

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i Gwella Iechyd Emosiynol ac Iechyd Meddwl Plant a Phobl Ifanc | Inquiry into The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People EMH 07

Ymateb gan: Mindful Schools Cymru

Response from: Mindful Schools Wales

***Links with Education (emotional intelligence and healthy coping mechanisms): The potential contribution of mindfulness***

**Introduction**

1. Mindfulness presents a significant opportunity to boost the wellbeing of children and their teachers, and the development of the new Curriculum for Wales has the potential to provide the context in which this could reach the majority of children and young people in Wales over the next few years.

2. Well conducted mindfulness interventions have been shown to be capable of addressing the problems of the young people who take part, and **improve their wellbeing, reduce worries, anxiety, distress, reactivity and bad behaviour, improve sleep, self esteem, and bring about greater calmness, relaxation, and self-regulation and awareness**. Adolescents who are mindful, either through temperament or training, tend to experience greater well-being; and mindfulness correlates positively with positive emotion, popularity and friendship- extensiveness, and negatively with negative emotion and anxiety (Miners, 2008).

3. Mindfulness programmes for staff show reductions in stress, burnout and anxiety, including a reduction in days off work and feelings of task and time pressure, improved ability to manage thoughts and behaviour, an increase in coping skills, motivation, planning and problem solving, and taking more time to relax.

**Mindful Schools Wales**

4. Mindful Schools Wales is a group including teachers in schools and working across schools who have been trained to deliver recognised programmes of mindfulness for pupils in schools. All these teachers have participated in at least an 8 week mindfulness course and developed their own regular mindfulness practice over time. Many have gone on to undertake further training to enable them to develop their practice and skills further and to teach a range of programmes for children and adults. The group is committed to expanding provision across Wales and continuing to enhance the quality of teaching of mindfulness in schools.

5. In many areas, Mindful Schools Wales members work closely with Healthy Schools Wales Coordinators to secure training for school staff and contribute to schools' Healthy Schools Accreditation. Other partners in different areas

include all types of school, Communities First, the NUT, Education Consortia, local authorities, universities, local libraries and others. Cluster groups of schools have also begun to work with Mindful Schools Wales members to plan and implement a strategic longer term approach to introducing mindfulness across a catchment area. We would be very happy to facilitate a visit by members of the Committee to one or more of the schools involved to enable them to see the potential first hand.

6. Mindful Schools Wales welcomes the CYPE Committee's investigation into the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales and offers the following information in support.

### **The Impact of Mindfulness on Children**

7. Specific programmes for introducing mindfulness in schools are still relatively recent and research into the impact on children and young people is still at a relatively early stage. However, early indications from a number of studies with young people in schools show an improvement in:

- Psychological health
- Attention
- Behaviour
- Social skills
- Academic engagement
- Emotional regulation
- Test anxiety

*'Systematic Review of Mindfulness Based Interventions for Youth in School Settings' Mindfulness, 6(1).* (Felver, J. et al 2015).

8. Initial research on mindfulness with primary aged school children indicates improvements in cognitive performance and improvements in wellbeing. The research in Wales has shown less negative affectivity in children trained in mindfulness as well as improvements in metacognition. It has also shown an increase over time in attention and focus. These findings apply across the board but the research shows a disproportionate benefit for those children with most need.

9. We have over 30 years of evidence on the impact of mindfulness on adults, and the body of research with children and young people is growing. Bangor University has already made a significant contribution to the body of research evidence with children and continues this work especially in relation to the implementation of the new programmes. These programmes, *Paws b* and *The Present*, have been designed in Wales for primary aged children with specific regard to the evidence from neuroscience about the development of the brain, and its neuroplasticity.

10. The .b (Dot bee) programme for secondary schools has shown similar results and is now the subject of the large scale MYRIAD research project carried out by Oxford University and funded by The Wellcome Trust  
<http://myriadproject.org/>

11. Research evidence can be found at <http://mindfulbrain.bangor.ac.uk> and <https://mindfulnessinschools.org>

12. Anecdotal evidence from schools across Wales where one of the programmes has been introduced shows that children of all abilities enjoy the course, and most find the “toolkit” of mindfulness practices they acquire helps them in a range of situations in and out of school in their wellbeing and their performance. The programmes include aspects of neuroscience which enable pupils to understand how their thoughts, feelings and body sensations influence their behaviour and to help them work with these to improve their self-regulation and enhance their enjoyment of life.

13. For example, pupils learn how to recognise their own reactions when they are subject to a “fight, flight or freeze” situation and know they have tools to help them to calm themselves to enable them to respond in a more appropriate way. Children report being able to use this effectively and it provides an in-depth language for staff to use in discussing behaviour and reactions. They also learn about the positive impact on themselves of being kind and expressing gratitude and they can recognise the rewards in terms of good feelings generated by an act of kindness or from expressing thanks. They learn ways to savour pleasant experiences and how to escape the cycle of negative thoughts. These and many other complex concepts are presented in engaging and interactive ways.

14. More and more schools – primary and secondary - are expressing interest and developing a strategy to introduce mindfulness. Where mindfulness has been introduced the anecdotal evidence from staff and pupils exemplifies the research findings so far. The groundswell of interest in mindfulness is fuelled by the positive experiences of schools who are already involved.

### **Mindfulness and Successful Futures**

15. Work is now beginning on the detailed development of the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience, but the identification of three overarching domains of mind, body and emotions as the basis for good health and wellbeing provide a link with mindfulness which could ensure all children in Wales can benefit from access to the potential skills and understanding. This is a major opportunity to provide children and young people throughout Wales experiences to enhance their emotional intelligence and healthy coping mechanisms as well as their learning.

16. The teams developing Successful Futures looked at mindfulness at an early stage in the development of the new curriculum, particularly its potential in supporting critical thinking, values and growth mindset. *Four Dimensional Education* (Fadel et al, 2015) was one of the significant influences in these early stages, and mindfulness heads the list of attributes under the dimension of Character. The work is still developing but the recognition of the potential contribution of mindfulness is welcome.

17. The July report from Strand 2 of the new Curriculum development shows that there is significant potential within the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience for mindfulness to form a specific aspect of the detailed curriculum. The Pioneer Schools are currently looking at this detail in the development of Strand 3.

### **The potential of whole school mindfulness – “Mindful Schools”**

18. The atmosphere and environment of a school provide the context in which emotional intelligence can flourish and healthy coping mechanisms can be developed and put into practice. Children, especially when they are vulnerable, are sensitive to and affected by the relationships, behaviour and attitudes of those working with them. It has been said that “they hear your music, not your words.” We know that there are high levels of anxiety and stress within the teaching profession and recognise the pressures on schools.

19. A number of primary schools in Wales have enabled all or most staff to participate in the basic 8 week mindfulness course .b Foundations, and are working towards training relevant staff to deliver Paws b and The Present as an intrinsic part of the curriculum throughout the school. Schools with this critical mass of staff who are familiar with and participants in mindfulness have the potential to build mindfulness into the life and work of the school in a way that should have maximum benefit for pupils and staff. There is some encouraging development from schools working within their clusters to develop their capacity to engage their staff and pupils in mindfulness.

20. Mindfulness courses are demonstrably more effective when taught by those who can understand from within what their students are learning, and model and embody the particular qualities that mindfulness develops, such as flexibility, attention, open minded curiosity, kindness, empathy, compassion, acceptance, and patience, in their everyday interactions with children. These are skills and attitudes that underlie all effective engagement with young people: mindfulness for school staff could clearly have the potential to play a central role to play in educational improvement.

21. Studies show that mindfulness can have the following impact for adults:

- reductions in stress, burnout and anxiety, including a reduction in days off work and feelings of task and time pressure, improved ability to manage thoughts and behaviour, an increase in coping skills, motivation, planning and problem solving, and taking more time to relax.
- better mental health including less distress, negative emotion, depression and anxiety.
- greater wellbeing, including life satisfaction, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-compassion and sense of personal growth.
- increased kindness and compassion to others, including greater empathy, tolerance, forgiveness and patience, and less anger and hostility.

- better physical health, including lower blood pressure, declines in cortisol (a stress hormone) and fewer reported physical health problems.
- increased cognitive performance, including the ability to pay attention and focus, make decisions and respond flexibly to challenges.
- enhanced job performance, including better classroom management and organisation, greater ability to prioritise, to see the whole picture, to be more self-motivated and autonomous, to show greater attunement to students' needs, and achieve more supportive relationships with them.

22. Work is currently being undertaken to investigate the option of accreditation of a CPD Pathway which would include an 8 week course, reflecting and then training to teach. A similar Pathway has been developed in Scotland in partnership with organisations such as the General Teaching Council Scotland.

### **Mindfulness for School Leaders**

23. Many organisations have introduced mindfulness for senior leaders to enhance leadership qualities such as being more present, listening actively and having more empathy with staff and their concerns. A recent study by Ashridge Executive specifically with senior executives found those who followed an 8 week course and practised mindfulness during that time experienced significant increases in:

- resilience – self-awareness, self-management, improved sleep
- collaboration – improved empathy, more human, feeling more resilient provides security to help appreciate others
- agility in complexity – changing attitudes to complexity, approaching rather than avoiding, less stressed by not having an immediate solution, more open to different approaches.

<https://www.ashridge.org.uk/faculty-research/research/current-research/research-projects/the-mindful-leader/>

24. William George, a board member for Goldman Sachs recently said “The main business case for (mindfulness) is that if you’re fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people.”

25. These skills will be more important than ever in steering the implementation of Successful Futures, particularly in conjunction with mindfulness for staff and pupils.

### **Mindfulness in Initial Teacher Education (ITE)**

26. The evidence set out above on the benefits for teachers of learning and practising mindfulness strongly suggest that an accredited 8 week course would contribute significantly to the ability of teachers in training to make the most of their training, to handle the challenges they will inevitably face and to enhance the quality of their teaching both during their teaching practice and in their careers.

27. Completion of an 8 week mindfulness course would also enable them to continue their training at a later date to teach one of the mindfulness programmes for children.

28. Several Teacher Training programmes including Cardiff, Trinity St. David, Cardiff and the Vale and Teach First have already included an introduction to mindfulness for their staff and/or students. Feedback from students has been very positive about the impact on their preparation for school placement.

### **Conclusion**

29. There are many reasons why the development of mindfulness for teachers and school staff is a welcome move. Mindfulness has the capacity to improve **staff occupational wellbeing and job satisfaction, improve performance, and reduce the wasted expenditure and human misery represented by the many days of stress related sickness and attrition from the teaching profession.** The evidence base for the beneficial impact of mindfulness on the young is growing rapidly and students clearly need teachers skilled in mindfulness to teach it.

We recognise that there are no silver bullets in this world, but are convinced from the emerging evidence and by first hand experience that mindfulness introduced in a skilled and strategic way by staff who become mindfulness practitioners themselves and lead by example has the potential to make a significant contribution to enhancing the emotional intelligence and emotional health of children and young people in Wales.

30. This is a unique opportunity to bring together the interest of health and education to support the development and implementation of Successful Futures as a vehicle for making this difference. The growing evidence base shows that mindfulness can have a significant preventative effect for children's future mental health.

31. However, there are dangers in expanding provision and we are committed to maintaining the quality and integrity of children's experiences. Wales needs to avoid the danger of short term quick fixes. "McMindfulness" – use of readily available resources without training or understanding of the complexities and potential - will not have the impact we seek and that our children and young people so keenly need.

### **Recommendations**

32. We hope the Committee will consider the following recommendations:

- expanding the availability of training for school staff in primary and secondary schools to enable as many staff as possible across Wales to participate in a basic 8 week mindfulness programme
- creating opportunities for relevant staff from each school to train to teach one of the recognised programmes for children in their age group

- encouraging as many schools as possible to develop a strategy to introduce mindfulness for all their pupils to embed it in school life and to work with local partners to involve parents and communities
- securing the continued involvement of Healthy Schools Coordinators in local development to ensure a strategic approach across each area, and the enhancement of the requirements of the Healthy Schools Network Accreditation Scheme to recognise the significance of mindfulness to children's wellbeing
- supporting the introduction of an accredited 8 week mindfulness course into Initial Teacher Education in Wales.

**Mindful Schools Wales**  
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