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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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 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) 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 2nd 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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