

Teacher experiences *of a school-based mindfulness programme*

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KEY POINTS

- Mindfulness is a practice of non-judgemental, present-moment awareness that occurs when a person brings their attention to the present moment.
- This research captured teachers' perceptions of a 6-week mindfulness programme run for three teachers and their students in the school hall.
- The results suggest that mindfulness activities can have benefits for both teachers and students, and that teachers can become confident to incorporate mindfulness practices into their classrooms.

Awareness of mindfulness in New Zealand school communities is growing, and many teachers are becoming aware of its significance to support health and wellbeing in the classroom. This article discusses qualitative research on a 6-week mindfulness programme for teachers and students which showed that teachers perceived specific mindfulness activities reduced their stress levels and improved their present-moment awareness. The teachers also believed that mindfulness practices had positive effects on the students, and that the practices helped the children to calm themselves and be more focused during class time.

The potential benefits of mindfulness for students and teachers

The teachers in this study were interested in ways to empower young children to be successful academically and develop positive social interactions. They also wanted to support children's health and wellbeing with teaching strategies aimed towards healthy choices. Such healthy choices include: being aware of self and others; being able to control one's emotions; reduce impulsiveness; and manage stress. Helping children to take ownership of their wellbeing can be supported by using mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness is a practice of non-judgemental, present-moment awareness that occurs when a person brings their attention to the present moment (often focusing on their breath), noticing when their attention wanders (monitoring) and bringing it back non-judgementally to the target (their breath) (see Figure 1 for definitions of mindfulness). A recent review of mindfulness-based interventions in school settings has shown that mindfulness practices can improve classroom experiences both academically and emotionally, and reports from teachers show marked benefits with reduced levels of stress and anxiety (Felver, Celis-de Hoyos, Tezanos & Singh, 2016). Research suggests that teachers should not only focus their energies on supporting children to be creative and innovative, but also to be able to self-regulate (control their thoughts and emotions) (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Mindfulness helps develop self-control and can lessen stress, arousal, and anxiety (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012). Teaching children to control anger, delay gratification, and reflect on their behaviour instead of unconscious, automatic lashing-out requires effort, and many teachers are looking for strategies to support positive classroom environments and help children to regulate their feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.

Evidence shows that mindfulness-based interventions can also support teacher wellbeing. A recent review by Felver and Jennings (2016) highlighted three studies that examined benefits for teachers. One study found that teachers reported reduced stress following training (Taylor et al., 2015). Another found that teachers' awareness of their internal states and improvements to their emotional regulation may be contributing to reductions in self-reported stress (Schussler et al., 2016). The third found that a brief daily mindfulness and yoga program improved their classroom management, levels of stress, physical symptoms, and blood pressure (Harris et al., 2016).

Research on fostering resilience of teachers and students also suggests that training in mindfulness skills can increase teachers' sense of wellbeing, self-efficacy, and their ability to manage classroom behaviour; and help them establish and maintain supportive relationships with their students (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). A New Zealand study also found that by participating in a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course, primary school teachers were able to improve their mental health, reducing their levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Gold et al., 2010).

Our research project: The big picture

This research focused on teachers' perspectives of the benefits of mindfulness. The researchers' aim was to teach primary school teachers a range of mindfulness practices so that, having experienced these practices, they could then evaluate which specific practices were useful to include in their classroom. The researchers taught the mindfulness activities to both teachers and the children, which involved setting aside a designated period for sitting or moving mindfulness meditation.

WHAT REALLY IS MINDFULNESS?

The definitions of mindfulness are many and varied. Most of the time in our conscious state we are habitually unaware of our actions. Mindfulness involves paying attention in the present moment, intentionally and non-judgementally, to what is going on around us. It is a complete contrast to rumination, which is a state of worrying about the future and reminiscing over the past, or being lost in thought. Bishop et al. (2004) state that mindfulness is “the self-regulation of attention so that is maintained on immediate experience ... characterised by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (p. 232). Mindfulness can be said to be both an outcome (mindful awareness) and a process (mindful practice). When it is learned and *used* by teachers it can become a “powerful tool” which allows the teacher to “awaken” by developing an awareness of what is happening inside their body, heart, and mind, and outside in their environment, without judgement or criticism (Chozen Bays, 2009).

Mindfulness is a practice that includes three core elements: intention, attention, and attitude (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin & Freedman, 2006):

Intention involves consciously and purposefully deciding to focus ... Attention refers to the ability to sustain attention in the present moment without interpretation, discrimination, or evaluation ... Attitude [refers to a] frame of mind brought to mindfulness meditation; commonly, this is described as openness and acceptance (p. 495).

FIGURE 1. WHAT REALLY IS MINDFULNESS?

Once experienced and practised over the week, the teachers were then able to perceive and evaluate their own and the children’s reactions to the activities.

The following questions were used in the interview process:

- Did the mindfulness practices reduce [teachers’] levels of stress and anxiety?
- Following training, what practices did the teachers find useful and easy to incorporate during the school day?
- What practices needed more time or a certain amount of space?
- Did shorter or longer mindfulness sessions work best?

Teachers were provided with journals which included descriptions of the weekly practices, spaces for thoughts, reflections, and questions, as well as short research extracts on brain function, to prompt their responses. Unfortunately, the teachers did not engage with or complete the journals. However, during the debrief sessions they mentioned that they had received lots of feedback from the children, and shared specific comments with the researchers.

Teacher and student involvement in the research

The participants consisted of 4 female teachers from a Year 7 group of three classrooms at a local primary

school. Three of the teachers were experienced, each with over 10 years’ experience in primary school teaching. The fourth was a student teacher who was completing her practicum. Ethical approval was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC), and informed consent for the study was obtained from the teachers, parents, and children involved. Three data collection methods were used throughout the research process: focus group interviews, unstructured observations, and journal notes completed by the researchers. (The children were not assessed or evaluated in this study.) Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the data.

The teachers and children were taught a range of mindfulness activities for one afternoon a week for 6 weeks, with each session lasting 40–50 minutes. These sessions were carried out in the quiet and secluded school hall. The teachers sat outside the circle of children to observe as well as participate in the mindfulness activities being taught by the researchers. Thus both groups were able to experience the effects of these activities. Throughout the programme the children and teachers were reminded and encouraged to continue their practice at home.

The four teachers were interviewed in a focus group. The interviews included a series of open questions such as “How useful did you find the mindfulness technique shown today?” and “How did you find today’s story? Would you use this in your classroom?” The interview data and teachers journal notes were transcribed and analysed using inductive coding to identify recurring themes. The researchers took detailed field notes (observations) to describe the teachers’ responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and illustrate their experiences in the programme. Categories were generated from all data sources (focus groups, which involved teacher report; journals, which involved teacher report; and observations of teachers, which is researcher report). Similarities and differences were identified, compared, and contrasted. The procedure was a cycle of constant comparison, moving around the data and trying to make sense of the teacher’s experience. McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2009) liken this to a process of looking and re-looking at the data, searching beneath the words for what is hidden or not immediately obvious and ending up with an ontological perspective of the teacher’s perceptions of what was happening.

How the mindfulness programme operated

The participants of this study experienced the 6-week program (plus a final follow-up) delivered by the two researchers who are experienced mindfulness teachers

with more than 10 years' experience of mindfulness meditation. The programme was modified and adapted from the MindUp Curriculum (2011), and was presented to the teachers and children as a short course to enhance wellbeing and attention and reduce stress by cultivating moment-to-moment awareness. The programme was delivered using a secular approach that did not include any non-secular terminology. In the first 2 weeks, the researchers emphasised the reason and importance of doing mindfulness by explaining the effects of mindfulness practice on their brain, and showing a large poster of the brain explaining simple ideas related to neuroplasticity. It was explained to the participants that they were training a "muscle" in their brain, the importance of regular practice and making these activities become a habit, like brushing one's teeth.

Many of the participants (adults and children) were distracted by thoughts or noises in the beginning, but were reminded that "lots of thoughts were normal, and to keep focusing on their breath". There was one main practice repeated frequently—the core practice—along with a range of other mindfulness activities, as follows.

The core practice—mindful breathing: this practice involves teaching participants to take slow, calm breaths through their nose, and then let go of each breath. They were told to "focus on the air going in at the tip of their nose" and told "if your mind tries to think about other things, bring your attention back to your breath. Keep your belly soft and relaxed." After a few minutes participants were told to "open their eyes slowly when they were ready" (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 42).

Heart awareness—mindful feeling: this practice was similar to the core practice. Participants were asked to close their eyes and take some slow deep breaths, then focus their attention in the heart area (a big wide area in the centre of the chest). They were told, "if your mind tries to think about other things, then bring your attention back to your heart area" (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 34).

Mindful awareness activities—mindful walking, mindful movement to music, and yoga poses: These activities involved mindfulness with movement. For mindful walking, participants were told to walk with their head floating like a balloon, paying attention to moving through the space in front of them and focusing on their breath going in and out. They were encouraged to not let their mind wander by bringing thoughts back to their breathing. *Mindful movement to music* involved playing mood music and telling participants to move to the different sounds however they wanted, and to move using all their body. *Yoga poses* involved showing them a few simple yoga poses: the cat, the tree, and the dog;

then practising them with guidance from the researcher (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, pp. 84–92).

Mindful eating: this involved learning to taste mindfully. Participants were given a raisin and told to notice its colour, shape, and texture. They were then told to close their eyes and focus on the smell. Next, they were told to put the raisin in their mouth and move it around, then bite down very slowly, chew slowly, and finally swallow (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 76).

Mindful listening: this practice involved getting the participants to close their eyes and listen mindfully to a sound that was made (e.g., tapping a pencil, crumpling a piece of paper, shaking coins, striking a chime) until they could no longer hear it. They were asked if they knew what it was, to keep it a secret and raise their hand (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 52).

Mindful experiencing or body scan: This was a relaxation practice that involved getting the participants to lie down and take slow, deep belly breaths (from their lower abdomen). The researcher then told them to focus on a specific part of their body, starting with their head, and getting them to tense and relax this part, then ears, jaws, shoulders, going right down to their feet (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 88).

Mindful attitudes: These exercises included reading stories about empathy, compassion, love, and kindness from the book *Pebble for your Pocket* by Thich Nhat Hanh (2013), and expressing gratitude. At the end of some of the mindful practices or body scan we told participants to send some friendly wishes to others, e.g., parents, grandparents or friends, and to self, and give attention to love and kindness (MindUp Curriculum, 2011, p. 100).

The mindfulness practices were short (from 5 to 8 minutes), but repeated frequently. A new practice was taught each week, but the core practice was repeated at each session. As there were two mindfulness teachers present at all sessions, one would do the teaching for a week while the other observed and took notes.

How we found the teachers and students reacted to the programme

The findings are discussed in relation to the literature under three categories: teacher's personal experiences; usefulness for children; and classroom experiences. The qualitative findings, including the focus-group sessions, revealed that all of the teachers had positive experiences over the 6-week programme. Teachers commonly reported that the mindfulness activities reduced their feelings of stress, aroused a sense of compassion, and helped them cultivate their awareness of the internal changes occurring in their body and mind. They also felt that the activities

helped them identify the origins of their stress and gain some insight into how it might best be managed. The novel experiences provided by the programme seemed to affect teachers' health in terms of enhancing their awareness of their emotional needs, nurturing their wellbeing and reducing their stress levels. Our observations and field notes of the teachers during the practice of mindfulness activities showed that the teachers were engaged in the practices and generally demonstrated a willing and positive attitude towards the activities. In the focus-group sessions teachers stated that they used the practices taught each week and included them during the day in their classroom. While it was emphasised that it was important to repeat and practise these activities over the week to get the benefits of mindfulness practice, the teachers' compliance were likely because they all had personal or professional reasons for wanting to learn about mindfulness, and were motivated to learn the mindfulness practices.

The teachers' personal experiences

All four teachers had positive personal experiences during the study. Teacher Jo explained,

honestly, I looked forward to Fridays, as I know that I am going to be doing some interesting and relaxing activities. After the sessions I just feel relaxed and looked forward to the weekend, as if I had already recovered from the hectic week.

Teacher Kay confided that it had been a difficult year and that she didn't think she would have coped without the mindfulness: "It's just helped me to keep calm, keep the class calm and I feel I can manage without getting so panicky."

Teacher Trish was also doing a mindfulness course outside school hours and was really enthusiastic about her own experiences and how they had helped her thinking processes. She stated that the Friday sessions reinforced to her the importance of taking time to be quiet, to notice how her body was feeling and the kind of thoughts that keep coming into her mind.

It's just go, go, go, rushing to get everything done and it effects how you feel ... We don't get time to just sit down and talk to the children, and I think this affects my mood, but I'm becoming more aware of this now, these activities are really very important.

When teacher Cath was asked about her personal wellbeing she stated how important her home was and how the loving-heart activity reminded her of her family connections and the importance of being with them.

I just realised when focusing on my heart that my family, cooking, laughing and sharing food is so important to me and that I need to do more of this. I think that this makes your heart strong and I like the feeling of being aware of my physical heart.

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Jo stated that she was impressed with the loving-heart practice:

It was pleasant. I felt warmth, love and tenderness in my heart. I also had the feeling of how much I love my family. I do not often open up to my family, even though I love them, but I do not really tell them about how I feel.

Trish was quiet and did not say much in our meetings. It was hard to read her facial expressions, and we (researchers) thought that she was not really "into" the mindfulness programme. When we asked her directly towards the end of the programme what she thought about using mindfulness, she said, "oh it's good, the kids really enjoy it, and it reduces their anxiety". While she did not say anything about her own experience, we were pleased that she noticed the benefits for the children.

Usefulness of mindful practices

All four teachers thought that the some of the mindfulness practices were appropriate to use in their classroom teaching and that they could help with stress and anxiety. Three teachers stated that their own levels of stress had lowered and that they felt more calmness in their life. Teachers were asked how useful each mindfulness practice was and they provided some interesting feedback.

The teachers were unified in their responses. It appears that they found the core breathing practice, the heart attention practice, and the body scan "very useful" practices that they believed could be carried out in the classroom. They also felt that that the core practice would be quick and easy to carry out anywhere in the classroom. In discussion Kay stated that she felt the core breathing practice:

was easy and useful to include in her daily classroom practice ... When it's been a busy day and everyone is tired, I can quickly tell everyone, let's just close our eyes and focus on our breath for a few minutes ... They know what to do now and it's just great.

Jo commented, "I liked the way you showed us how to sit in our heart, to me that was really nice and soothing". Cath said, "I really enjoyed the body scan, it's not

something I'd would use every day, you would really need everyone on the mat or in the hall, but it's a really nice way to end a day, I think I'll keep using that one."

Mindful eating and mindful listening were two practices that were considered useful to the teachers. The mindful-eating practice, which involved slowly eating a raisin or piece of chocolate, is inherently an enjoyable practice, but doing this activity slowly was a first for many children. Many children exclaimed in joy about the texture, the sensations and feelings associated with eating the chocolate. Teachers thought that it was appropriate to eat food slowly and mindfully. As Jo explained, "especially with all this focus on too much sugar and the obesity problems, I think it's important for children to pay attention to what they are eating, to slow down and focus on their food".

When discussing mindful listening all of the teachers thought that mindfully listening would help the children to focus their attention and make them aware of different sounds.

The mindful movement exercises, including mindful movement to music, mindful walking, and yoga poses, were thought to be not so useful. Discussion on these activities suggested that the teachers could not see the point or relevance of doing these activities in their busy schedule. Kay said, "I'm not a yoga teacher, so I won't be doing them!" Their discussion and expressions showed that they were not interested in these activities. The researchers perceived this was also because the children in their classes got lots of physical activity and therefore these activities were not necessary or valuable enough to add to the classroom schedule.

Reading stories on themes such as compassion and empathy was another activity that was rated as being not so useful. During the reading sessions it appeared to be difficult for the children to stay focused. The teachers also commented that maybe there were too many activities and that the stories were too difficult for the children to understand. Kay stated, "I think perhaps the stories were a bit too difficult for the children and perhaps they could not hear the narrator's voice which was quite soft". The researchers felt that the stories read from *Pebble for Your Pocket* by Thich Nhat Hanh (2013) may have been too

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long and its Eastern and ethereal flavour not suitable for the children in New Zealand.

Classroom experiences

When asked about whether the mindfulness practices made a difference to the classroom, Cath stated that she had been practising the listening and the core practice every day, and that it was making a difference:

I'm so glad you're doing this, it has had a real effect on some of my children, particularly D, he is really benefitting and I can see that he is really listening. His Mum is really excited that he is doing the practices at home and he is telling her that she should be doing them too.

Kay stated, "I'm getting so much out of these sessions, I'm using lots of mindfulness in my classroom, we've been listening to mindfulness videos, and I'm now doing mindful art sessions, the children love it". This feedback was very important to us as researchers as it showed that some were able to interpret the essence of the mindfulness activities, and could potentially become confident to adapt and design their own activities.

Cath stated towards the end of the sessions, that she would like to keep using certain practices as she thought the children found it helpful. Cath said, "the children wanted to make those glitter jars that you brought in". When questioned she added, "I asked the children why, and they said that they thought they were pretty". A child in her class said, "you have to shake them and just watch, all the swirling settles down, it's like your brain, it calms you, like snow falling". Another child also thought they would make good presents. She said to her teacher, "I think Mum would love this, and it might make her more relaxed".

Another teacher mentioned how she was now using sound to bring the class to attention. She had tried a range of sounds but liked the Tibetan-type bell which has a soothing sound. She said, "it took a while, I have to strike it a few times, but they're (children) getting used to it now and it's better than having to raise my voice all the time". Jo stated that she had instructed the children to be quiet when they heard the bell, but also to listen until they could no longer hear the sound. "It seems to centre them, they know that they have to stop talking, but it's also a sort of gentle reminder to come back and listen to me, rather than me shouting or growling at them, it's much nicer."

While the teachers did not carry out any empathy-type activities, it appeared that some of their comments suggested that they were in fact using strategies to calm the children that were more empathetic and compassionate. By using Tibetan bells and other mindful practices, teachers seemed to be unconsciously shifting their awareness and using compassion in their practices.

When asking teachers how we could have improved the activities for the children, teachers had some important suggestions to make. First, we were told to keep the activities very simple, and that we should repeat the activities before introducing a new activity. This is important as children could get confused by the range of activities. Teachers also felt that it was important to explain the reasons behind each activity so that the children would understand how it would affect their brain and consequently their mind and emotions. Another suggestion from the teachers at the end of the programme was that they would prefer to have learnt the mindfulness activities without the children. They stated that during the activities they were aware that they should be maintaining a good level of behaviour from the children in the room, and that this distracted them from their own practice.

Discussion: Implications for teachers

By creating opportunities for stillness, awareness, and calmness it appeared that many of the activities undertaken in the 6-week programme enhanced both teachers' and children's wellbeing. Having the opportunity to be still and aware of one's body and mind, without distractions, allowed teachers to pay attention or focus on themselves. Becoming aware or recognising when their breath was shallow and tense and knowing how to make it deep and calm was an important realisation for them. For all four teachers, slowing down or stopping thoughts from continually coming in was another experience gained from the mindfulness activities. As Cath stated, "It's made me realize how chaotic and full on I am, all the time, rushing around, I now want my classroom to have more quiet times and I want my children to take time to actually just breathe and relax their brains."

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) emphasises the importance of mental and emotional wellbeing, and including mindfulness in the classroom may well be considered integral to understanding one's mind and emotions. While it appears that the teachers in this study found the moving mindfulness-based practices not so useful, it is important that teachers first develop their own practice and experience its effects so that they can teach their class from a place of authenticity.

As mentioned above, a limitation of the study was having the teachers learn alongside the children. Although there were benefits from this method (e.g., a clear role modelling of each practice and answers given to a wide range of questions from the children), having to be aware of the overall behaviour of the children during each session was a distraction and did not provide an optimal

experience for the teachers. We suggest that teachers learn mindfulness outside the classroom from a professional program in a group setting. It is important that teachers are able to ask questions and get feedback on their own practice.

Maintaining a home practice will also help make the teacher more effective at teaching mindfulness to children. While there are many videos on the internet, our experience suggests that a regular group practice in the beginning is more effective. Teachers will then feel more confident and comfortable integrating mindfulness based practices in their own classroom. It is hoped that these findings will plant seeds in the school community of the positive benefits of mindfulness.

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