

Mindfulness in schools: a growing movement



Mindfulness deserves serious attention by all who seek to make schools happier and more productive places, argues Katherine Weare, Emeritus Professor at the Universities of Exeter and Southampton

There is currently a major growth of interest and activity around mindfulness for children and young people, particularly in the context of schools, with theory, practice, interventions, research, conferences and publications proliferating. The evidence for its effectiveness is still young, but is growing, positive and promising.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness involves learning to direct our attention to our experience as it is unfolding, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance. Rather than worrying about what has happened or might happen, mindfulness trains us to respond skilfully to whatever is happening right now, be that good or bad. This includes paying close attention to inner states such as thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, as well as to what is happening in the outside world.

Where did mindfulness come from?

Mindfulness is said to have originated in Buddhist thinking and meditation practice over two-and-a-half thousand years ago where the purpose was to address and relieve self-induced suffering caused by the dysfunctional ways people habitually tend to react to their experience. However most religions have been clear about the value of contemplation for improving the quality of life. Over the last 30 years, mindfulness has become secularised and simplified to suit a Western context. In the 1970s anecdotal and research findings about the ability of meditation to reduce unhealthy psychological symptoms triggered interest in mindfulness as a healthcare intervention. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Medical Centre at the University of Massachusetts introduced the first eight week structured mindfulness skills training programme which gave considerable psychological, and some physical, relief, to patients experiencing intractable severe pain and distress from a wide range of chronic physical health conditions.

Mindfulness interventions and research have proliferated across the world over the last thirty years, and the emerging evidence base suggests that mindfulness has a wide range of potential applications for adults and young people. The most common form of mindfulness intervention for adults is still a version of the classic Kabat-Zinn course, usually experienced as a weekly two to three hour session over 8 weeks, which aims to reduce

stress (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: 'MBSR') or to prevent depressive relapse (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy: 'MBCT'). These courses are now readily accessible in most towns in the UK. MBCT is now a therapy officially recommended for publically funded treatment for recurrent depression by the UK National Institute for Clinical Excellence having proved to be twice as effective as treatment as usual.

How is mindfulness learned?

There are a growing number of types of mindfulness interventions, including, and increasingly, ones for children and young people. They include long and short taught courses, one to one or group therapy, tailor made interventions for specific groups, self help manuals and cds, and online versions. Contexts include clinical settings, the workplace, schools, universities and the community. Although details and illustrations vary in different contexts, the core activities, rationale and mechanisms for how mindfulness appears to work are essentially the same.

In line with the original MBSR course devised by Kabat-Zinn (1996) participants are led in simple meditation/ concentration exercises which enable them to become more able to be 'with' their present experience. Through giving close attention to feelings and sensations, such as the breath, sound, contact, and the fluctuating sensations that arise in different parts of the body, participants gradually acquire the ability to be aware of the passing and changing nature of all experience - thoughts, emotions and physical sensations.

How does mindfulness work?

Over time participants, young and old, who practice regularly report that they gradually learn to sustain and focus their attention and accept experiences of all kinds in a more curious, interested and open minded rather than a judgmental way; they also discover how to use felt physical sensations of the breath and the body as 'anchors' to return to when their minds wander and negative, ruminative and repetitive thoughts take over. They come to see that thoughts are mental events rather than facts and can be allowed to let come and go: this realization helps loosen the grip of habitual, mindless activity including negative ruminations and worries, and produces less reactivity and impulsiveness, and a greater ability to examine thoughts more rationally. They also learn how to turn towards rather than try to avoid or

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suppress uncomfortable emotions and body sensations. This has significant effects in reducing the impulsive reactivity that psychologists have identified as a root cause of mental health disorders of various kinds. Practising these new skills gradually modifies habitual mental and behavioural patterns which otherwise create and maintain negative mental states, such as stress, anxiety and depression, and makes for greater mental stability, calm, acceptance, appreciation and higher levels of happiness and wellbeing.

What is the evidence that it does any good?

There is a sound evidence base, based on the most rigorous of research methods, the randomized control trial (RCT), for the impacts of mindfulness for adults on most aspects of wellbeing: on physical health problems - such as pain, blood pressure and the immune function; on mental health - such as depression, anxiety, and stress; and on cognitive development - such as executive function, attention, and metacognition. Mindfulness training is cost effective, with long term effects often apparent after three years, and relatively short inputs producing discernable results: four days of mindfulness training was sufficient to improve mindfulness, visual-spatial memory, working memory and sustained attention. Even short periods of mindfulness practice have been shown to reshape the neural pathways in the brain in ways which increase the areas associated with kindness, compassion and rationality and decrease those involved in anxiety, worry and impulsiveness.

Why should children and young people learn about mindfulness?

Over the last ten years mindfulness for children and young people in mainstream settings has developed apace, initially in therapeutic contexts, most recently in also schools, all over the world. Research on the effects of mindfulness and young people is not yet as extensive as work with adults but research is now growing rapidly. The results of the work that has taken place are promising, and suggest that the young people who take part in mindfulness courses not only enjoy and appreciate them but often benefit too - the effects of mindfulness on the young are proving to be very similar to those on adults.

Well conducted mindfulness interventions, such as the .b Mindfulness in Schools Project, have been shown to help address the problems of the young people who take part and reduce their worries, anxiety, distress, reactivity and bad behaviour, improve sleep, self-esteem, and bring about greater calmness, relaxation, and self-awareness. Mindfulness has also been shown to be capable of contributing directly to the development of cognitive and performance skills in the young. It would appear that when children and young people learn to be more 'present', they can pay attention better and improve the quality of their performance in the classroom, on the sports field, and in the performing arts, for example. They can become more focused, more able to approach situations from a novel perspective, more able to draw more effectively on previously-learned material, have less anxiety and greater ability to pay attention.

What about the teachers?

Mindfulness needs to be taught only by those who regularly practise mindfulness themselves and have been appropriately trained. Research shows clearly that mindfulness is more effective when taught by those who embody the particular qualities it develops, such as open minded curiosity, kindness, acceptance, trust, patience, and non-striving, and who have skills of focusing, and paying and switching attention. Teachers need to be able to model what they are teaching, and to understand and relate directly and empathically to somewhat unusual experiences their students will be having from a solid base of experience in their own life. (Similarly, you would not expect a teacher who had never been in water to teach swimming effectively!)

Practising mindfulness is likely to bring clear benefits for the teachers themselves, both for their own wellbeing and their ability to teach effectively. There are some promising early studies of the impact of mindfulness training on the wellbeing of school staff. Impacts shown so far again include in many cases the reduction of stress and recurrent negative thoughts and ruminations, anxiety, and sleep difficulties, and increases in reflection, emotional self-awareness and compassion. Teachers who practise mindfulness themselves appear to be more able to create positive changes both in and out of the classroom; are able to focus more clearly on key ideas; are better able to prioritise and prepare class material; are more able to focus on implementing what they intend to do without distractions; create calm and orderly climates and induce better behaviour in their pupils.

Conclusions

Innovative and exciting mindfulness in school programmes for students and their teachers are being developed, and outcomes from the evaluations of various interventions look promising. Well conducted mindfulness interventions have been shown to be popular with students and staff, capable of addressing the many and varied problems of young people and their teachers, and help them positively flourish. Mindfulness deserves serious attention by all who would seek to make our schools happier as well as more productive places, our school staff more fulfilled, and help our young people grow into well balanced, successful and caring adults.

Katherine is Professor at the University of Exeter and the University of Southampton. She is known internationally for her work on children's mental health and well-being and social and emotional learning, she was a key player in the UK's social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL programme). She is a trained teacher of mindfulness for adults, children and young people. Her wide ranging publications include overviews and reviews of the evidence base and she regularly provides keynotes and presentations at national and international conferences. She can be contacted at skw@soton.ac.uk