in the control group [8].

2.2. Mindfulness as a Learned Habit and its Effects

Researchers have explored whether mindfulness is inherent or a learned trait. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade [18] claim that 50% of a person's tendency toward happiness is related to his/her genetic set point, 10% to situation, and 40% to purposeful practice. Doctors have identified specific actions called "gratitude practices" that if implemented, one has the ability to experience a greater feeling of happiness and well-being [8]. It appears that mindfulness can be developed through intentional practice. For example, researchers found that participants who reflected on their daily positive experiences highlighted the good in their lives due to training their brains with this cognitive routine [23].

A study from Broderick and Metz [2] tracked the positive behaviors of adolescent students who practiced various aspects of mindfulness. They found increased calmness, peace, and alertness in addition to reduced negative effects among children, as determined by teacher accounts. While research shows that mindfulness and reflection have cognitive benefits, educators should be aware that one cannot force this upon individuals. One researcher concluded "students need to intentionally choose to practice gratitude before they may experience increased focus and resilience in learning" [23].

2.3. Stress and Self-Efficacy

Stress is defined as the body's flight or fight reaction, a state that occurs naturally both physically and mentally when the brain senses danger or discomfort [20]. When it comes to children's perception of stress, many factors contribute to their anxiety including everyday setbacks which have been identified as playing a stronger role in emotional and behavioral problems than major life events [3]. A study in the United Kingdom showed that nearly half of all middle school aged children surveyed reported being unable to sleep because of stress due to family quarrel, assessments, bullying or friendship worries. Additionally, over half of those surveyed indicated that they felt sad or worried at least once a week [5]. According to researchers [13], adolescent stress levels were influenced by the pandemic and still remain high. Along with the pandemic experience, the negative 24-hour news cycle, increased number of school shootings, and the prevalence of social media all play a role in keeping adolescent stress levels high [13]. The CDC [4] reported that during the pandemic the majority of adolescents felt isolated from their peers and 47% felt higher than normal levels of stress.

2.4. Goal Setting Theory and Self-Efficacy

Goals are precise targets a person consciously wants to achieve in the future [1]. The goal setting theory is the idea that encouraging people to pursue a goal that is specific will result in better performance more than no goals or "do best" goals [17]. The practice of setting goals "builds self-confidence and improves performance as one recognizes the ability and competence in achieving set goals" [12]. Schunk [21] for example found that participation in goal setting by sixth graders improved achievement results. Specific goals direct students' decisions to be engaged, to remain determined, and to feel a sense of competence with a certain set of skills within their environment [9].

The effect of goal setting is directly connected to one's self-efficacy, or belief of one's capabilities to achieve or accomplish a task. A person's sense of self-efficacy affects how he/she goes about accomplishing a goal or challenge [21]. Schunk and Swartz [21] believe that someone with low perceived self-efficacy is less likely to attain a goal or complete a challenging task while those who believe in their abilities are more likely to tackle the goal and achieve it.

3. METHODOLOGY

The following formatting rules must be followed strictly. This is a phenomenological qualitative research design. A focus group was used to gauge students' stress levels, perceived happiness at school, self-identified actions, and feelings of productivity. This was conducted at the beginning and end of the research project. The responses were collected and analyzed in order to gain a starting point. During the 16-week semester (beginning in January), students were asked to use a journal to set goals, address positive experiences and things they were thankful for, and then reflect upon their daily experiences and goal achievement, etc... After the journal experience, students responded to semi-structured interview questions that directly referred to the effectiveness of the daily reflection and goal journals. This added depth and meaning to the qualitative research component of this study.

The following delimitations applied to this study:

1. This study was limited to seventh grade students in a west Tennessee private school.
2. Since stress is unique and subjective for each individual, this study was limited to the participants' perceptions of the meaning of stress.
3. Research was conducted over a sixteen-week academic semester.

The purpose of conducting research around stress levels and organization was to find potential solutions to combat pre-adolescent and adolescent anxiety in hopes of improving students' quality of life during the school day. The researcher observed the effects of having students start each day by writing down items that they are grateful for as well as two goals they would like to accomplish that day. The progression of students' self-perceived levels of stress and happiness at school was assessed by the researchers through interviews to determine if creating a morning habit of practicing gratitude and goal setting and an evening practice of reflecting in a journal would help students accomplish more, influence stress levels, and improve the quality of their school days.

3.1. Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative design. An initial focus group gauged student stress levels, perceived happiness at school, self-identified actions, and feelings of productivity. Over the course of a 16-week semester, students engaged in structured journal writing which also allowed for a certain level of creativity. Students were asked to set two daily goals, focus on positives within their life, and then ultimately reflect upon their daily goal attainment and offer personal feedback based on their stress levels, emotional well-being, and other daily experiences. After the journal writing experience ended, students responded to semi-structured interview questions that directly referred to the effectiveness of the daily gratitude and goal journals, which added depth and meaning to the qualitative research approach.

3.2. Instrumentation

This study utilized a focus group prior to the journal writing experience that included structured questions combined with secondary follow up questions based on student responses. The focus group was structured in an informal, relaxed manner in order to help conversation flow. After the focus group was conducted, students journaled over the entire 16-week semester. After the initial focus group and 16-week journal experience were concluded, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each, and students answered questions regarding their perceptions surrounding the journal experience.

3.3. Population and Sample

The population of this study included 30 seventh grade middle school students who attend a private suburban school in West Tennessee. Half of the participants were male (15) and half were female (15). Eighty percent (24) of the participants identified as white. Ten percent (3) identified as African American. Ten percent (3) identified as Hispanic.

This study involved a convenience sample of 30 students who were a part of the same homeroom class. This sample was chosen because of the consistency of access and because of the even split between males (15) and females (15). Students were asked to participate on a voluntary basis and all thirty students agreed. Permission to work with students was granted by the principal of the school and the homeroom teacher. Parent permission was sought in the form of a written permission form that described the study in detail and required a signature.

3.4. Data Collection

A focus group was conducted in early December 2023. Based on the student feedback from that experience, interview questions were designed. The study ran for 16 full weeks and concluded with the researcher conducting interviews at the end of the experience. Semi-structured interviews began in May 2024 and were completed by the end of June.

3.5. Qualitative Data Preparation and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in person in a classroom at the school. Eight semi-structured interview questions were asked to all participants with secondary, follow-up questions asked on an “as needed” basis. Data was entered into the NVivo qualitative software tool so that patterns and themes could be more efficiently recognized. After that process, data was organized, with specific focus placed on repeated themes and patterns.

Interview Questions

- 1.) What do you enjoy about your middle school experience?
- 2.) What do you find stressful about middle school?
- 3.) Describe how you deal with stress or stressful situations.
- 4.) Describe how you plan or organize your day. Is there a specific system or pattern that you follow?
- 5.) How did the daily goal setting exercise influence your stress level?
- 6.) How did the daily goal setting exercise influence your organization and productivity at school?
- 7.) How did the nightly written journal reflection influence your stress level?

- 8.) How did the nightly journal reflection influence your organization and productivity at school?

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Qualitative feedback was collected, first in the form of focus group responses and second in the form of interview results. The goal of the focus group was to gain information to help support the creation of the subsequent interview questions and to provide structure for the journal writing and reflection exercises.

The focus group itself was conducted over the course of a single afternoon session. The journal and reflection writing occurred over an entire 16-week semester. The interview process lasted for almost two months.

4.1. Focus Group Results

Results were assembled from the initial focus group in order to inform the creation of the interview questions. When asked “What words would you associate with your time so far in middle school?”, 70% (21 students) responded that their school experience was “stressful, overwhelming, or demanding”.

Ten percent (3 students) mentioned that school was “easy”. Another 10% (3 students) replied that school was “productive”. Forty percent (12 students) stated that school was “fun” or “enjoyable”. Another 40% (12 students) mentioned that school was “boring” or “pointless”. Finally, 7% (2 students) said that they felt “lonely” or “isolated” at school.

As a follow-up, students were asked two different questions: “What do you enjoy about middle school?” and “What do you find stressful about middle school?” Over half of the students (60%) stated that their most enjoyable part of the school day was the lunch and flex period after lunch so that they could “spend time with friends”. Conversing and spending time with friends and others seemed to have an overwhelming positive influence on student happiness. Other students mentioned enjoying specific classes (gym or wellness class, history, and English being the top responses). They also mentioned specifically enjoying time in certain teacher’s classes.

The responses connected to the “What do you find stressful about middle school?” were more diverse. Responses ranged from answers such as “bullies or people who talk about you behind your back” to “specific teachers” or “teachers who talk down to them” to “too much homework” to “fake people”. Students also mentioned dissatisfaction with their daily schedule, school start time, lack of freedom, lack of elective course options, and not enough down time.

4.2. Interview Results

All 30 seventh grade students were interviewed over the course of a two-month period. They were all asked the same eight interview questions, with secondary follow-up questions asked as needed. Based on their interview feedback, three qualitative themes emerged. They were: 1.) Students stressed that peer relationships (both positive and negative) influenced their stress levels more than anything else; 2.) Students felt more productive when they set two daily goals; and 3.) Students stated that the written reflection journal exercise helped them deal with stress in a positive way.

Theme 1: The Importance of Peer Relationships

Seventy-three percent (22 out of 30) of students mentioned that peer relationships had either a positive or negative influence on their daily stress levels at school. Peer relationships were mentioned as being more impactful than any other influence in the students' lives.

One particular student stated the following: "I lean on my close group of friends when I'm feeling bad or feeling stressed. They know me and know how to help me get back on track".

On the opposite end of the spectrum, another student described the negative influence that peers had on her stress level: "Honestly, my life would be so much easier if I didn't have to deal with mean girls. I try to join in and be part of the group, but they won't let me".

Theme 2: Setting Two Daily Goals Helped Students Feel Productive

Over half (60%) of students mentioned that they felt more productive when setting two daily goals. Most students mentioned being somewhat goal oriented, but their goals were more informal thoughts. When writing out formal, daily goals students felt that they were more likely to meet their goals.

One student shared "I have always been driven. I have goals. I have just never written them down and focused on meeting specific goals". The same student then stated: "Writing down my goals was an extra motivator to make sure that I accomplished what I set out to do".

Another student said "I always write down my homework to make sure that I do it. I feel the same way about setting daily goals. When I write them down, I am more likely to follow through".

Yet another student mentioned that she had never thought about setting goals or writing them down. "I never really thought about setting goals. I have things that I want to do or want to accomplish but putting them down on paper makes them seem more real".

Finally, a female student mentioned how setting goals and reflecting upon those goals enhanced her sense of self-confidence. "I feel better about myself when I set goals and then see them accomplished. I feel more self-confident when I get my work done".

Theme 3: Writing Journal Reflections Helped Students Deal with Stress

During the interview process, students mentioned a wide array of methods for dealing with stress. Some of these coping strategies were negative, but most of them were positive. Students mentioned the importance of peer relationships, exercise and athletics, and eating as ways to cope with stress. However, 63% of students stated that they felt that the journal writing exercise and the ability to reflect on their day in a positive manner helped lower their stress levels.

One student shared "I have never kept a diary, but when I took the time to think about my day and what I accomplished, I felt good about myself. I would say that it was a stress reliever".

A male student answered the question in a similar manner, but with a different tone. "I never thought that writing in a journal was something that boys really did. When you call it a journal instead of a diary, I think that helps. I did feel like it was a positive experience, and it is something that I plan to continue in the future".

Finally, another student mentioned journaling as a positive stress reliever. “When you take the time to reflect on your day and look at what you have actually accomplished it feels good. Putting it in writing is better than just thinking about it. It made me feel better about myself when I saw that I accomplished something every single day”.

5. CONCLUSION

The initial focus of this research was to determine the effectiveness of having students set goals and write daily reflections in a journal as an organizational tool and a stress reliever. Through a focus group, students reported that their middle school experience was “stressful, overwhelming, and demanding”. Using that feedback, the researcher helped the classroom teacher implement daily journal and reflection writing. This experience lasted for an entire 16-week semester. At the end of the semester, 30 students were interviewed based on questions that emanated from the earlier focus group.

Three qualitative themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. They were: 1.) Students stressed that peer relationships (both positive and negative) influenced their stress levels more than anything else; 2.) Students felt more productive when they set two daily goals; and 3.) Students stated that the written reflection journal exercise helped them deal with stress in a positive way.

The overwhelming majority of students found value in the journal and reflection writing with multiple students using the word “calming” to describe the experience. Students found value in sharing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions in written form. They also found that they were more organized when they set specific goals and wrote about their daily experiences. Multiple students described the goal setting piece as helping them get organized. They also described feeling more accomplished since they set daily concrete goals and then reflected upon their success in achieving those goals.

The combination of lower perceived stress levels, higher comfort level sharing their thoughts and experiences, and an increased feeling of being prepared and organized seemed to be positive outcomes.

Studies have shown that adolescents who practice reflection and goal setting have more positive attitudes toward school, their classmates, and their families [10]. The 30 participants not only reported lower levels of perceived stress, but they described the journal writing and goal setting as something that increased their self-confidence. Students also stressed the role that peer relationships play in adding stress to their lives (in negative ways) and how positive peer relationships also help them combat stress.

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