

# A Reprieve but not a Fix for Childhood Stresses: A Participatory Study of School- based Mindfulness in an Irish Primary School

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ECER Copenhagen, 22<sup>nd</sup>-25 Aug 2017



# Mindfulness and education

- Mindfulness is increasingly popular in schools -- evidence of positive effects on psychosocial wellbeing & executive functioning (e.g., Flook, 2010, Schonert-Reichl, 2010)



- Many educationalists recognise the transformative potential of contemplative practice (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Berila, 2016; Ergas & Todd, 2015; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010)
- Our inner thoughts, emotions & embodied experience form part of an 'inner curriculum' which ought to occupy a central place in Education (Ergas, 2017)

# Critique of school-based mindfulness

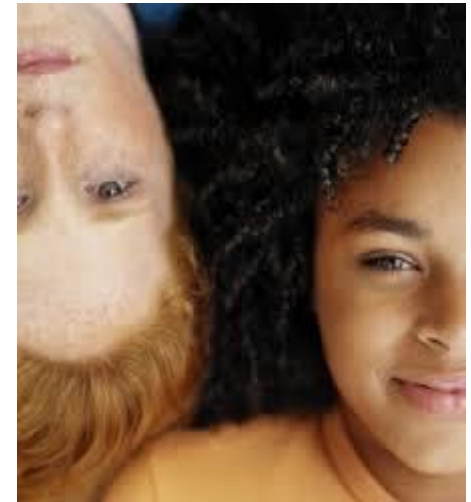
- Mindfulness as discrete, individualistic intervention - neglects broader social and cultural forces that influence children's wellbeing; &
- By focusing on technicalities of programme delivery, there is a risk of undermining the centrality of relationships (O'Toole, 2017)
- Mindfulness programmes are increasingly divorced from core ethical principles (Forbes, 2016, Monteiro, et al., 2015; Purser & Loy, 2015; Shonin, et al, 2015; Todd, 2014, 2015)
- Mindfulness as a 'technology of the self' – creating a form of subjectivity that is amenable to neoliberal capitalist agenda (Revelely, 2013, 2015)

# Children's experience of mindfulness

- Studies suggest that children enjoy school mindfulness practices & perceive a range of intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits (Bluth et al. 2016; Cheek, et al, 2017; Dariotis, et al, 2016; Lau & Hue, 2011; Semple et al, 2017; Wisner, 2016)
- Most qualitative studies form part of a process evaluation – to better understand acceptability, feasibility & for guiding the successful implementation of school mindfulness programmes.
- These are driven by adult agendas and preconceptions about what is good for children

# The standpoints of children

- Exploring how children interpret, negotiate and feel about the activities and events that form part of their daily lives is central to understanding and advancing their wellbeing (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Crivello et al, 2009; Greene & Hogan, 2005)



# The current study

- A participatory and rights-based approach
  - Research ‘with’ and ‘by’ (rather than ‘on’) children (White, 2010; Greene, & Hogan, 2005; James & Prout, 1997; Simovska, 2004)
- Aims were twofold:
  1. To explore children’s experience of mindfulness from their perspectives & within the context of their particular lives (not a process evaluation)
  2. To explore ways that children can become meaningfully involved in school-based research as co-researchers.

# The current study

- Participants and setting
  - 48 children (aged 10-11 years) completed a mindfulness programme in an ethnically diverse, urban primary school in Dublin, Ireland.
- Mindfulness programme
  - *Paws b* ([mindfulnessinschools.org](http://mindfulnessinschools.org)) is a 12 session structured mindfulness course for primary schools, targeted at 7 – 11 year olds.

# Children as co-researchers

- Four children participated as co-researchers (Bucknall, 2012; Kellett, 2009; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011)
  - Advised on research questions, conducted focus groups with peers, identified emergent themes
  - Capacity building - the research process, ethical issues, interview techniques, pilot interviews, knowledge about mindfulness



# Research methods

- I. Drawings – child-centred technique to elicit children’s thoughts and views on mindfulness practices

(Alerby, 2000; Clark, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Leitch & Mitchel, 2007; Veale, 2005)

47 children

- II. Child-led focus groups - Focusing on experiences & views of mindfulness and its relevance in their lives

(Bucknall, 2012; Kellett, 2009; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011)

3 focus groups (4 children in each)

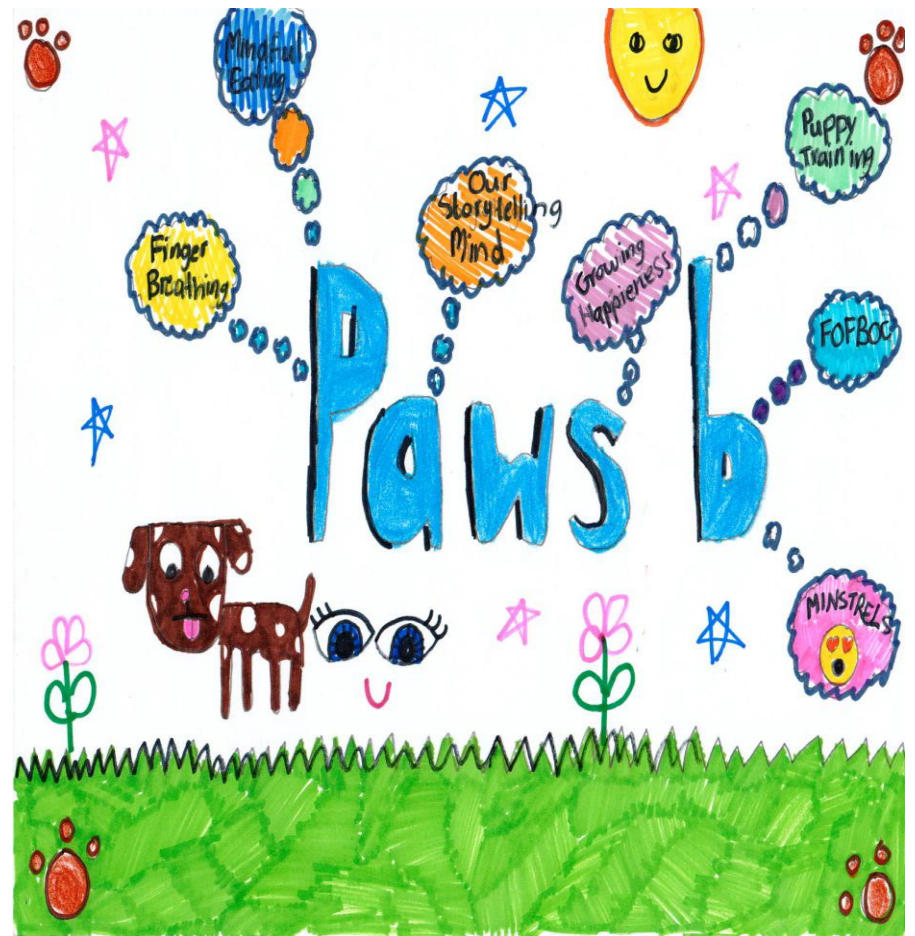
# Emergent Themes

(as identified by the children)

## 1. The positives

- A welcome interruption from regular ‘business’ of the classroom
  - being able to “stop and relax”....
  - *“I felt relaxed after it and was better at doing my work”*
  - Using the term *“explore”* rather than *“learn”*
  - Taking off our shoes
  - Mindful eating: *“magical... it was the “nicest chocolate I have ever eaten”*
  - Addressing teacher by her first name

- Drawings were invariably colourful & positive; smiling characters, sunshine, animals, nature





*“It helps you make right decisions and control your emotions. Then it helps you look at the positive things instead of the negative things”*

## 2. The negatives

- Some practices were liked less than others, but no uniformity
- Perception that classroom of 24 children is too large for some of the practices
- Some criticism directed at peers when they “popped your bubble”

# 3. School life

Two issues loomed large: Tests/exams and the transition to 2<sup>nd</sup> level

*Like, if you have a test after break, it would be good to do it [guided practice] before the test -- like when we had the 1916 quiz\*-- maybe the break before that”*

*In secondary school you wouldn't really have time cos you'd be going between classes and all that and you're more stressed with work”*

- *\*Irish History – Easter Rising of 1916*

# 4. The real world

- Extra-curricular activities & performance

*“It helped me during my hardest times when I had to do something in front of people, when I felt nervous”*

- Having trouble sleeping

*Luke: “...couldn't sleep so I started doing it [finger breathing]”*

*Daniel: “like ,say if you're stressed or can't sleep, you can use it”*

*Amelia: “It helps me go to sleep quicker”...*

# Discussion

- Children depicted their lives as stressful – pressure to perform in class tests, entrance exams and extra-curricular pursuits, difficulty sleeping, stress.
- Reflective of neoliberal agenda; a culture of accountability, competition, excessive individualism (Smail, 2005)
- The children's accounts suggest that mindfulness offers symptomatic relief, &
- that mindfulness is becoming entangled with a neoliberal agenda - creating better learners & test-takers who are more in control of their emotions.



# The need for an 'inner curriculum'

- Yet, the children expressed a desire to continue the practices; &
- mindfulness offers potentially rich possibilities for exploring, developing and enriching the landscape of our interiority.
- If education hopes to change us in light of a public good, then the mind needs to be positioned at the centre of curriculum & pedagogy...(Ergas, 2017)



# A socially engaged mindfulness

- Contemplative practices in schools have tended to focus on the first person, subjective (I) and third person, objective (It);
- The collective realms are neglected -- second-person, inter-subjective (We) and inter-objective (Its). These emphasise relationships, meaning, society, culture and issues of social justice (Forbes, 2016, Bodhi, 2015).
- Forbes argues for socially engaged mindfulness that helps students connect their experience to social conditions

# Conclusions

- We should be cautious about uncritical acceptance of mindfulness programmes in school settings
- Caution about overselling mindfulness & overstating the potential of individual students to transcend their difficult circumstances
- There is a need to envision balanced and integrated approaches embedded within educational practice

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