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Headteacher Update

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Mindfulness

A focus on mindfulness

Mindfulness has become a familiar term, but what does it really mean and does it have a place in our schools? **Amanda Bailey** discusses how mindfulness can help children in particular to grow and develop

Mindfulness stems from Buddhist philosophy, with its roots in psychology, as a way of understanding and relieving the causes of human suffering. The term mindfulness refers to the ability to direct the attention to the experience as it unfolds, with curiosity and kindness. Rather than the constant shuttling of our mind, worrying about the past or planning for the future, mindfulness trains us to respond skilfully to what is happening now.

Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced secular mindfulness in the 1970s at the medical centre of the University of Massachusetts to suit a western context and for people with chronic health conditions.

In the past five years, interest in mindfulness has really taken off, with an emerging evidence base of potential applications on physical and mental health conditions such as cancer, recurrent depression and anxiety or stress as well as supporting wellbeing and flourishing. So what are the benefits?

According to Sarah Silverton, mindfulness teacher and trainer at Bangor University, the benefits are varied. She explained: "They include attention focus and control, emotion regulation and dealing with difficulty in life externally and internally, whether in relationships, thoughts or body sensations. It also enables responsive choice-making rather than automatic habitual reacting and self-care."

In education in particular, we use mindfulness to teach young people how to better manage with exam anxiety, increase focus and concentration and build resilience and self-esteem. Mindfulness can support us in sleeping better and gives us space to respond rather than be reactive in difficult



situations. It is a practice we are rolling out across the Bright Futures Educational Trust, with courses currently run for students and staff in six of our schools.

Tabitha Sawyer, teacher at Ysgol Pen y Bryn in Bangor, and co-founder with Ms Silverton of the "paws.b" mindfulness in schools programme, added: "Its role in education is still in its infancy, and it has been more fully introduced into secondary schools than primary schools at this point, offered as lessons within the PSHE curriculum, either voluntary or conscript. It can be presented by the classroom teacher or by a mindfulness teacher coming in to deliver the lessons."

In a primary setting, the preferred route is for classroom teachers to

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fresh thinking, best outcomes

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develop their own mindfulness so that they can deliver it to their own classes. This can then be complemented by practice being woven in to other elements of the curriculum, such as sport, music and school trips.

Lessons centre around a fun introduction to the theory and practice of mindfulness, offering the invitation to explore mindfulness and concepts. They encourage children to discuss and explore their practices with their learning partner. Content includes learning about the brain, with film clips and exercises to help the children discover and understand. Mindfulness practices are varied and centre on present moment experience using the breathing and body to focus. Children develop a toolbox of practices that they are encouraged to play with in school and at home.

Mindfulness practice offers a welcome time for both teachers and children to take a pause from the busyness of school life. It is also a good counterbalance to the immense media and technology that children are exposed to, allowing teachers and children the opportunity to connect with themselves and others. And the advantages are clear. Children and staff talk about feeling calmer and having more resources to manage challenges in their lives. The children have reported a wide range of experiences where mindfulness has had an impact and supported them in their lives – acknowledging and promoting happiness and pleasure is also very important, rather than just focusing on what is wrong.

This is all very positive, but there may be challenges to overcome. There is a real danger of not respecting the necessary foundation in experiential knowledge through rushing, and losing the essence of mindfulness in the

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curriculum delivery. It needs patience in delivery and an acceptance that it may not be for everyone – on-going engagement and support within the school are required to sustain personal and teaching practice.

George Thomas, a trainee educational and child psychologist at Bright Futures Educational Trust, is currently in his second year of a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. For his thesis, he has chosen to evaluate the impact of the paws.b mindfulness programme on year 4 pupils' attention and academic progress at Stanley Grove Primary Academy in Manchester.

He explained: "The pupils really enjoy paws.b and many said how much it had helped them at school, particularly with their attention and emotional regulation. Their teachers are also able to give many examples of how it had helped their pupils."

Support from the top is also important for success. Leading by example and giving your full support to mindfulness can be essential to reducing the challenges associated with implementing new ideas. And established teachers can obviously integrate mindfulness into everyday school life more effectively than external teachers.

If schools are interested in introducing mindfulness, there are a number of good places to start. Seeing it in action through visits or film clips can really enthuse potential participants and, although one teacher can make an impact, it is more likely to be sustainable if there is more than one teacher that can deliver the sessions. New teachers should be supported by experienced mindfulness practitioners if possible, and establishing a network of mindfulness teachers to support, encourage and build confidence and skills locally can be a big help.

Before they start, teachers should develop their own mindfulness practice or find someone with mindfulness teaching skills to support the introduction. They can then attend a training course to learn about the curriculum and how to deliver it. It is important to maintain the practice and have the support to continually develop mindfulness teaching skills.

There are real opportunities in primary, as it can become part of the ethos of the school. Teachers are with the children throughout the day and so children are open to this learning and are happy to experiment and practise both at school and in the home. Mindfulness can make a real difference to children's behaviour and wellbeing, both inside and outside of the

classroom. And by involving teachers as well, it is a practice that can have a positive impact on the whole school.

• *Amanda Bailey is chief operating officer of the Bright Futures Educational Trust and a qualified mindfulness teacher and trainer.*

Case study: Stanley Grove Primary Academy

Stanley Grove in Manchester is one of the first UK primary schools to take part in the new paws.b programme.

The programme seeks to teach children how to recognise their feelings by learning about body responses to emotions. It then teaches mindfulness strategies to help children deal with difficult feelings such as anger and worry. It has a strong focus on learning through experience and children are supported to develop their own mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness themes are taught using engaging images, video clips and objects such as snow globes, which are used to support the understanding of allowing busy thoughts to come and go without carrying us off into worrying.

Mindfulness has been taught to all year 4 pupils. Pupil responses to the programme have been positive, with the majority of pupils reporting continuing their practice even when the paws.b lessons have finished. The school has plans to train more staff to deliver paws.b to allow mindfulness to be taught more widely across key stage 2 in 2014/15.

The Bright Educational Future Trust's educational psychology team is also using the participants as the basis for a piece of bespoke research examining and evaluating the positive effects of mindfulness on student behaviour. The research is proving vital in finding new ways to help children to focus on the present and to be aware of when their mind is wandering, thus helping to increase their attention span.