

TTR 18: Can 5 minute daily 'micro mindfulness' sessions make a difference to pupils and staff in a SEN setting?

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Background/Context

This paper details a 4-week mindfulness project completed with Crosshill Special School in Blackburn into the effects of 5-minute daily mindfulness sessions. The research uses a mixed method (questionnaire, interview and observation) approach to consider the influence that mindfulness sessions have on the whole school setting, particularly focusing on staff opinions and the effects they documented on themselves and their pupils.

Crosshill Special School is a special educational setting for 72 pupils. It is co-located with Blackburn Central High School mainstream school as part of the Champion Education Trust. It is an Academy Special School catering for 11 to 19 year-olds who have an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) or Statement of Special Educational Needs regarding their Learning Difficulties.

The main identified need of the majority of students is associated with language and cognition difficulties (Severe learning difficulties/Moderate learning difficulties/Global learning delay). The students often also display a second area of need which is usually associated with speech language or communication needs, Autistic Spectrum, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment, Social Emotional Mental Health as well as a variety of physical or medical disabilities or conditions.

This project intended all pupils to be able to access this daily activity and analyse the effect on the whole school environment (including staff) rather than specific individuals. The project was accessed by 51 pupils and 18 out of 25 staff (teachers and teaching assistants in classes).

Research Questions

1. Do daily 5 minute 'micro mindfulness' sessions appear have an impact on the wellbeing of SEN pupils and their staff?
2. What are the attitudes of staff towards the idea of daily 5-minute mindfulness sessions and are there any changes over the course of the project? (e.g. are they willing to try it and do they suggest that they are likely to continue the sessions in the future)
3. To what extent does a 4-week intervention influence developing a whole school initiative towards daily mindfulness sessions?

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a psychological process of purposely giving attention to experiences occurring in the present moment. It involves maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that thoughts and feelings are paid attention to without judgement- for example without believing that there's a "right" or "wrong" way to think or feel in a given moment. Thoughts are tuned into what we're sensing in the present moment rather than what's happened in the past or worrying what may happen in the future (Kabat-Zinn, 2006).

It is the simple human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by our environment. Being mindful is a quality that people already possess no matter what their age, needs or abilities although some may find it difficult due to, for example, high levels of anxiety or emotional distress which make it hard to focus.

Nevertheless, mindfulness can be nurtured and developed through practising which will increase its benefits, especially when undertaken on a regular basis. It can become a way of living, bringing awareness and care to everything we do. Both experience and scientific research demonstrate the positive benefits of mindfulness for happiness, relationships and overall health. The evidence is detailed in the next section.

Existing evidence: Why mindfulness?

Since the early 1980's, many studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness and countless programmes have been introduced in schools, prisons, hospitals, workplaces and beyond. Projects introduced in mainstream schools for both primary and secondary aged pupils suggest teaching mindfulness in school can reduce behaviour problems, aggression, and depression in students (Werner-Seidler et al, 2017). It has also been shown to improve levels of happiness, the ability to self-regulate and attention (Remmers, Topolinski, & Koole, 2016).

Many of these studies have also documented the effects on school staff. Teachers trained in mindfulness have shown lower blood pressure and less negative emotion and symptoms of depression (Flook et al, 2016). Mindfulness also appears to lessen distress and urgency, increase compassion and level of empathy and lead to more effective teaching (Roeser et al, 2013).

Studies have shown that practising mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits. Davidson et al (2003) found that after 8 weeks practising mindfulness our immune system is boosted and we can fight off illness more easily. Studies have also suggested that mindfulness helps us to improve our memory (Zeidan et al, 2010) and attention skills (Moore et al, 2012). There are many other benefits such as enhanced resilience, improved social and relational skills, enhanced job performance, enhanced academic achievement in students due to improved focus and attention, decreased levels of anxiety, depression, worry and rumination. These benefits have been documented in a variety of settings, and for different groups of people, see, for example Burton et al (2017), Dane and Brumel (2014), Gallant (2016), Semple et al (2010), Singh, Soamya & Ramnath (2016).

This piece of research was devised due to limited research available related to the effects on SEN pupils and staff in an SEN setting. The researcher chose to look at small-scale 5-minute mindfulness sessions following discussions with staff in school regarding how they felt pupils would engage and the feasibility of fitting daily sessions into an already very intense timetable.

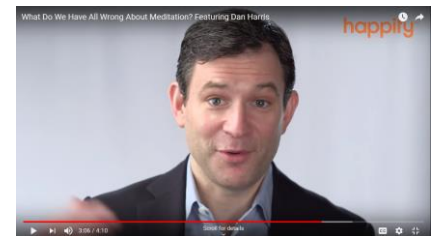
The aim of this study was to establish a mindfulness activity suitable for a SEN setting and look at how the activity was experienced by SEN pupils. It also aimed to examine staff attitudes towards the introduction of daily small-scale mindfulness sessions for all classes.

Preparation for the project

Step 1- Address misconceptions

The week before the project commenced, the researcher led an inset session and provided information on the process. Through a PowerPoint presentation staff were informed of what mindfulness is and any misconceptions were addressed.

A short video was shown of Dan Harris, one of 'Good Morning America's news anchors, who experienced a panic attack live on air in 2004. He is now one of the biggest advocates of mindfulness and claims it helps him to stay in check with himself and prevent that from happening again.



The video was used since there seemed to be a negative attitude among some staff members. This attitude possibly stemmed from a previous session delivered by an external company which involved activities such as mindful eating that seemed to cause staff discomfort and embarrassment. Anecdotal evidence also pointed to scepticism towards wellbeing activities in general, with comments such as 'it's just another tick box exercise' when resources for emotional wellbeing were introduced.

Step 2- Discuss benefits & explain project

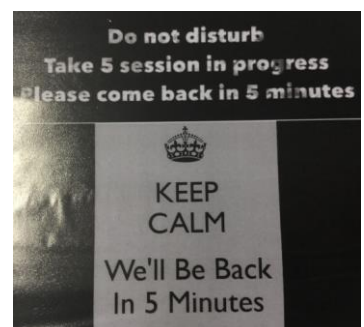
The potential benefits of mindfulness were discussed with the staff, followed by an explanation of the research:

- 'Take 5' would run for 4 weeks with four videos
- Each 5 minute video to be shown daily
- All classes to take part, including staff (to record effects on their own wellbeing and to model the practice for students).



Step 3- Keep simple and emphasise points

Staff were told that the practices had been kept simple and the only extra work required would be providing feedback during allocated meeting time (rather than using staff's own time). The key points were reiterated and staff were given a sign to put on their door during the Take 5 sessions. The importance of staff taking part was emphasised, explaining that students would find it difficult to focus if staff were, for example, moving around the room or marking books.



Step 4- Key points to remember

Staff were told they should try wherever possible to have the daily session at the same time each day as a whole school to minimise disruption. This was not always possible due to timetabling, lessons off-site and changeover of teachers. As a team we arranged that certain classes situated near each other in school would hold their sessions at 10am each day, others felt it more beneficial/convenient to have their session after lunch and others felt they would need to change it on odd days. Some staff said that they may want to do it a second time on certain days so were asked to record this repetition.

It was explained that staff did not need to give out any rules to these sessions regarding how to sit. Students could lie down if they wanted to, place their heads on the desk, they did not have to shut their eyes (even if the video says) if they are not comfortable with this. The only instruction given out is that they need to try to stay as still as possible, as quiet as possible and try to listen and tune in as much as they can. Teachers of lower ability classes had the option to use different 5 minute videos if they felt those provided weren't suitable.

Step 5- Initial questionnaire

At the end of this inset session all staff that attended were given time to fill in the initial questionnaire detailing their thoughts and feelings on completing this project. Mid way through the project informal interviews were held with a representative from each class (6 teaching assistants) where discussion took place regarding how the project was going so far, any observations, any issues/problems encountered and any other feedback they wanted to give.

Step 5- Further data gathering

At the end of the 4 weeks all staff were given a final questionnaire designed to find out how they felt it had gone, how pupils responded, and if they would continue this practice. The tick sheets from each class were collected to look at engagement levels. Data was also gathered through informal observations of the sessions, informal discussions with staff and pupils, and staff feedback via email. The researcher was supported by the school's senior leadership team who made wellbeing the focus of their learning walk in week 3 of the project, observed some sessions, spoke to staff about engagement and asked certain pupils for feedback.

Step 6- Ethical considerations

A letter was sent out to all parents of pupils who would be taking part in this project outlining what it was, the reason for this research and potential benefits that their child may experience by taking part. They were given the option to opt out if they did not wish for their child to take part.

What do we have to do

- ▶ Every class
- ▶ Everyday
- ▶ Everyone
- ▶ 5 minutes
- ▶ Same time (ish!)
- ▶ Feedback

Mindfulness practices

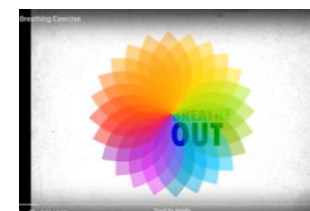
1. [Body scan](#)

This video instructs the listener to focus on each part of their body in turn, pay attention to how their body feels and to focus their thoughts.



2. [Breathing](#)

This video shows a mandala shape that expands and contracts and instructs you to breathe in when it expands and out when it contracts.



3. [Bell](#)

This practice is a simple listening exercise with a bell that increases and decreases in length, volume and tone. Listeners are asked to focus on the noise. The pattern on screen emphasizes the noise.



4. [Music and light](#)

Tranquil music accompanied by a peaceful lakeside image, a light floats above the water and around the screen for the viewer to focus on as they listen.



Findings

Initial staff reaction

The initial staff questionnaire completed after the introductory inset suggested that:

- All respondents were positive about their involvement in the project
- Prior experience of mindfulness amongst staff varied
- Most staff believed it would be easy to complete with their classes
- Some concern that certain pupils would not want to engage or would find it difficult
- Widespread recognition of the possible benefits of the Take 5 project (e.g. smoother transitions between lessons, calming after chaotic break times, lowering stress and anxiety)
- Only one staff member commented on the potential impact on themselves.

Observations and informal feedback

The researcher observed some of the sessions throughout the project. The first of these was with the Key Stage 4 class on their introduction to the project. The teacher explained that the sessions would hopefully lower stress levels and help the pupils learn more effectively. The students listened attentively to what was expected and all seemed to engage with the video but after the session

there was some giddiness, which was addressed by the teacher who allowed them to talk through it.

“How can I relax my hair.... that’s impossible!”

It was observed that some of the instructions in the first video were a little too abstract for some pupils. One pupil who has an ASD diagnosis commented on how you cannot relax muscles at the back of your head, as there are no muscles there to relax and questioned how you were expected to relax your hair.

Observations in different classes took place on average twice a week. It was quite difficult for different classes to have their practice at the same time as other classes due to differences in timetables and staff movement around school. This movement meant some class sessions were disturbed as Crosshill School is a very open plan school and not all classes are situated within a room with a door where a sign can be placed. Other disturbances included email notifications and noise from the outdoor areas. Some pupils struggled with the sessions on certain days but on others engaged really well. There was one pupil who couldn’t grasp the meaning of ‘relax’ each body part during the first video and seemed to tense each body part as he was instructed to relax each one. At the end of the video he was all tensed up and relaxed everything at the end of the session with relief.

Some teachers were happy to provide the researcher with informal feedback as they saw her around school or via email as things came up. It was noted that in the Key Stage 4 semi-formal class some of the videos were causing some unexpected reactions for a couple of pupils, two of them who have Downs Syndrome had found that certain videos made them quite emotional with occasions of tears happening a couple of times. This occurred during the first video of body mapping and the last video with the piece of music. There were many sessions observed and documented where all pupils and staff engaged and a positive calming effect was had upon the classroom and all participants, particularly in the Key Stage 3 class. It was observed that sometimes staff found it difficult to model mindfulness practice with the children, on a few occasions staff were observed moving about the room and walking out to use the photocopier or other jobs. On one occasion staff remained in the room but talked to each other throughout the session.

Mid-point informal interviews

At the end of the second week informal interviews took place with a member of staff from each class. All of the staff representatives documented that they were finding the project easy to complete and that most pupils were engaging well and seeing benefits. There were some pupils who were not engaging as well due to lack of understanding and awareness of surroundings. One class said they thought it would be beneficial to do more than 5 minutes each day.

Staff mentioned some specific individual pupils were appearing to struggle but felt that on the whole most pupils were really engaging and benefitting from this practice. Some classes had changed the time that they were completing their daily practice as it was felt it was more needed at

a specific time, after lunch in this case. The teacher felt it was more calming for her class after the chaos that sometimes occurs over lunchtime and that they engaged more at this time and gained more benefits. Most of the classes were still completing their practice at 10am between lessons. One class often completed the practice twice daily, once in the morning and sometimes again in the afternoon if they felt it was needed. Occasionally pupils had asked to do it again in the afternoon too. Staff at this point seemed to prefer the first video to the second.

Staff discussed that benefits they were seeing for their pupils so far and also on themselves. They said that most pupils seemed a lot calmer after the sessions and were able to focus more in the next lesson. Pupils that they did not expect would engage well had surprised them by really engaging and reaping the benefits. One teacher was very positive about how the activity had linked well with her PHSE topic of mental health and wellbeing. Staff reported that they appreciated having 5 minutes themselves to breathe and gather their thoughts between lessons. One teacher said they would carry on the sessions after the project ended while another discussed how they had used the videos at home with their own children and seen benefits, particularly before bed.

Support from SLT

To support with this project and wellbeing in school the Senior Leadership team undertook a learning walk on week 3 of this project where they focused on wellbeing practices in school. They checked whether all classes and pupils were accessing and engaging with the project and spoke to some pupils about it. It was found that most classes were engaging with this on a daily basis, using their daily tick sheet and documenting feedback. Pupils reported that they were enjoying taking part and so far preferred the video from week 1. One pupil said that it calmed him down if he felt angry or worried, others said they enjoyed it but were unsure of the benefit it was having on them.

End of project staff feedback

The data collected at the end of the 4-week project showed positive results detailing levels of engagements and benefits experienced. All staff that completed the project detailed that they found it easy to do and saw varying benefits for pupils including calmer class atmosphere, pupils readiness to learn improved after practice, relaxation, refocus when becoming restless and pupils asking to do their mindfulness on a daily basis and reminding the teachers. All staff noted that pupil engagement improved as the project went on and that pupils came to look forward to doing it and expected it. Staff felt the best time to do the practice was in between lessons in the morning or straight after lunch break to calm pupils down.

Staff could see benefits for themselves in completing this activity and mentioned how it felt like a 'mind detox', that they looked forward to it, feeling calmer and more peaceful. Most staff wanted to learn more about mindful practices and how they could utilise this more in the classroom with all who answered the questionnaire saying that they would carry on using the videos. Some just when needed but at least half of staff saying they would aim to do it on a daily basis. It was found that most staff and pupils found the instructional video from week 1 or the music and light video from

week 4 to be the most relaxing and easy to engage with out of the 4 videos. Some staff said they would prefer to engage with this practice for a longer period of time up to 10 or 20 minutes.

Benefits and challenges of this project

There has been an array of benefits discovered through completing this project in school, including:

- Significant increase in discussion between staff and staff/pupils regarding wellbeing and resources/practices and benefits. All staff showed enthusiasm and willingness to take part and were happy to spend time analysing the impact on both themselves and their pupils.
- The vast majority of pupils in school took part and benefitted in a variety of ways. As staff embraced this project and modelled the exercises to their classes more discussions took place around the benefits on their own wellbeing with some going on to engage in their own mindful practices at home. Many classes in school have continued daily sessions or used mindfulness with pupils showing signs of upset or unsettledness.
- In the wider project there has been a network of support from other researchers with regular opportunities to discuss our work, share ideas and address the challenges of completing a research project in our settings
- From a personal perspective it has allowed continuing professional development, increased my confidence in research and developed links with other schools and staff at Lancaster University.

Some of the challenges have included:

- Finding a way to get the whole school to complete the exercise at the same time each day.
- Staff not completing the exercises making it difficult to look at the effect on staff wellbeing.
- The researcher could not observe all classes taking part in the exercises.
- Some pupils finding the exercises difficult, due to language, instruction or emotional reactions.

Conclusion

This research found that daily 'micro mindfulness' sessions can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of SEN pupils and the staff that work with them **including calmer atmosphere, decreasing anxiety and worry and time just to gather thoughts and be still/quiet**. Staff were open to the idea of embedding 5 minute daily practice into their day and most wished to continue the sessions once the project ended which further evidences the perceived benefits within an SEN class setting.

Factors supporting a 'whole school approach'

- ✓ Preparing staff with introductory INSET
- ✓ Providing appropriate information and resources
- ✓ Involving SLT support to signal commitment and embed monitoring and evaluation

- ✓ Integrating research into the project to increase reflection and cycle of improvement

Further use of mindful sessions

- ✓ Some staff are carrying on with the sessions and still using the videos.
- ✓ Some pupils have used the videos individually through headphones on their iPad as suggested by staff after incidents or upsets.
- ✓ Use of mindfulness practice during an intense period of unsettledness in school in the run up to schools closing down during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- ✓ One member of staff uses the videos at home with her family.
- ✓ Renewed interest towards mindfulness in school. Many staff have talked about different resources, made suggestions and have downloaded apps for personal use such as Headspace (which is free for educational professionals).

Recommendations

The findings suggest that mindfulness may be a valuable addition to the curriculum of other schools; in delivering the project again the following points should be considered:

- ✓ Review mindfulness exercises before use so that they are accessible and inclusive;
- ✓ Deliver over a longer period of time to help establish routine
- ✓ Explore ways of minimising disturbances in school settings during the sessions
- ✓ Remind staff to model or set an example and avoid disturbing the pupils
- ✓ Use a whole staff INSET to introduce the project
- ✓ Explore alternative mindful activities such as mindful colouring to music or yoga
- ✓ Introduce a mindfulness afternoon once a term to explore different mindful activities and allow classes to choose the most popular
- ✓ Think about how to evaluate activities in your setting.

Further Research

The findings suggested several avenues for further research including:

- Exploring reasons why some staff did not fully engage in the sessions themselves. This could look into teacher workload or stress.
- Examining more closely the individuals who had some quite strong emotional reactions to consider whether there is an exercise that would limit such reactions.
- Investigate the effects of varying lengths of mindful sessions and evaluate how much time is best to be set aside each day towards mindfulness.
- Examine the abstract language that is often used in guided mindfulness practice to consider whether it can be made more inclusive and fully accessible.

Acknowledgements

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