

What is the impact of mindfulness based interventions?

Exploring the experiences of children and their perceived effect on their mental health and well-being: A Case Study

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Mindfulness is founded upon training your mind to focus on the current task in question without being influenced by what has taken place previously or what could happen next. The concept of mindfulness stems from eastern traditions practices such as breathing exercises, meditation and yoga which can help to focus the mind to increase its attentional capacity and concentration.

This study explored how mindfulness based interventions (MBI), in particular breathing exercises, are experienced by children and their personal perceptions of the associated benefits.

Making sense of 'mindfulness'

Historically, educational research has tended to focus mainly on attainment and social participation leading to a lack of research surrounding children's health and well-being (Rathmann et al, 2018). Recently, a growing curiosity surrounding the impact of MBI has emerged, and



this is rapidly becoming high on the academic agenda (Emerson et al, 2017). Underpinning this, is growing evidence in support of mindfulness and the positive impact it can have on children's mental health and resilience in dealing with anxiety and stressful situations (Benn et al, 2012). This is more evident today especially with current issues affecting recovery from the pandemic such as the rising cost of living which can increase anxiety, worry and stress in adults which in turn can influence children and their well-being. Furthermore, Arduini and Chiusaroli (2013) argue that well-being has become more

vital in children now as it has become linked to psychological functioning which according to Lund (2014) is critical to the way a child thinks, self regulates and behaves. This in turn has an impact on a child's ability to be open to learning and to engage effectively in opportunities presented within their class.

Although there are theories that suggest that MBI can support self-regulation, very few studies have analysed the validity of these interventions and the experiences of them in action for primary school children (Emerson et al, 2017).



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Viglas and Perlman (2018) describes how researchers are beginning to explore the effects of MBI in a broader educational context. This could correlate with their recommendations, that if practitioners learn to embrace the ideas and practices regarding mindfulness into existing programs, then, they could potentially help their children benefit in a lasting sustainable way.

Mindfulness and schools

As children spend the majority of their day at school, this context has since become viewed as the perfect place for MBI to be implemented to support children in beginning to help regulate both their attention and behaviour. MBI can help improve children's mental health through greater self-awareness, emotional understanding, compassion and empathy towards others. Consequently, there has been a development of numerous initiatives or programmes which seek to develop and support school wide approaches to implementing mindfulness-based practices or MBI.

'Take 5', devised by Each Amazing Breathe (2019), is an example of a mindfulness programme. It is one approach that has become increasingly popular across Nottinghamshire schools in relation to facilitating mindfulness and resilience building through teaching children a range of skills including breathing, grounding and awareness. This programme emphasises these skills as fundamental within mindfulness-based practices as they are sustainable, safe and easily applied into our daily lives (Each Amazing Breathe 2019). It is

a programme designed to support and benefit specifically educational settings and designed to be implemented as an MBI.

Mindfulness and mental health and well being

Children have spent more time at home over the pandemic and therefore have been more exposed to worries, stress and anxiety from their parents and others in the family home in relation to finance, relationships and other issues. This has resulted in children also feeling anxious and worried because others around them are, but not necessarily understanding the reasons why. So, practising mindfulness interventions can lead to better self regulation of emotions, which in turn has a positive effect on children's health and well being (Benn et al. 2021). This is because as children are trained to focus on the moment, then they have a better capacity to deal with issues one at a time rather than being overwhelmed (Viglas and Perlman 2018). These interventions are also aimed at children understanding that it is natural to have some anxiety and worry when important events at school take place such as tests, or learning lines for an assembly. The important factor is enabling children to have the skills to deal with issues in a calm and strategic way rather than panicking and becoming distraught.

In addition to mindfulness based practices from the 'Take 5' approach, children also need to be given a safe space to talk and ask difficult questions without fear of judgement. Once children have the opportunity to talk and make sense

of their understanding of the world, they will become more reflective, resilient and less anxious.

Research

This study emerged from personal and professional passion for supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children. It is an example of a small scale piece of classroom research by a primary teacher wishing to explore the impact of this approach towards children's willingness to learn.

The goal was to create useful knowledge that could contribute to an understanding of the impact of the growing implementation of MBI within primary school settings. This study undertook a qualitative approach using a case-study (Yin, 2009) and furthermore, a qualitative methodology. The sample was taken from a class of 30 Year 5 children within one academy trust in Nottinghamshire.

This study adopted the use of questionnaires with a follow up focus group. Both of these research tools were deliberately selected so as to place the children's voice as the key mechanism in supporting the researchers' comprehension of their personal experiences and perceptions of the MBI and whether or not they felt there were benefits of it. Denscombe (2017) advocates focus groups as an effective tool for data collection of this nature because it enables researchers to explore participant's attitudes, perceptions and feelings. However, this particular method is not without limitations, prevalent with how the participants could influence each other (Gibbs 2017). In order to overcome this, individual questionnaires were



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distributed initially. These were used to seek out individual opinions and gain a holistic oversight into the opinions of children in terms of their perceptions of the benefits of MBI in a measurable way. To support this, the questionnaire used a scale of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Initial discussions were had in advance with the children to reflect upon how they could gauge this, however using this scale positioned the data to be open to subjectivity based on how the children independently interpreted it. This was a further reason why the focus group was so important as it allowed further opportunity to explore these judgements before the point of thematic data analysis.

Findings

This study gathered evidence formulated from a social phenomenon, in particular children's experiences and perceptions. Therefore, to reflect upon and unpick the reality of the data collected, a thematic analysis was adopted (Braun and Clarke 2006). There were two main themes which emerged whilst exploring the feedback from the children in terms of what they perceived the impact of MBI's are:

i. Self-regulating stressful situations

Evidence from the individual questionnaires initially presented a strong correlation between the impact of MBI and children feeling more able to manage their behaviour and emotions (see table 1).

Over 50% of the children surveyed spoke positivity regarding the impact it had. Consequently, during

Table 1 Individual Questionnaire Data
(‘Take 5’ is the named MBI from this study)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Sometimes Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Take 5 helps me control my behaviour and emotions	18%	14%	14%	36%	18%
I use Take 5 to calm myself down	18%	7%	21%	36%	18%

Table 2 Individual Questionnaire Data
(‘Take 5’ is the named MBI from this study)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Sometimes Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I prefer starting lessons with Take 5	18%	7%	21%	14%	40%

the focus group this was explored further. As previously noted by Benn et al. (2012), MBI can support children when dealing with anxiety and stressful situations and during the focus group the children were invited to discuss 'how' 'Take 5', helped them feel less stressed. Children described how the actions of the MBI itself, 'Take 5' being a breathing exercise, was what helped them in particular:

"It takes your mind off things, and I get to have a breather, this helps me calm myself down"

"When I breathe out, I feel like I can release my stress"

"Doing Take 5 turns my brain off from working about stressful things that sometimes distract me"

What children perceived as a "stressful" experience varied, from tests anxiety, fallouts at playtimes and worrying about situations on going at home. This was affirmed during discussion with those who had suggested 'sometimes agree', stating that it depended on the

situation itself. However, the children were united during the focus group in agreeing that the impact of a MBI helped them self-regulate within these named 'stressful' situations.

ii. Enhancing Learner Resilience

In addition, Benn et al. (2012) discussed other positive impacts MBI can have, naming how it can support resilience. During the individual questionnaires, children responses confirmed the belief that they preferred preparing for learning experiences by starting lessons with 'Take 5' (see Table 2).

As this was a closed question it was then further explored in more detail during the follow up focus group to gain an understanding why children preferred starting with 'Take 5'. Children stated:

"It helps me have more courage and determination, I feel I like I start the lesson fresh"

"I feel more confident afterwards to take on challenges that I may have given up on"



This demonstrated how the after effect of an MBI left these children feeling more prepared for a lesson. During the focus group, children pre-empted that they may face challenges, which they thus felt more prepared to face following 'Take 5'. Furthermore, some children even discussed the impact of this during lessons, stating that when they came across work they found difficult, instead of giving up they could:

"...focus my attention on my breathing and take 5"

This again suggests that they perceived the impact of MBI as a successful intervention in helping them feel more resilient during lessons. It could even be argued that they perceived the MBI being beneficial to their learning outcomes.

Implications

Consequently, this small-scale study certainly opens up avenues to be explored further. In particular, focussing on specific pupil groups and seeing whether children's individual learning needs has an impact on children's experience of MBI. In addition, this study evidenced why it is important that research of this kind continues to develop within the broader educational contexts (Viglas and Perlman 2018). However, this study contributes to a growing evidence

basis that MBIs pose positive benefits in terms of their impact on children. These impacts were named specifically from the children's reflections to be helping them focus their attention and self-regulate in stressful situations, which could ultimately benefit their well being but also progress in the longer term in terms of their resilience towards learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, evidence from both the individual questionnaires and follow up focus groups directed to the belief that the impact of MBI is perceived by children as being positive. In particular these findings synthesised with previous literature, particularly that they can support both self-regulation and resilience. However, it is important to reflect upon, that when further analysis took place at an individual level, particularly looking closer at the children's initial individual questionnaire responses, those who answered more negatively were on the cohorts Special Educational Needs (SEN) register. These children also opted out of being in the focus group, which had implications for the data collected from this experience. This is a prevalent finding within the study in its own right, and future studies should explore what the experiences of MBIs are for children with SEN in order for it to become an inclusive practice to benefit all.

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Pen Portrait

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