Mindfulness in schools: Taking present practice into account

Jacqueline Stone

AN INCREASING number of studies indicate the potential benefits of mindfulness-based interventions for children and adolescents in educational settings (Burke, 2009; Harnett & Dawe, 2012; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Such benefits include improved academic performance, classroom participation and attention as well as reductions in levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009).

This paper will discuss some of the issues that I am currently investigating in my doctoral research in light of the proliferation of mindfulness-based interventions. These issues include how we define mindfulness and mindfulness-based approaches (MBAs). More practical and logistical issues are also pertinent, such as how mindfulness-based activities are incorporated into the school day, by whom and how MBAs fit in with present practice in schools and what present practice actually involves.

Definitions of mindfulness and mindfulness-based approaches

There are many definitions of mindfulness in the current literature varying, depending on context and application. The definition that I have chosen for this study is from Kabat-Zinn (2004, p.4): 'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally'. This definition describes succinctly and clearly the moment by moment awareness of whatever we may be experiencing, both internally and externally, as it is happening, without judgement. The practice of mindfulness may include more formal activities such as sitting and walking meditation as well as more informally adopting a mindful approach to everyday activities such as washing the dishes and brushing one's teeth. In both formal and informal mindfulness practices, the breath is commonly used as an 'anchor' to remind the practitioner to gently return the attention to the present moment each time the mind wanders.

The majority of current mindfulness-based approaches for children and adolescents are modified (with shorter sessions) versions of the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programmes (for details see Burke, 2009). However, in recent years, new courses are being created, piloted and rolled out specifically for adolescents and children as well as teachers, staff and parents (see, for example, The Mindfulness in Schools Project http://mindfulnessinschools.org/courses/. Current MBAs in educational settings are diverse in content (see mindfulness-based programme descriptions in Meiklejohn et al., 2012), are not always detailed sufficiently in studies and vary in terms of dosage and the theory proposed behind mindfulness-based practices (Harnett & Dawe, 2012).

Background

When I first began to look at the existing literature around mindfulness-based programmes in educational settings at the start of my research in 2011, I was struck by the fast-paced creation of new mindfulness-based interventions, especially in the US. At the time, studies involving teachers and school staff in mindfulness-based interventions were scarce. It was apparent that mindfulness-based interventions were being created and implemented from a top-down

or external approach using outside agencies to deliver MBAs rather than training existing school staff in mindfulness and encouraging them to have their own mindfulness practice, a bottom-up approach.

In the face of this strong current pushing mindfulness-based interventions forward, I thought it prudent to investigate what type of mindfulness-based activities were already being practised (or not) in schools at the present time. To my knowledge, no other survey tool has been created to gather such data.

Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire (MiSQ)

The first phase of my research involved creating the *Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire* (MiSQ). The principal aim of the questionnaire was to find out what, if any, mindfulness-based activities were taking place in educational establishments in the region and how these were being taught, practised and engaged with. I was also interested to know if there were any particular reasons why mindfulness-based activities were not taking place in some schools. The MiSQ is a 22-item qualitative online questionnaire consisting of five sections that contain items about type of school/college, details of any mindfulness-based activities engaged in, feedback that may have been received about these activities and general comments including how respondents think mindfulness is perceived within education. At the end of the survey, in a separate section, participants are offered the opportunity to take part in a follow-up focus group about mindfulness in education; these focus groups were conducted during the second phase of the study. The definition of mindfulness-based activities incorporated in the MiSQ is an adaptation of Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition (2004, p.4). Details were added to the definition to make it more relevant to school settings and to be inclusive of those in the school environment: 'Mindfulness activities in schools are those in which pupils/students, school staff and parents can increase awareness of themselves and others through paying attention, in a non-judgemental way, in the present moment'. A number of examples of mindfulness-based activities were given with the definition that included yoga, martial arts and loving-kindness meditation.

The MiSQ was sent out electronically via SurveyMonkey to nursery, primary and secondary schools and colleges in the Northamptonshire, Milton Keynes and Bedfordshire areas. This region was chosen as the study is funded by The University of Northampton, which has strong links with the local community. Invitation emails, which included an individual embedded web link to the questionnaire, were addressed to named contacts. Email addresses and contact names were obtained using school directories and websites available publicly online. If there was no response within a fortnight from an email address, then a reminder email was sent, with a final follow-up email again a week later. Student teachers at The University of Northampton also completed paper versions of the MiSQ.

Are mindfulness-based activities already taking place in schools?

The data described here from the online version of the MiSQ, are from nursery, primary and secondary schools as there were no responses from colleges in the region. An equal number of primary and secondary schools responded. 46.4 per cent of respondents stated that mindfulness-based activities were taking place in their schools, 35.7 per cent responded that they were not taking place and 17.9 per cent were unsure if mindfulness-based activities were taking place or not in their schools. These data suggest that activities that involve a mindful approach are currently taking place in schools in the region. The following comment from a MiSQ respondent supports this interpretation.

'I think many activities that are linked to 'min[d]fulness' take part across a school day but not in a structured way. The more structured activities are useful but require trained

staff and cut into teaching time which is not always helpful'. ([d] added by author)

This comment indicates that current activities engaged with in schools are not necessarily labelled as mindfulness-based activities. This could be because the word mindfulness has only recently been introduced to education in terms of MBAs and that such activities are already known by a different name. The respondent also raises important points about how mindfulness-based activities can be incorporated into the existing curriculum with minimum disruption to class time and how trained members of staff are required to teach mindfulness practices.

Respondents who were unsure as to whether or not mindfulness-based activities were taking place in their schools may not have aligned current activities with the definition provided in the MiSQ and/or may not have wanted to label them as such, if mindfulness is a new term to them and they were concerned not to misrepresent their school or themselves in any way. It could also be the case that respondents are not fully aware of all of the activities that their colleagues engage in, as teachers may be discreet about any such mindfulness-based activities in case they are not encouraged in their school.

Examples of mindfulness-based activities from the MiSQ

The wide range of mindfulness-based activities cited in the MiSQ was an interesting and crucial discovery in the first phase of my research. The spectrum of mindfulness-based activities cited in the questionnaire ranged from activities such as yoga, martial arts and meditation, to relaxation and massage, to working with bereavement.

The most frequently cited mindfulness-based activity in the MiSQ was yoga. This was one of the examples of a mindfulness-based activity given in the MiSQ. This was followed in order of frequency by relaxation and music (both with the same number of responses) and silent reflection and meditation (also with the same number of responses). Massage was a less frequently cited activity. Activities such as relaxation and massage are not mindfulness practices, although relaxation can be an outcome of mindfulness practice. Relaxation and massage are offered in classes and products by Relax Kids (http://www.relaxkids.com/about/), one of the Universal Programmes included in the Northamptonshire Shoebox, a collection of resources for the Targeted Mental Health in Schools Programme (TaMHS) in Northamptonshire. Brain Gym, also cited in the MiSQ, and not a mindfulness practice, may produce, according to the Brain Gym website, (http://www.braingym.org/about), improvements in areas such as academic skills, concentration and memory. It could be the case that school staff that cited these activities in the MiSQ, thought that the possible outcomes from such activities matched the possible benefits of mindfulness-based activities, especially with the association of brain and mind. Inclusion of activities such as relaxation and massage, highlight the possible areas of confusion surrounding the definition of a mindfulness-based activity.

Another mindfulness-based activity cited by MiSQ respondents was working with bereavement, a Targeted or Support-Wave 2 focused programme as part of the Northamptonshire TaMHS programme. Interestingly, from a Buddhist perspective, mindfulness of death is considered as a type of mindfulness in the Pali suttas (Buddhist texts written in Pali language) as well as recollection of the Buddha, contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body and meditation on loving kindness or metta (Bodhi, 2013). Although working with bereavement may not spring to mind as a mindfulness-based activity in schools, it is curious to see that a connection has been made with awareness of death. This could be considered a tenuous link depending on the level of inquiry engaged in and the intention behind the activity nevertheless it warrants further investigation.

Langer (1997, p.4) points out that, 'A mindful approach to any activity has three

characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective'. In this sense, it is not so much the activity itself that is the focus, but the intention behind the activity. The activity itself cannot be mindful although certain activities such as yoga and martial arts do lend themselves more to a mind-body focus. Hanh (2008) in *The Miracle of Mindfulness* includes a chapter entitled 'Exercises in Mindfulness' with everyday activities such as washing the dishes, making tea, cleaning the house and taking a long bath as well as following your breath while listening to music. Towards the end of the chapter, exercises with a deeper level of exploration such as 'Your Skeleton' and 'A loved one who has died' are also mentioned. We return here again to mindfulness of death. From Hanh's (2008) examples, it is clear that mindfulness-based activities can cover a wide range of practices from those that take place on an everyday basis to those with a deeper level of inquiry.

Summary

The array of responses provided in the MiSQ illustrates the possible ambiguity in defining mindfulness-based activities. Having said this, this obscurity could provide schools with the opportunity to be flexible and curious about incorporating a mindful approach to learning and teaching. Clearly defining mindfulness and mindfulness-based activities in a secular context, such as in schools, is particularly important in order to provide information about the possible benefits of mindfulness-based activities and to state what the purpose of engaging in these mindfulness practices is, as well as to rigorously measure the effects of mindfulness-based interventions. However, with such a reductionist and measured approach, comes the risk of losing the essence of the Buddhist constructs of mindfulness (Grossman & Van Dam, 2013). It is essential to bear in mind that there are great subtleties of meaning and inquiry within the practice of mindfulness that are not necessarily attended to, or fully appreciated by, operationalised definitions of mindfulness and the secularisation of mindfulness practice. For example, the original Buddhist intention of practising mindfulness is to achieve enlightenment. This is an important point with regards to schools examining their own understanding of MBAs in terms of values, ethos and intention.

It is vital that present practice in terms of the curriculum and the current political climate (Jennings, 2013) are taken into account when incorporating mindfulness-based interventions in schools. Making sure that these programmes are age, culturally and developmentally appropriate for children and adolescents is also important (Davidson et al., 2012).

The MiSQ provides an original starting point from which to survey the feasibility and efficacy of existing mindfulness-based activities or interventions in schools. The MiSQ offers staff the opportunity to express their views on mindfulness in education and any interest that they may have in learning more about mindfulness. These data are all important for the sustainable future of mindfulness in schools as it is these staff members who may go on to teach mindfulness in schools and practice mindfulness themselves.

Correspondence

Jacqueline Stone
Psychology Division,
The University of Northampton,
St George's Avenue,
Northampton NN2 6JD.
Email:
Jacqueline.Stone@northampton.ac.uk

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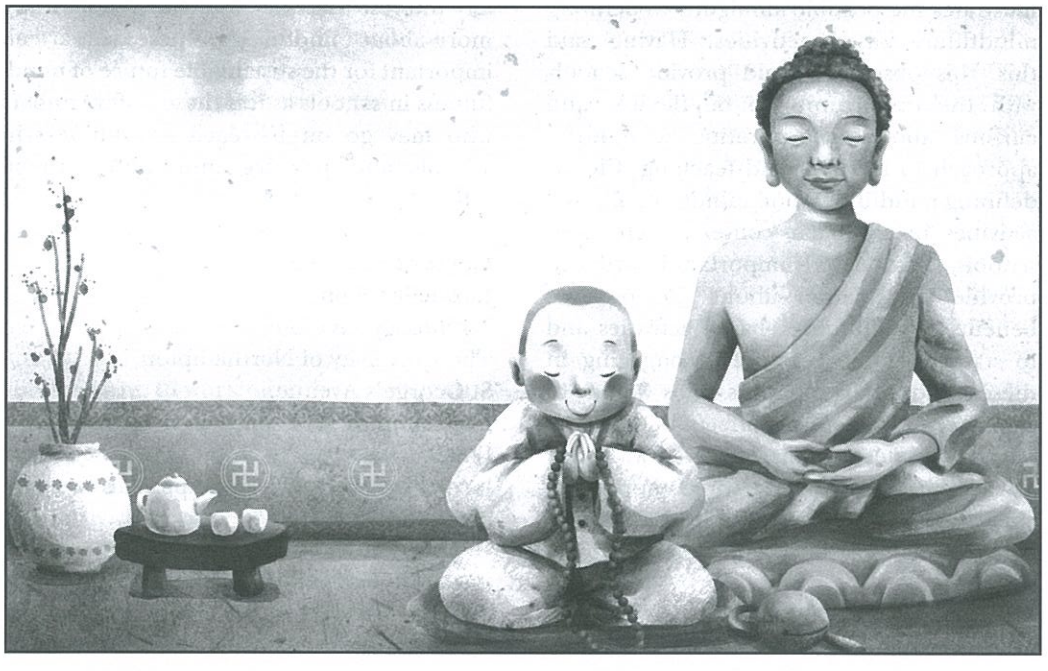

Mindfulness within Educational Psychology practice: Possibilities and constraints

Suzi Iyadurai, Jez Morris & Sandra Dunsmuir

Background

MINDFULNESS is based on concepts within Buddhist meditation. There has been growing interest in the approach in the West in recent decades, following the publication of an increasing number of studies that have demonstrated its beneficial effects (e.g. Grossman et al., 2004; Hofmann et al., 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Teasdale et al., 2000). Mindfulness programs aim to alter the relationship between the client and their problem, a characteristic feature of 'third wave' cognitive behavioural therapies (Herbert & Forman, 2011). In the main, such approaches have been predominantly taken forward in work with adults and it is only recently that such approaches have been applied in work with children and young people.

Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as *'paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally'* (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). It has been suggested that mindfulness has two core components: present moment awareness and a non-judgemental stance towards experience (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). For much of the time, people may not be fully aware of present moment events and responses may become automatised. Mindfulness aims to combat this, by encouraging individuals to be more aware of moment to moment experience. Some techniques for enhancing mindfulness include consciously paying attention to breathing, deliberately noticing (and not excluding) all bodily sensations and walking in a mindful manner (through holding the physical sensation of walking in mind). Mindfulness-based interventions with adults usually encourage participants to practise mindfulness techniques each day. The impact and purpose of such practice is to increase awareness of thoughts as thoughts, reduce the degree of identification of self with the contents of consciousness and reduce levels of affect in response to the contents of consciousness. The overall stance is one of acceptance rather than changing content or patterns of thinking. In mindfulness terms, the intention is to notice but not engage with particular thoughts, through raising awareness that these are only objects of mind. This overlaps with other acceptance approaches and techniques of relaxation.

Evidence-base for mindfulness with children and young people

The evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness approaches with children is in its early stages, but a small number of studies have reported positive results (e.g. Bogels et al., 2008; Iyadurai, 2013). Most of these studies have looked at targeted populations (e.g. Biegel et al., 2009), examined the acceptability of such interventions with children (e.g. Semple, Reid & Miller, 2005) and involved work with small groups of children (e.g. Flook et al., 2010). These studies have established that in general children find the interventions acceptable and interesting, and that some encouraging improvements are seen across a range of measures. A recent review of 14 studies (Meiklejohn et al., 2012) concluded that the participating children showed:

> *'...improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, as well as self-reported improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue.'* (p.292)

Whilst such interventions show promise and may be valued by families and teachers, the time required to deliver these to targeted groups of children may act as barriers to uptake by educational psychologists (EPs) and schools. However, this year, two important larger scale randomised controlled trials (RCTs) were published based on universal programmes taught to whole classes of children. Raes et al. (2013) undertook a mindfulness based intervention with 13- to 20-year-old students (N=408) across five schools in Holland. They showed both a reduction in depressive symptoms in those children who were already depressed, and a preventative effect (i.e. reduced numbers of children becoming depressed later). Similarly in the UK, Kuyken et al. (2013) showed reduced depression and stress, and increased well-being in a group of 522 children aged 12 to 16 years undertaking the .b (stop, breathe, be) programme from the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP). Both studies show excellent promise for the delivery of universal mindfulness interventions in schools. The main limitation of both studies being the possibly unrepresentative samples (the MiSP study used a large number of students attending independent schools).

Training in delivering mindfulness interventions in schools

EPs who are interested in delivering Mindfulness-Based Interventions in schools must have regard to the professional standards set out in the British Psychological Society's *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009) and the Health and Care Professions Council *Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* (2012). Training and supervision are essential in order to practice within the boundaries of competence. At present mindfulness teachers are not regulated, and there are no governing or regulatory bodies. However, the UK Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Trainers (http://mindfulnessteachersuk.org.uk/) have developed Good Practice Guidance on standards for those delivering Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programmes. These include:

- Familiarity with course curriculum;
- In-depth personal experience of core practices;
- Completion of rigorous in-depth mindfulness-based teacher training or supervision over a 12-month period;
- Relevant professional qualification and adherence to appropriate ethical framework;
- Knowledge and experience of population that course will be delivered to;
- Commitment to personal mindfulness practice;
- Ongoing contacts with other mindfulness practitioners and teachers;
- Regular supervision with an experienced mindfulness-based teacher;
- A commitment to ongoing development.

Three of the university based training courses (Bangor, Oxford and Exeter) have also developed a 'Mindfulness-Based Interventions: Teaching Assessment Criteria' scale. There are, however, tensions in the use of such scales arising from the basis of mindfulness as a 'way of being' rather than 'a set of skills' and also from the essential core component of mindfulness as having a non-judgmental attitude.

Crane et al. (2012) refer to generic aspects of competence arising from the mindfulness teacher's professional background such as group teaching skills, interpersonal skills and training relevant to the context within which they intend to teach, all of which are shared by applied psychologists. They also refer to 'embodiment of the qualities of mindfulness' as an essential component along with other specialist aspects of competence. This 'embodiment' would appear to derive from the individual's own practice of meditation. Such embodiment

might be difficult to quantify. Length of experience of meditation may be more important than formal training. However, there are important differences between engaging in personal practice of mindfulness and having the competence to teach it.

Whilst there is a clear need to have regard to competence guidance, there are differences between delivering mindfulness interventions such as MBCT to groups of highly vulnerable individuals referred for mental health problems, and delivering a universal preventative intervention to groups of apparently healthy schoolchildren in order to promote well-being. In addition to the less vulnerable population, the mindfulness practices used with children are much briefer and less intensive than those in the MBSR and MBCT programmes, thus far less likely to cause harm. Thus whilst training and an established personal practice are still essential, training required may not need to be as lengthy as for MBCT delivery. Indeed there may be similarities with existing personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programmes delivered in schools and school-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) interventions (e.g. Cool Connections; Seiler, 2008).

In order to work with targeted groups (e.g. children with anxiety disorders), more extensive training will be required. It is important for individual EPs to be able to recognise training and supervision needs and the limits of competence in this regard. Whilst there is little documented evidence of harm resulting from mindfulness interventions (Dobkin et al., 2012), there is a need for high levels of expertise and experienced supervision when working with young people with acute depression, suicidality, post-traumatic stress disorder, history of early trauma/abuse and psychosis (MBCT Implementation Resources, 2012). It is also important to know how and when to refer on when more intensive, specialist intervention is required (Frederickson et al., 2009).

As an example of training to deliver mindfulness interventions with children, the Mindfulness in Schools Project offer a four-day course to teach their programme (.b), which requires teachers to have done at least the equivalent of an eight-week training course in mindfulness such as MBSR or MBCT and have an established mindfulness practice themselves.

A further issue raised in Crane et al. (2012) is fidelity or adherence to the treatment programme. MBSR and MBCT are recognised programmes supported by substantial research evidence. By contrast, there are a wide variety of mindfulness programmes in use with children, none of which as yet has a strong evidence base. It is, therefore, important that whatever intervention is used, some core principles of mindfulness are followed, for example:

- Attention to the present moment;
- Non-judgmental acceptance;
- Compassion for self and others;
- Teaching of everyday mindfulness practices (e.g. mindful walking, mindful eating, three-minute breathing space);
- Teaching of mindfulness meditation (e.g. breath meditation, mindful stretches, body scan);
- Personal embodiment of the qualities of mindfulness.

It is also necessary to ensure a high quality of delivery and sufficient exposure to the intervention in terms of length and number of sessions.

Professional supervision is also essential. This may be generic, specialist or a mixture of both (Division of Educational and Child Psychology, 2010). In the context of mindfulness, there is a need for specialist supervision by an experienced practitioner in addition to generic casework supervision. There are currently only small numbers of psychologists using mindfulness with children which presents difficulties in accessing appropriate supervision. There may also be a role for supplementation with peer supervision. The need to maintain and deepen one's own practice could be met through attendance at a mindfulness meditation group (which are numerous through the UK) and going on retreat.

As with other interventions, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions in schools, in order both to inform practice, and contribute to the evidence base. It is an important element of the EP's role to act as an intermediary between research and educational professionals. Evaluation should include pre- and post-intervention measures and longer-term follow-up. Measures could include ratings of well-being and psychological symptoms as well as participant feedback.

Pre-intervention measures of psychological symptoms, for example, anxiety and depression are also important ways of identifying children in order to make judgements about possible onward referral.

Development of a Continuing Professional Development course for psychologists working with children

To address the growing demand, a course for EPs and other practitioner psychologists interested in developing 'Mindfulness-Based Approaches for Working with Children and Young People' has been running at University College London since September 2013. It consists of eight weekly half-day sessions, and is similar in length and content to the MBSR and MBCT programmes. In addition to the experiential aspects, the course aims to include theoretical background and research evidence, how to adapt and apply mindfulness with children, and an extended 'mindful movement' component.

The course includes:

- In-depth experience of a range of guided mindfulness practices, including a body scan, mindfulness of breath, sounds and thoughts and mindful movement;
- Support for participants to develop and maintain their own mindfulness practice;
- Presentations on mindfulness theory and mechanisms, and evidence from recent research into its uses and effectiveness;
- Ways of adapting mindfulness interventions for children with a focus on improving well-being, and the practicalities and pitfalls of developing programmes in schools;
- A review of a range of programmes currently available for children.

By the end of the course, participants can expect to be competent in delivering a basic mindfulness intervention to children and young people aimed at improving well-being. This will consist of core mindfulness practices detailed above, with presentation adapted according to age group and developmental stage of the children. In order to maintain and further develop their competence, participants will need to continue with their own mindfulness practice and arrange appropriate supervision and attendance at mindfulness groups and/or retreats.

Future developments

Currently, there is a growing evidence-base supporting mindfulness as a potentially effective intervention that can be delivered in schools to both targeted and universal groups. However, there are currently few well developed programmes available in the UK. If part of the basic role of the EP is to translate new and promising research into applications to support children, families and schools, then the time would seem right for EPs to take up this work. The skill sets required to deliver such interventions need to be clearly articulated and agreed. These would include many generic EP skills, experience and understanding of mindfulness, and relevant knowledge and expertise with mental health when working with targeted groups. Embedding such work in the life of a school will provide an additional set of challenges quite different to those required when providing for adults in clinic settings. Enabling access to this intervention for many schools whilst at the same time ensuring fidelity to the programmes and high quality delivery should be a central aim for EPs hoping to provide this kind of intervention in schools. Relevant training and supervision are of central importance in building professional capacity in providing psychological services that are relevant, evidence-based and responsive to demand.

The Authors

Suzi Iyadurai, Jez Morris & Sandra Dunsmuir
University College London,
Educational Psychology Group,
Research Department of Clinical,
Educational and Health Psychology.

Correspondence

Dr Suzi Iyadurai
Educational Psychologist.
Email: suziiyad@aol.com

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Bringing Mindfulness into Suffolk's Community Educational Psychology Service

Natalie Hart, Kay Breton & Zoe Reavill

AT THE Eastern Region Educational Psychology Conference on 14 October 2013 we (the Authors) presented a workshop on mindfulness. The interest in the subject was pleasing; the workshop was full and more people wanted to attend. This wasn't the first enthusiastic response we've witnessed with regards to mindfulness. Another workshop that we presented at in September this year resulted in a number of people from a variety of professions contacting us to see how they could learn more about mindfulness and its use. Clearly mindfulness is rising in popularity and is capturing the attention of many people. Perhaps this is why at the regional conference we were invited to submit an article. When pondering upon what we could share that would be of added value to an area which is emerging within our profession, yet has existed for centuries, we decided an account of our professional and personal journey with mindfulness might be fitting.

When reflecting upon when we were first introduced to mindfulness it became apparent that it was difficult to be precise. Mindfulness seemed to be a concept which indicated a sense of wisdom and clarity about itself that each of us had an understanding of. Conversations about mindfulness sought to explore a greater understanding of the application of mindfulness and what mindfulness meant to us as individuals. Over time we have developed what can be best described at present as an understanding about a philosophy, ethos or way of being, which sits within the term mindfulness.

What is mindfulness?

Traditionally mindfulness stems from Buddhist philosophies and practice predominantly through the art of meditation, (Baer, 2006; Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1999; Shaprio et al., 2006: Weare, 2010). Since the 1980's mindfulness has become secularised and simplified to suit Western cultures where a growing interest in the application of mindfulness-based interventions, both in medical and educational professions, has occurred (Kabat-Zinn, 1996; Lozar-Glenn, 2010; Semple Reid & Miller, 2005; Weare, 2010).

Whilst Thich Nhat Hanh is often accredited with bringing mindfulness to the attention of 20th century Westerners, Jon Kabat-Zinn is widely cited as a leading light in the emergence of Western scientific interest in the field and has described mindfulness as...

> 'the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.' (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145)

According to Thompson (2012) Kabat-Zinn adapted Hanh's teachings on mindfulness into the structured eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course, and began teaching this at the Stress Reduction Clinic in Massachusetts in 1979 (see Wikipedia entry for Jon Kabat-Zinn; page last modified on 5 November 2013 at 01:24). Kabat-Zinn later went on to publish research papers to show how mindfulness could be used to promote healing in patients with psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998).

Since this time, scientific research has spun off into many different directions, with one of these being into the field of education, and work with children and young people. Emeritus Professor Katherine Weare published a paper in association with the University of Exeter and the '.b' Mindfulness in Schools Project entitled 'Evidence for the Impact of Mindfulness on Children and Young People' (Weare, 2012) which summarises the findings of at least 20 studies on the benefits of mindfulness for pupils from age 4 to 19, the vast majority of which date from 2005 onwards.

Mindfulness with children

American actress Goldie Hawn has put her name to the use of mindfulness in work with children, setting up the Hawn Foundation and seeking to promote the 'MindUP' programme (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). Amongst the claims made about the mindfulness programme, is that it helps students to self-regulate, to improve concentration, to enhance perspective taking and to reduce stress. Mindfulness programmes include Inner Kids (Kaiser-Greenland, 2013), and more seem to be emerging.

Following an initial clinical trial (Semple et al., 2005), Semple and Lee (2011) have now written a mindfulness-based treatment programme for professionals which is designed to support children aged 9 to 12, who struggle with anxiety. This text can effectively be followed on a week-by-week basis, enabling and guiding practitioners to bring mindfulness practice into schools.

Investigations have also begun into the use of mindfulness training in work with adolescents with ADHD (Zylowska, 2008), and in promoting primary children's mental health (Joyce et al., 2010).

There is good evidence from neuroscience and brain imaging that mindfulness meditation in adults reliably and profoundly alters the structure and function of the brain to improve the quality of both thought and feeling (Weare, 2012). There is also reasonably strong evidence for the positive impact of mindfulness on a wide range of mental and physical health conditions in children, on social and emotional skills and well-being, and on learning and cognition (Weare, 2012)

Mindful service developments within Suffolk

With such research and interventions whetting appetites across the globe, mindfulness represents an exciting area of interest, and not least within the field of educational psychology. In view of claims made lauding its benefits in stress reduction alone, one can see its potential in supporting both adults and the children in their care. It is for this reason that the Community Educational Psychology (CEP) team employed by Suffolk County Council have begun to question how they might find out more about the use of mindfulness in education, and to consider how it might be used in a wider sense within our work as Community Psychologists.

Mindfulness Interest Group

Within our service we have recently set up a mindfulness interest group which provides an opportunity for us to discuss mindfulness, share research and practice as well as engage in mindful enhancing activities which include meditation. When we first came together as a small group we sat in a glass-walled room on a floor of open-plan offices, it would be fair to say that each of us were aware that when we sat with our eyes closed listening to the guided meditation our minds wandered. They wandered to a place where our thoughts were preoccupied with 'I wonder if anyone is watching me from outside?'.

We needn't have been quite so preoccupied. Google, Apple, Barclays Bank and the Deutsch Bank are a few large companies who recognise the importance of mindfulness and have provided their staff with the opportunity to engage in meditation in order to support their well-being. For us this is reassuring as rather than meditating at work being something of a novelty we are in fact

joining in with what seems to be a popular and encouraged work place activity.

Conferences

At a recent multi-agency conference in Suffolk to consider ways of promoting resilience and overcoming adversity, we gave a short presentation to introduce the topic of mindfulness and its potential benefits and were much encouraged by the wide range of interest from attendees within Suffolk. The feedback from this was positive with respondents expressing interest in knowing more about the practice, and of how they might use it themselves to reduce their own stress levels at work, as well as of how they might 'bring' the practice to their clients (essentially parents and children and young people, who are battling to overcome adversity). There has since been discussion of how we might begin setting up a regular mindfulness practice group within the Suffolk County Council offices.

Members of our Community Educational Psychology interest group also recently presented to a small group of Educational Psychologists within the Eastern region, with feedback again suggesting real interest in cross county collaboration, over further training and ways of promoting resilience in our work with children and young people.

Mindfulness within Suffolk schools

Mindfulness-based interventions are also proving to be popular with schools. A recent six-week mindfulness-based group intervention sought to support pupils with developing coping strategies to stay calm and attentive. Pre- and post-evaluation measures suggested that four out of six children were reported to demonstrate an increase in their ability to pay attention. Five children were reported to demonstrate an increase in their awareness of other people's feelings. All six children were reported to demonstrate an increase in their ability to accept compassionate behaviour towards themselves and five children were reported to demonstrate an increase in their willingness to pay attention.

With the measured outcomes seeming positive we are planning a further imminent intervention drawing upon the aforementioned Semple and Lee (2011) 12-week mindfulness-based cognitive therapy programme for anxious children. The intervention will seek to develop children's awareness of mindfulness through mindful based activities, with pre- and post-measures used to evaluate any apparent reduction in the anxiety levels of participating students.

Pupils involved within the Semple and Lee (2011) intervention will also be invited to take part in a piece of Doctoral research carried out by the Community Educational Psychology Service (CEPS) Trainee Educational Psychologist. The main aim of the research seeks to explore children's understanding of mindfulness. It is anticipated that the research will be able to offer an insight around what children understand mindfulness is and how helpful children perceive the application of mindfulness to be. It is hoped that gaining a richer understanding of mindfulness with children will inform future applications of mindfulness for educative purposes.

Future plans and possibilities

Mindfulness continues to be a field expanding rapidly in the areas of health and education and is an area we hope to continue to develop further within our service. Certainly, further research through evaluation of existing programmes and mindfulness groups will contribute to such an expanding field.

Organisations are increasingly recognising the role that mindfulness-based skills training plays in the workplace in the development of improved health and well-being, reduced sickness absenteeism and employee turnover, resilience, motivation and engagement, increased creativity and innovation, attention and concentration, and for teams as a whole (Glomb et al., 2011). Raising awareness at conferences has sparked interest at the organisational level and raised interest in mindful groups within the Suffolk

County Council. Interest in the area of developing mindful support for particular groups such as Young Carers has also emerged.

Research suggesting possible 'overspill' effects (Neece, 2013) on others surrounding a person who is engaging in mindful practice may well have implications for our work with parents, staff and other professionals. This would also be an area worthy of further research.

The aim to continue raising awareness of mindfulness within schools through SENCo network meetings will inevitably spark further future plans and possibilities for exciting pieces of work. In anticipation of work around supporting mindful practice in schools, there are plans to visit schools following mindfulness curriculums. At the forefront will also be the continuation of our own personal journeys of mindful practice to ensure we are in the best position to be able to deliver groups, for example, and know fully what mindfulness is through being mindful of ourselves. Within the Service we recognise that being mindful oneself is essential to be able to understand and support/teach others. Fully understanding what mindfulness entails is proposed to only occur through guided practice and is not considered as something which can be learnt from reading the relevant literature (Baer, 2006).

The future application of mindfulness work with children, young people and their families is an exciting one. However, the excitement and promise that mindfulness has encouraged evokes the feeling that we are about to ride the crest of the wave of mindfulness. With this in mind we wonder where the wave will break, what will be left upon the shore and what will be collected? No doubt this is a question which will be answered in time. As highlighted by Crane et al. (2012) there is a potential risk that the integrity of the mindfulness approach may be subject to possible dilution. With this in mind there is a call for practitioners to demonstrate a level of competence which seeks to encourage an understanding of what mindfulness is in its entirety.

Mindfulness sits comfortably within the field of positive psychology, promoting emotional health and well-being, and in promoting resilience for all. As Community Educational Psychologists, this is at the heart of our work and what we do and we welcome the future possibilities this work will unveil.

The Authors
Natalie Hart & Kay Breton,
Educational Psychologists, and
Zoe Reavill,
Trainee Educational Psychologist,
Suffolk Community Educational Psychology Service.

Correspondence
Zoe Reavill
Email: Zoe.reavill@hotmail.co.uk

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Introduction to the University of East London Mindfulness Reading Group (MRG)

Ho Law

THIS ARTICLE draws the reader's attention to a recent development on the new Mindfulness Reading Group (MRG) which was set up in September 2013. The Group is open to both members of staff and students at the University of East London (UEL) as well as external academics and professional practitioners who are interested in mindfulness, its research and practice. If you would like to join the Group, please email the author (contact details at the end of this article). But first, I shall briefly describe the broader context of mindfulness in relation to my interest of setting up MRG. More details about MRG – how it was developed, its aims, and practices – are provided in the second part of this article.

The context

Although it originated from the Far East, mindfulness has been increasingly popular as a psychological intervention in recent years in the Western world. We can observe this emerging phenomenon in a wide range of practices. Counselling and clinical psychologists are increasingly appreciating the value of mindfulness-based approaches (Law, 2011, 2012). Mindfulness techniques are used for people with a range of psychological disorders such as psychosis, schizophrenia and mood disorders.

Coaching psychologists are also embedding mindfulness techniques in their work both with individuals and organisations. For example, coaching executives – how to focus their minds to improve their concentration and performance, and training people in mindfulness approaches. One can take an eight-week mindfulness course in a workplace setting (Chaskalson, 2011, pp.8–31).

However, as Professor Les Lancaster pointed out, the term 'mindfulness' is 'actually quite 'trivial''... its practice is much more complex than is generally appreciated. There is an issue about packaging mindfulness... 'presenting the rich and complex spiritual material for consumption in a way that Western psychologists can use... While this is not a bad thing. But there is much more in the traditional writings about 'mindfulness' than the relatively trivial exercises often used in these clinical settings' (Law, 2011, p.335). Despite its popularity, we do not have much longitudinal research to provide evidence to show whether the positive outcomes generated by mindfulness exercises are sustainable. Clearly, more research needs to be done. Especially for practitioners who are in the profession of coaching, education and supervision, teaching others on mindfulness, one would need to have a deeper and wider understanding on the subject. As a psychologist and to be effective in our teaching and practice, we need to understand the psychological mechanisms that underpin the mindfulness practice and its efficacy. Practice is informed by research and vice versa.

My interest in mindfulness has been inspired by some of the students whom I supervised in recent years in the MSc Coaching Psychology here at UEL. It started with Reginald Aquilina's dissertation on developing a health care leadership coaching model by introducing an executive coaching programme to support nurse managers in achieving organisational objec-

tives in Malta (Aquilina & Law, 2012; Law & Aquilina, 2013). Later and more recently, with Professor Irene Wong, we advocated a 10-point plan to embed the compassionate and person-centred nursing care in response to the scandalous practice as witnessed in Stafford Hospital, which was regarded as the worst practice in the history of the NHS (Law & Wong, 2013).

The UEL Mindfulness Reading Group (MRG)

In August 2013, I had a meeting with Professors Mark Davies (the Dean of the School of Psychology) and Mark McDermott (Research Lead) at UEL about my interest in developing research in compassion and mindfulness applications in health care. Mark Davis suggested that it may be a good idea to set up a Mindfulness Reading Group within the school (for both staff and students). A small group showed interest in participating in such a reading group. As a result, the UEL Mindfulness Reading Group (MRG) was formed with the following aims:

1. Research – exchange of ideas on the latest research on mindfulness.
2. Practice – have some simple exercises on mindfulness during the meeting.
3. Invited speakers – occasionally we may like to invite a speaker to give a talk on the subject.
4. Journals – discussion on developing a journal for mindfulness, which should cover the latest research, development, applications and practice on mindfulness.

As mentioned in the introduction, MRG is open to both members of staff and students at the UEL as well as external academics and professional practitioners who are interested in mindfulness, its research and practice. The format of the meetings are in a semi-formal experiential group setting – having a mindfulness coffee/tea or lunch together. At least one member of staff will be present to facilitate the meeting. It usually starts with each member of the group introducing themselves and explaining about their interest in mindfulness. A facilitator may conduct a 10- to 15-minute mindfulness exercise. We shall then discuss about the recent research or relevant events, and journal publications. At the time of writing, Dr James Walsh and I at the UEL School of Psychology have taken on the role of facilitators. More volunteers are welcome so that we can take turns. If you want to be a volunteer, please let me know (see contact details at the end of this article). So far three meetings have taken place on the first Thursday of each month between 12.00 noon to 1.00 p.m. at the UEL (with four to 10 people attending at each meeting) in September to December (to be reviewed each Semester). It is envisaged that the size of the Group will grow. Please email the author for the details of future meetings.

Correspondence

Dr Ho Law
Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology,
University of East London.
Email: law2@uel.ac.uk

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