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## Claire Kelly

### Mindfulness in Schools Project

At its most basic level, mindfulness equips you with the skill of training the attention by really attending to and focusing on whatever is happening in any given moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founding father of secular mindfulness, described this skill as 'being alive and knowing it'.

But mindfulness is also useful in helping us to address the kinds of worries that we all experience. For young people, they learn how to work skilfully with the stresses and strains of childhood and adolescence without being swept away by them, and these coping skills then remain with them into adulthood.

#### Who is MiSP?

Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP) is a UK charity set up in 2009 by two British teachers, Richard Burnett and Chris Cullen, to promote the use of mindfulness in the classroom. MiSP's main aim is to bring mindfulness to young people and those who care for them.

The first MiSP curriculum developed was *'.b'*. Pronounced 'dot, be', it stands for 'Stop, Breathe and Be'). A ten-week classroom-based course written by teachers for teachers, it sits well within a school's PSHE or Well-Being Programme. The key intention was to provide a mindfulness programme which works well in a traditional classroom context. It includes Powerpoint presentations, worksheets, teacher and student booklets and animations to help encourage students to practice at home. The following are two extracts from the MiSP website about the *'.b'* [curriculum](#):

#### *The 10 lessons*

The *'.b'* curriculum is a set of ten lessons, each teaching a distinct mindfulness skill, and designed to do so in a way which engages young minds. The lessons typically include images and animations

which bring these skills to life and most importantly, practical exercises which teach the core skills and make them relevant to the pupils lives.

Putting mindfulness in a relevant context motivates pupils to become still and allows the teacher to lead them in some short practices – for example learning to sit still and watch the breath, be aware of different parts of the body, walk mindfully or become more aware of how the body feels under stress. After each lesson the pupils are asked to do some 'home practice'. At the core of each 'home practice' is an animation which explains the skill they have learned in the lesson and leads into a guided practice. The animations are available at <http://www.dotbe.org/>.

#### *'.b' aims to help young people*

- To experience greater well-being (e.g. feel happier, calmer, more fulfilled)
- To fulfil their potential and pursue their own goals e.g. be more creative, more relaxed, academically, personally
- To improve their concentration and focus, in classes, in exams and tests, on the sports field, when playing games, when paying attention and listening to others
- To work with difficult mental states such as depressive, ruminative and anxious thoughts and low moods
- To cope with the everyday stresses and strains of adolescent life such as exams, relationships, sleep problems, family issues

However, as we begin to see mindfulness being embedded in schools more broadly, there are more examples of mindfulness appearing in other areas of school life, including mainstream curriculum lessons, school clubs, assemblies and even staff meetings.

At the time of writing, the '.b' curriculum has been translated into 13 languages and is being taught in more than 40 countries, in traditional school settings, but also in other contexts such as community and youth groups, pupil referral units, young offenders' institutions and even to gang members.

### **Paws b**

A further curriculum (Paws b), aimed at children aged 7-11 year, works with similar themes to '.b', but with age-appropriate practices, discussion, and lively film clips. The course also involves a considerable amount of neuroscience. Young children really enjoy finding out about the very instrument of their learning – the brain. The following is an extract from the MiSP website about the [Paws b curriculum](#):

#### *What will children learn?*

- They learn about parts of the brain known to be affected by mindfulness practice, and what effect this might have on their own experience
- Ways to steady themselves when their mind/body is busy or out of balance
- Ways to respond rather than react – and therefore take best care of themselves
- Ways to relate to their thinking processes and how these may have an impact on their emotions and body states
- Ways that mindfulness can support them in the activities and relationships in their lives

### **Staff development**

We also emphasise the importance of staff developing their own mindfulness practice as part of the process of bringing mindfulness into schools. '.b' Foundations is an 8-week training for teachers and staff who wish to learn the foundations of mindfulness. The course has proven effective in over 280 schools across the UK and abroad. The training is designed with staff in mind, and the particular challenges they may be familiar with working in educational settings. It offers an alternative to traditional Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) courses, with shorter sessions and home practice designed to be accessible for busy educational staff.

Through staff learning about mindfulness in

their school alongside colleagues, they are both in a better position to train to teach young people mindfulness skills, but also to feel the benefits for themselves through reduced stress, a greater sense of wellbeing, and a more mental space for creative thinking and teaching. Results from one study, into the efficacy of a mindfulness-based intervention for teachers to reduce stress and improve well-being, showed that, "... *In light of the reported stress levels among teachers, and given the unique role of teachers as health promoters within the school system, the findings of this study point to a promising intervention that may be capable of supporting teachers in their work place.*" ([Beshai et al. 2015](#)).

### **What is the evidence that mindfulness does any good?**

There is a growing and sound evidence base, based on the most rigorous of research methods, the randomised control trial (RCT), for the impacts of mindfulness for adults – not surprising given that adult groups were the first groups to trial mindfulness in a secular context. Most aspects of wellbeing show positive result: on physical health problems such as pain, blood pressure and the immune function; on mental health such as depression, anxiety, and stress; and on cognitive development such as executive function, attention, and metacognition.

While work involving mindfulness with young people is relatively recent, there is a growing body of evidence relating to the potential benefits of mindfulness for children generally but also specifically relating to primary schools. In particular, a research study at Bangor University - [Mindfulness-based interventions in schools](#) - and a systematic review and meta-analysis by [Zenner et al., \(2014\)](#) - involving the Paws b curriculum, identified that pupils who were taught the course experienced increased positive attitudes towards their learning after the lessons compared to the pupils who weren't taught the course. There were also significant improvements in meta-cognition and improvements in emotional well-being.

Feedback from children who have taken part in Paws b is very positive. The children report enjoying the lessons and finding the learning supports them in a broad range of situations from being able to concentrate and focus more easily in school to helping them feel calmer in exams and competitions. Many have described sharing the

learning with other family members and finding it helps them with their relationships with family and friends.

Professor Katherine Weare stated in her review, [Evidence for the Impact of Mindfulness on Children and Young People, in 2012](#), '.....there are promising results that, taken together, and with the strong support from the substantial work with adults and on social and emotional learning more generally, suggest that for schools to engage in mindfulness is likely to have beneficial results on the emotional wellbeing, mental health, ability to learn and even the physical health of their students. Such interventions are relatively cheap to introduce, have an impact fairly quickly, can fit into a wide range of contexts and above all are enjoyable and civilising, for pupils and staff.'

Weare reports on a number of mindfulness studies with children and young people including:

[Flook et al., \(2010\)](#) reviewed the "Inner Kids" mindfulness-skills programme which has been taught around the world. Evaluation with 7 to 9 year-olds produced parent and teacher-rated improvements in so called 'executive function' (which refers to the ability to problem solve, plan, initiate and control and monitor one's own actions, to pay attention, be mentally flexible and multi-task, and to employ verbal reasoning). Those with lower pre-course self-regulation were observed to experience greatest improvements in behavioural regulation, meta-cognition and executive function.

To view published studies, involving school-based mindfulness evidence, please visit Professor Weare's [review](#) and the research page of the [MiSP website](#).

## MYRIAD

The national research programme 'My resilience in adolescence' ([MYRIAD](#)), which started in 2015, will address some of the uncertainties that remain around the evidence relating to young people and mindfulness, using enhanced study designs and samples large and representative enough to answer the questions. It aims to investigate the effectiveness of school-based mindfulness training as a means of preparing young people to manage their emotional health and improving resilience. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, a series of linked research projects will recruit over 25,000 young people to examine the impact of mindfulness training, with follow ups of up to 2 years.

The MYRIAD programme is led by Mark Williams and Willem Kuyken of the University of Oxford, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore of University College London, and Tim Dalgleish of the Medical Research Council in Cambridge. It brings together an international team on each of its three themes.

## What is the importance of mindfulness in 2017?

In many ways, the rationale for practising mindfulness today is the same as it has been for the past 2500 years. In 'Paradise Lost', John Milton puts it beautifully: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.."

Our minds can be our greatest allies or our worst enemies. Our mind is the portal through which we experience life, so it makes sense to understand its 'natural tendencies', and train it in a way that allows us to fully access its potential and to understand its less helpful tendencies.

Most people would agree that the pace of life is on the increase. Many acknowledge that they spend their days feeling driven by an incessant sense of urgency as they work through a list of goals, often ending each day feeling exhausted, waking the next day to simply start it all again. What results is a sense of life passing us by as we are driven by a perpetual need to plan ahead or reflect back, whilst often in a highly self-critical state of mind.

The chance of us changing the speed and scale of what is demanded of us at work, school or at home is slight. However, we have within us the capacity to change our relationship with what life can throw at us.

Being mindful makes it easier to savour the pleasures in life as they occur, helps you become fully engaged in activities, and creates a greater capacity to deal with adverse events. These are skills that we can all learn, and if young people can learn them early on, they will have them to take through life.

## More information

To learn more about how to get mindfulness into your school visit the [MiSP website](#).

MiSP works in partnership with [Oxford University's Mindfulness Centre](#)

MiSP was part of the advisory group for the Education strand of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Mindfulness, which in October 2015 launched its report: '[Mindful Nation](#)'.