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What is the impact of mindfulness practices on pupil engagement and academic performance in primary school?

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Word count – 6,000

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons) Primary Education (5-11) with QTS

York St John University School of Education, Language and Psychology June 2025

June 2025

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Acknowledgments

This project is dedicated to my Mum and Dad. Your support and belief in me have meant everything. Mum, I once set out to prove teaching was not for me, but instead I found my passion. I am proud to follow in your footsteps. Dad, your resilience has shaped how I face challenges. To Niall, thank you for your unwavering love and for making the distance feel smaller. To my placement schools and YSJ staff, thank you for inspiring me to grow. I am also grateful to my friends for the laughter, memories and constant support throughout.

Acronyms

CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

SATs – Standard Assessment Tests in Year 6

SE2 – School Experience 2

SEL – Social-Emotional Learning

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SDT – Self-Determination Theory

PSHE – Personal, Social, Health and Economic education

What is the impact of mindfulness practices on pupil engagement and academic performance in primary school?

Introduction

Maintaining pupil engagement has become an increasing challenge in primary schools, particularly amid the growing demands placed on both pupils and teachers in Key Stage 1 and 2 classrooms, including intensified curriculum expectations (Jerrim, 2021; Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan, 2023; Solvason et al., 2023). In response, there has been growing interest in mindfulness as a strategy to improve classroom environments. Research suggests such practices foster calmer, more focused spaces by supporting emotional regulation and sustained attention (Zhang et al., 2021; Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Wilson, 2024).

However, few studies have examined the specific impact of mindfulness on engagement and academic performance in UK primary settings. This is especially true for short structured techniques lasting under five minutes, designed to integrate smoothly into the school day without disrupting curriculum delivery (Nelson et al., 2021). The Department for Education (2025) underscores the importance of nurturing pupils' emotional wellbeing alongside academic growth, while Ofsted's inspection framework includes personal development as a key judgement area (Ofsted, 2023).

This research was inspired by my SE2 placement, where brief mindfulness tasks supported SATs preparation. I observed that these techniques helped pupils reset between lessons, prompting my interest in their wider potential. To explore this, the

study adopts an action research approach to investigate the effects of mindfulness on pupil engagement and academic progress. Over a six-week period I implemented daily activities including mindful breathing, body scanning and the five senses exercise. These were selected for their short duration and ease of integration into the school day, allowing for consistent implementation. Data was gathered through teacher questionnaires and classroom observations, providing both qualitative and quantitative insight.

The findings indicate that short mindfulness strategies can enhance pupil engagement and may support academic performance. These outcomes offer practical methods for promoting wellbeing and learning in the primary classroom.

Literature review

This literature review examines the foundations and research on mindfulness in education, focusing on three key areas: theoretical frameworks, the relationship between mindfulness and pupil engagement, and its impact on academic performance. It identifies conceptual gaps in the literature and emphasises the need for further investigation into how mindfulness supports engagement and learning in primary schools. The review is structured around an exploration of the underpinning theories, followed by an analysis of mindfulness in relation to engagement, and finally, its influence on academic performance.

Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Frameworks for Mindfulness

Mindfulness, which has its roots in Buddhist traditions, is commonly defined as paying purposeful, non-judgemental attention to the present moment (Singh, 2023). Although often used interchangeably, mindfulness and meditation are not synonymous. Schuman-Olivier et al. (2020) note that not all meditation is mindful and not all mindfulness involves meditation. Behan (2020) further explains that meditation is an umbrella term encompassing techniques such as focused concentration through mantras, whereas mindfulness specifically emphasises present-moment awareness.

According to Greenwalt and Nguyen (2019), the integration of mindfulness into education can be traced back to the philosophies of learning theorists such as John Dewey. Emphasising experiential learning and reflection, Dewey advocated for approaches that engage learners actively and connect them meaningfully with their

experiences. This connection is particularly relevant in primary settings, where learning is often sensory and embodied. Mindfulness activities such as body scanning and the five senses exercise exemplify this, as they encourage pupils to attend to their bodily sensations and remain present in the moment. This belief in learning through lived experience also aligns with Vygotsky's view that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and later internalised to support self-regulation and reflective thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). Through scaffolded experiences, pupils gradually develop awareness of their internal states and begin to manage their learning more independently (Taber, 2018).

Building on this foundation, Sutradhar (2024) highlights the alignment between experiential learning and reflective practice, both of which underpin personal growth and academic development. Mindfulness, through its emphasis on awareness and acceptance of present thoughts and feelings, also complements Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) (Baer, 2003; Hofmann and Gómez, 2017). Although CBT was originally developed for psychiatric contexts (Shapiro et al., 2019), its core principles such as self-regulation and resilience have been effectively adapted to educational settings, including secondary school classrooms in Brazil (Chiodelli et al., 2018).

Diamond (2024) argues that integrating mindfulness in schools promotes emotional stability, helping pupils manage stress and challenges such as returning to school post-COVID-19. These benefits extend to improved concentration, reduced anxiety and strengthened problem-solving skills (Hofmann et al., 2010; Zenner, Herrleben-Kurz and Walach, 2014). When applied in educational contexts, mindfulness aligns closely with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks. According to the Education Endowment Foundation (2021), SEL aims to build pupils' capacity to

regulate emotions and make thoughtful decisions. It prioritises social and emotional skill development which research shows contributes to academic attainment and classroom engagement (Gimbert et al., 2021). Lawson et al. (2019) identify five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

The integration of mindfulness into SEL is further supported by statutory guidance from the Department for Education (2021), which advocates for strategies that enhance pupils' wellbeing, self-regulation and emotional literacy. These are areas in which mindfulness practices are particularly effective. However, systematic reviews have raised concerns about the effectiveness of whole-school SEL programmes. Goldberg et al. (2019), for instance, found only modest impacts ($d = 0.22$), while others critique the lack of clarity surrounding what constitutes a whole-school approach, with implementation often varying across settings (Mogren, Gericke and Scherp, 2018; Chu and Dearmond, 2021). Similarly, mindfulness programmes delivered at a whole school level have sometimes shown limited effect sizes (Weare, 2019).

Despite these limitations, specific mindfulness practices remain valuable tools within SEL. Guided breathing can support self-management, body scans enhance self-awareness, and the five senses exercise cultivates attention and shared presence (Griffith, 2022). These strategies foster resilience and reflective thinking while also strengthening empathy and compassion. These skills are central to relationship building and social awareness (Lawlor, 2016).

Building on this, the application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) further illustrates the motivational benefits of mindfulness. According to Deci and Ryan (2022), SDT is based on three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

When these needs are met, pupils are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, which involves engaging in activities for their inherent interest and enjoyment (Moller and Deci, 2014). Mindfulness encourages learners to manage their emotions independently, supporting autonomy. As they gain focus and emotional control, their sense of competence and self-efficacy also increases (Hutmacher et al., 2022). Additionally, by promoting empathy and social connection, mindfulness enhances pupils' sense of relatedness (Centeno and Fernandez, 2020). In this way, mindfulness supports sustained engagement and fosters a classroom climate that promotes personal growth, collaboration and meaningful participation in learning (Ryan, Donald and Bradshaw, 2021).

Although existing research demonstrates the benefits of mindfulness in education, many studies focus on secondary or American school contexts, with limited attention given to younger pupils in UK primary settings (Waters et al., 2014; MalboeufHurtubise et al., 2016). Furthermore, much of the literature evaluates interventions delivered over extended periods or by external specialists, which reduces its applicability to day-to-day classroom practice. Few studies incorporate pupil voice or examine the impact of short teacher-led activities (Thomas and Atkinson, 2017). This highlights a gap that the current research addresses by evaluating brief, daily mindfulness practices that are co-constructed with children and embedded into an existing classroom routine.

In summary, while CBT, SEL and SDT offer strong foundations for supporting pupils' academic and emotional development, ongoing evaluation is needed to ensure their effective and equitable use across diverse settings. This informs the present study, which examines how mindfulness can enhance pupil engagement and achievement in primary schools.

The Relationship Between Mindfulness and Pupil Engagement

Mindfulness practices and pupil engagement have become a prominent focus in educational research (Wu and Zhao, 2023). As Bond and Bedenlier (2019) explain, pupil engagement refers to the attention, interest and effort pupils apply to learning, including their cognitive strategies and mental focus. It is demonstrated through active participation, sustained concentration and a willingness to persevere with tasks. Conversely, disengagement involves diminished interest and effort, leading to reduced attention and withdrawal from classroom activities, which can undermine learning behaviours (Kong et al., 2024). Although much of the existing research centres on higher education, the underlying principles of engagement apply equally to primaryaged pupils, who also depend on foundational cognitive and emotional skills for effective learning (Department for Education, 2024; Zieher et al., 2024).

Mindfulness, defined as the intentional focus on the present moment while calmly acknowledging distractions (Zelazo and Lyons, 2011), is increasingly associated with improved attention and emotional development. It strengthens executive functions such as self-regulation, sustained focus and inhibitory control, all of which support positive learning behaviours (Erten and Güneş, 2024). These skills contribute to better organisation, perseverance and concentration during classroom tasks (Flook et al., 2024), while also enhancing working memory and attentional capacity, enabling pupils to retain information more effectively (Bailey et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

Mindfulness-based interventions, as Phan et al. (2022) observe, are effective in reducing cognitive overload, which can arise from excessive information or environmental distractions such as background noise or frequent task transitions (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Sígolo and Casarin, 2024). This overload can lead to

frustration and stress, ultimately contributing to disengagement. Mindfulness encourages more regulated emotional responses, promoting calmness and enabling pupils to maintain focus during learning. Channawar (2023) further highlights that these benefits extend beyond immediate improvements in attention, fostering a broader emotional readiness to learn.

Practical techniques, including body scans, guided breathing and mindful movement, provide pupils with tools to manage stress, impulsivity and emotional disruption. These strategies help pupils reset following moments of challenge and contribute to emotional resilience, making it easier to participate consistently across varied classroom activities (Eva and Thayer, 2017; Murphy et al., 2022). Additionally, mindfulness supports the development of positive coping mechanisms, helping reduce anxiety and cultivate a secure emotional environment in which pupils are more confident to take part in learning (Weare, 2013; Moulder, 2023).

In summary, mindfulness supports pupil engagement by enhancing concentration, emotional control and behavioural preparedness. By equipping pupils to manage both internal and external challenges, it fosters greater focus, motivation and a consistent willingness to participate in learning.

The Impact of Mindfulness on Academic Performance

Mindfulness has become an increasingly valuable practice in educational settings, offering broad benefits for academic development. By encouraging a holistic approach to learning, it supports pupils' cognitive, emotional and social growth, helping them navigate the demands of school life with greater confidence (Rybska and Błaszak, 13

2020). As pupils develop the ability to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, they become better equipped to meet the challenges of modern education.

Incorporating mindfulness into daily classroom routines allows teachers to cultivate a learning environment that promotes concentration and cooperation, both of which are linked to improved academic outcomes (Sheinman and Russo-Netzer, 2021). The capacity to sustain attention during complex tasks is strongly associated with achievement, and pupils who are able to regulate their focus are more likely to understand and retain new information. Furthermore, mindfulness supports effective group work by improving pupils' communication and interpersonal awareness (LeviKeren, Godeano-Barr and Levinas, 2021).

Research also indicates that mindfulness fosters essential life skills such as selfmanagement, emotional control and reflective thinking. These abilities contribute to both academic progress and personal development (Dvořáková, Greenberg and Roeser, 2019). Pupils are encouraged to pause before reacting, respond thoughtfully to challenges and remain calm in situations of stress or frustration (Hourihan, 2024). With the use of strategies such as guided breathing, body scans and mindful movement, pupils can manage emotional and behavioural responses, allowing for consistent engagement with classroom activities (Eva and Thayer, 2017; Murphy et al., 2022).

Mindfulness has also been associated with enhanced cognitive flexibility, which supports creativity, innovation and problem-solving. These skills are particularly valuable in subjects such as mathematics, science and the arts, where imaginative thinking is often required (Jha, Krompinger and Baime, 2007; Charness, Le Bihan and

Villeval, 2024; Ünsal, 2024). By alleviating stress, mindfulness encourages a clear and focused mindset, enabling pupils to explore learning tasks with confidence and curiosity.

In addition to cognitive development, mindfulness strengthens the social and emotional foundations of learning. Pupils gain empathy, patience and respect for others, which contribute to a positive classroom culture where everyone feels valued (Hölzel et al., 2011; Barr, 2016). Supportive peer relationships enhance emotional wellbeing and promote collaboration, creating conditions that sustain academic progress (Clarke et al., 2015). Pupils who feel emotionally secure are more likely to participate actively and meaningfully in lessons (Keng, Smoski and Robins, 2011). Mindfulness also supports key cognitive functions including attention, memory and executive control, helping pupils to stay engaged and manage learning demands effectively (Indriaswuri et al., 2023). By reducing the mental strain caused by stress and anxiety, it allows for improved clarity and task performance (Shareefa et al., 2025). Finally, mindfulness promotes self-awareness and self-regulation. These skills enable pupils to manage distractions and maintain attention, even when faced with challenging academic material (Alomari, 2023). In doing so, it contributes to sustained effort, improved task completion and stronger outcomes in subjects such as reading and mathematics.

This literature review has shown that mindfulness is grounded in established frameworks such as CBT, SEL and SDT, each demonstrating its potential to enhance pupil engagement and wellbeing. Research suggests it strengthens attention, selfregulation and emotional resilience, supporting active participation in learning. When integrated into schools, it can help address barriers like cognitive overload and

stress. While concerns remain about whole-school scalability, current evidence supports mindfulness as an effective strategy for engagement. The literature also stresses the need for flexible, context-specific delivery. This foundation informs the current study's focus on its practical impact in UK primary classrooms.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study explored the impact of mindfulness practices on pupil engagement and academic performance in primary schools. An action research approach was chosen for its cyclical structure of planning, implementation, observation and reflection (Oosthuizen, 2002; Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). This method suits classroom-based research, allowing for adaptive strategies that can inform wider practice (Mertler, 2021).

The intervention was delivered over four cycles. Cycle One served as a baseline. Cycle Two introduced body scanning, selected due to known implementation challenges (Crescentini et al., 2016). Cycle Three focused on mindful breathing, and Cycle Four combined the five senses activity with pupil-led delivery. Each cycle included reflection and refinement in line with the action research model.

Participants and Data Collection

Before the main study, fourteen anonymous teachers from Northern Ireland and England provided baseline perspectives on classroom mindfulness (see Appendix B). While this offered valuable initial insights, anonymity may have limited the accuracy of responses due to a lack of accountability (Lelkes et al., 2012).

The primary research was conducted in an urban primary school in Scarborough with six Year 4 pupils from my class, who volunteered to participate. While this convenience sampling was practical, it limits the generalisability of findings (Andrade, 2021). The group included three girls and three boys aged 8 to 9, each of whom selected a

pseudonym: Rosie, Edward, Castly, Ali, Milly and Ocean. Assigning pseudonyms is a commonly used strategy in research with children to reduce power imbalances and ensure ethical participation (Wang et al., 2024). A mixed-methods design was adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of mindfulness. Quantitative data were collected using the Leuven Scale for engagement, which tracked behavioural changes throughout the intervention. Qualitative data included pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, focus group transcripts and open-ended responses, all of which were thematically analysed to identify shifts in emotional regulation and understanding (Alele and Aduli, 2023). This combination of data sources allowed for a more nuanced analysis of pupil development over time.

The focus group completed questionnaires at both the beginning and end of the study, reflecting on their understanding of mindfulness and how they manage emotions, such as sadness (see Appendix C). After the final cycle, they participated in a semistructured discussion supported by colouring pages to help create a calm, childfriendly setting (Holt, Furbert and Sweetingham, 2019). Researcher input during this discussion was intentionally limited to encourage open and authentic pupil responses.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of the research, York St John University granted ethical approval. Written consent was obtained from the headteacher, and passive consent was secured from the guardians of the children in the focus group (see Appendices A1–A3). All participants were informed of the study's purpose through a research proposal form, and verbal assent was obtained from each child. They were also reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage, including during data collection (Dahal, 2024).

I worked within York St John University's ethical guidelines throughout the project (see Appendix A4). As a teacher–researcher, I remained mindful of the influence my dual role might have had on pupil responses and behaviour. To mitigate this, I minimised input during focus group discussions, created informal settings for data collection and encouraged pupils to select pseudonyms. These strategies aimed to reduce power imbalances and foster a sense of autonomy. However, it is possible that some pupils still responded in ways they believed would be viewed favourably. Acknowledging this positionality is important, as it may have shaped engagement and verbal contributions, particularly early in the intervention.

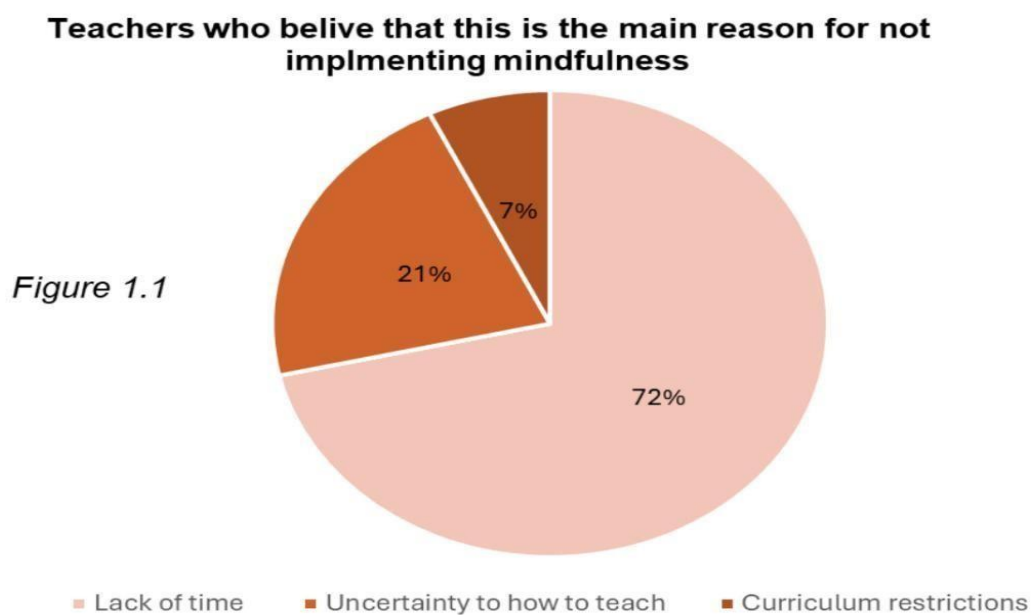
To protect anonymity, previously assigned pseudonyms were used throughout, and all data was handled confidentially. Digital files were stored securely on the YSJU OneDrive, and physical documents were destroyed after digitisation. In line with university policy, data will be deleted upon study completion. Although confidentiality was prioritised, safeguarding protocols were followed where required.

Triangulation was used to strengthen the validity of findings. This included combining multiple data sources, applying thematic coding and sharing interpretations with participants for verification before including them in the dissertation (Turner, 2016). A summary of the findings will be shared with the research supervisor and, if appropriate, with the school gatekeeper (Khan, 2016; BERA, 2024).

Findings

Questionnaire

The teacher questionnaire revealed that while many linked mindfulness to improved focus and emotional regulation, 72% of the 14 respondents cited limited curriculum time as the main barrier. Some also raised concerns about potential behaviour issues. These responses highlight both the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing mindfulness in classrooms (see Figure 1.1).



Observations

This action research study followed a four-cycle process. A pupil focus group met before and after Cycles Two to Four to reflect on their experiences, while questionnaires at the start and end captured changes in understanding and emotional regulation. Pupil observations were recorded using the Leuven Scale, which rates involvement and wellbeing from 1 (low) to 5 (high) (Main, 2021).

Cycle One – Establish current practices

Cycle One established a baseline of pupils' prior experience and understanding of mindfulness. Most reported little to no exposure, aside from occasional activities like mindful colouring, which they did not link to a broader mindfulness approach. Their initial definitions reflected limited understanding. For example, Rosie described it as "*being peaceful*" and Edward as "*sitting still.*" Questionnaire data supported this, with only 1 of 6 pupils (17%) able to define mindfulness accurately at the start, rising to 5 of 6 (83%) by the end. Engagement in early sessions was mixed, with some pupils unsure of what to do and relying on peers. This cycle highlighted the need for structured, explicit mindfulness teaching.

Cycle Two – Body scanning

Cycle Two introduced body scanning as the primary mindfulness activity, with a noticeable improvement in pupil engagement and wellbeing. Sessions followed a consistent structure, fostering familiarity and comfort. Initial pupil feedback showed curiosity but limited understanding.

For example, Milly asked, "*Are you going to bring a big metal machine into school?*" while Ocean added, "*Are you going to give me some metal to test it?*"

As sessions progressed, pupils showed increased stillness, focus and behaviours like closed eyes and controlled breathing. Observations using the Leuven Scale indicated a rise in average involvement from 2.5 to 3.8 and wellbeing from 2.7 to 3.9 (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Involvement levels ranged from 3 to 5, with more pupils consistently reaching Levels 4 and 5 by the end of the cycle.

Leuven Scale Involvement Scores for Each Pupil: Cycle 1 vs Cycle 2 (Dashed Lines)

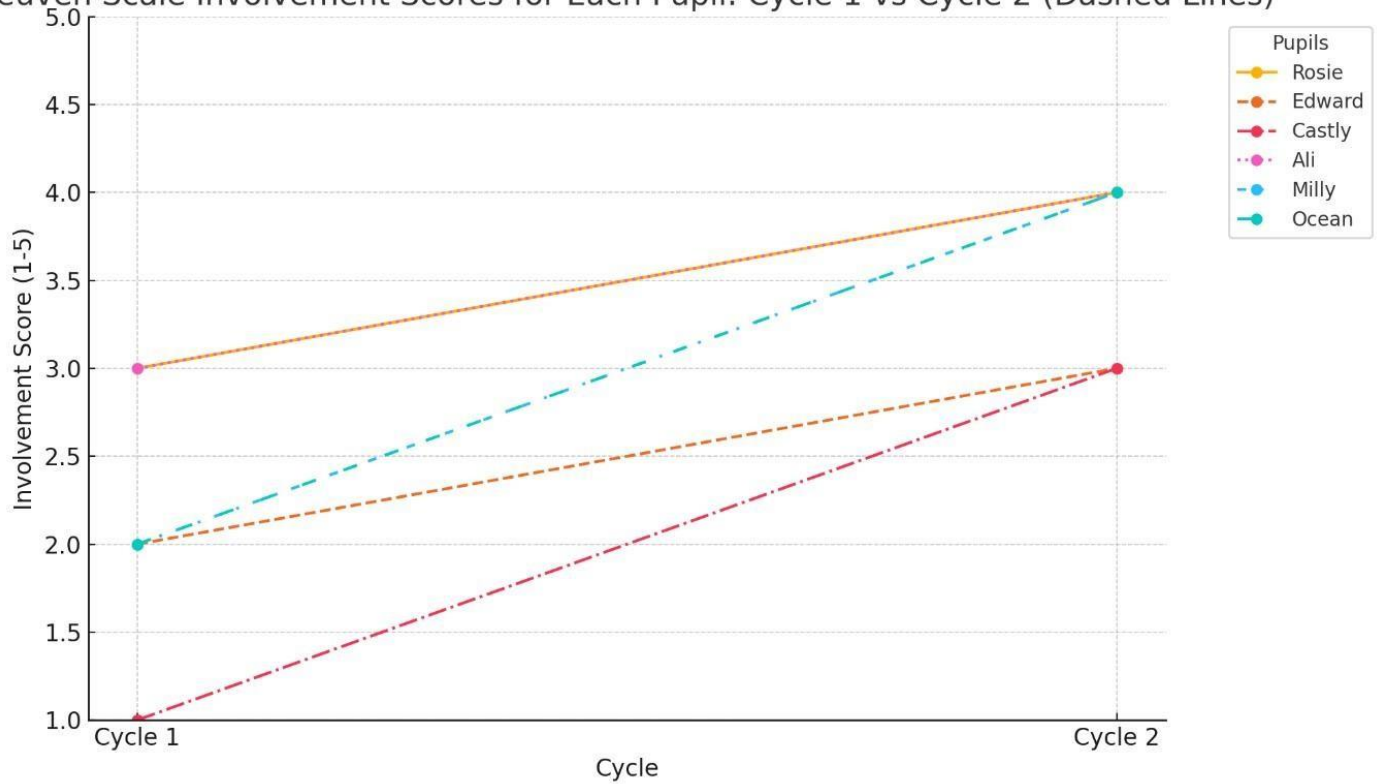


Figure 2.1: Average engagement for pupils during Cycle One and Cycle Two.

Leuven Scale Well-being Scores for Each Pupil: Cycle 1 vs Cycle 2 (Dashed Lines)

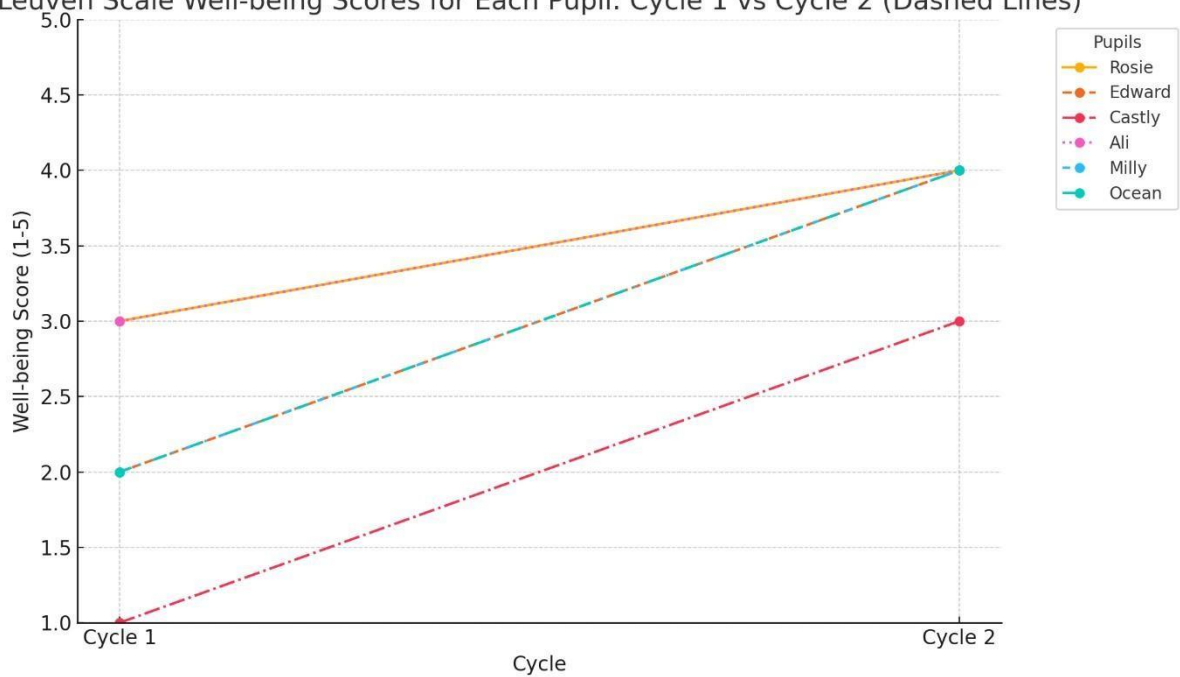


Figure 2.2: Individual pupil wellbeing scores on the Leuven Scale across Cycle One and Cycle Two.

Approximately 83% of the focus group (five out of six pupils) showed improved engagement compared to Cycle One, alongside signs of increased wellbeing, such as relaxed body language and calmer expressions. Although some pupils occasionally opened their eyes or looked around, this was less frequent than before. Notably, Castly, a pupil with autism, demonstrated a significant positive shift. Initially assessed at Level 1 on the Leuven Scale, especially after break times and at the end of the day, Castly consistently reached Level 3 by the end of Cycle Two and occasionally achieved Level 4. Both the class teacher and I observed improved selfregulation, suggesting that the structure and sensory nature of body scanning supported emotional readiness for learning.

After Cycle Two, the focus group suggested changes to reduce distractions, including designated mindfulness seats and turning off the video screen in favour of audio-only guidance. Pupil comments included:

Ali: "Maybe we should move different tables so we're not near friends and not talking."

Milly: "Yeah, I think that idea would be great, some people said the same thing."

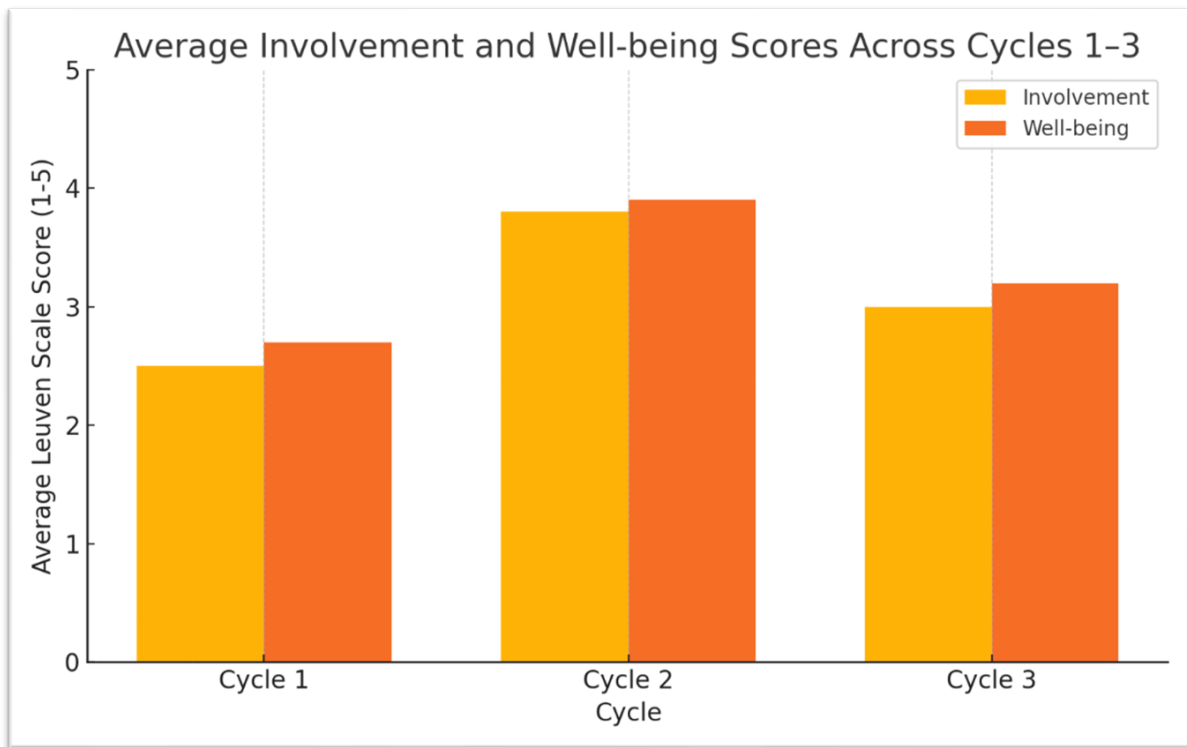
Castly: "So, can the board go off?"

These changes were trialled at the start of Cycle Three. However, after two days, the class agreed the video helped them focus better and the original format was reinstated.

Cycle Three – Mindful breathing

Cycle Three introduced mindful breathing while maintaining the familiar session structure; however, this cycle had the least observable impact on pupil involvement and wellbeing. Observations showed that many pupils who began the week at Level 2 on the Leuven Scale remained at that level. Overall, involvement and wellbeing scores ranged from Level 2 to Level 4, with most pupils consistently remaining at Level 3.

Quantitative analysis showed that the average involvement score decreased slightly to 3.0 and the average wellbeing score dropped to 3.2, compared to Cycle two (Figure 3.1). The number of pupils reaching Levels 4 and 5 on the Leuven Scale was notably lower than during Cycle Two.



Figure

3.1 Fewer signs of deep engagement were observed compared to previous cycles. Several pupils were noted shifting in their seats, glancing around the room, or opening their eyes during the activity, indicating reduced focus.

Focus group comments reflected this decline in engagement:

Edward remarked, *“It’s kind of boring.”*

Ocean added, *“You need to focus like in Body scanning, but your mind wanders because no one’s asking questions.”*

These comments were consistent with observational data, particularly among pupils who demonstrated decreased focus and lower involvement levels during mindfulness sessions.

Cycle Four – Five senses exercise

Following Cycle Three, decreased engagement was observed through both focus group feedback and classroom observations. Cycle Four implemented this, resulting in a significant rise in participation. 100% of the focus group and around 59% of the class (27 pupils) volunteered to lead. This boosted motivation, ownership and engagement, while also improving behaviour management.

The five senses exercise was also introduced, with mixed responses. Some found it calming, while others felt it allowed worries to surface:

Castly: "This one made me still think about stuff I am worried about."

Edward: "This one is my favourite. I feel calmer after it than the others."

Edward, who had previously shown limited engagement, reported reaching Level 5 on the Leuven Scale during this activity.

Ocean: "It is better when we get to do it. It makes it more fun and you try harder."

Ali: "When I did it, I felt proud."

Observations showed improved focus and a calmer classroom atmosphere. In a class vote at the end of the placement, 19 of 27 pupils selected mindful breathing as their preferred activity, which was repeated in the final session.

Discussion

These findings support initial teacher questionnaire responses, which anticipated that mindfulness could improve pupil focus and emotional regulation, while noting concerns about time constraints (Teacher Questionnaire, Appendix B). My experience, however, suggests that with effective planning, mindfulness does not need to take up significant classroom time. By allocating just five minutes each morning to prepare resources and create a calm atmosphere, transitions became smoother and lessons began with greater focus. My mentor also observed improved pupil behaviour and engagement, continuing the use of mindfulness after recognising that the time was previously spent managing low-level disruptions. Although anecdotal, these observations indicate that when thoughtfully embedded, mindfulness can enhance classroom readiness without reducing instructional time.

Impact on Pupil Engagement

The study suggests that mindfulness supports pupil engagement when activities are structured, age-appropriate and delivered consistently. Pupils showed increased emotional regulation, participation and focus during and after mindfulness sessions. Over time, pupil voice shifted from vague definitions to more personal, accurate descriptions of mindfulness, indicating both conceptual understanding and emotional investment and engagement developed gradually as mindfulness became part of the class routine.

In Cycle One, many pupils appeared unsure, often copying peers or seeking reassurance (Torres and Hout, 2019). By Cycle Two, several pupils demonstrated increased independence, choosing to close their eyes or focus on their breath without prompting. This change reflects Dewey's emphasis on habit formation through experiential learning, where repeated, purposeful experiences lead to deeper engagement (Dewey, 2009). This may also reflect positive peer modelling, where observing classmates engage confidently encouraged others to participate. Over time, this contributed to a shift in classroom culture where mindfulness was normalised and accepted, which aligns with Jennings et al. (2019) who highlight the importance of relational safety in classroom-based SEL practices.

The most significant improvement occurred in Cycle Two with body scanning. This activity fostered physical stillness and sensory focus, helping pupils redirect attention inward. These results align with Murphy et al. (2022), who found that sensory-based mindfulness can prepare children for academic tasks. The technique proved especially effective after breaks, calming the classroom and reducing the need for behavioural prompts, supporting the view that emotional regulation underpins learning readiness (Graziano et al., 2007; De Neve et al., 2022).

One notable example involved Castly, a pupil with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Initially reluctant and prone to sensory overload, Castly became calmer and more focused by the end of Cycle Two, even volunteering to lead mindfulness sessions. This suggests that when mindfulness is flexible and sensory-aware, it can serve as a powerful inclusive tool. As Rix et al. (2013) argue, inclusive practice should centre on strategies that reduce barriers and empower all learners, particularly those with sensory sensitivities or communication challenges. This supports findings by Chiodelli et al. (2018), who argue that mindfulness can

enhance emotional resilience and engagement in neurodiverse learners when tailored to their needs.

Cycle Three, focused on mindful breathing, saw a dip in engagement. Although the structure remained consistent, pupils described the activity as repetitive and less engaging. Comments, such as “It’s kind of boring” reflected the need for more interactive, developmentally appropriate content (Phan et al., 2022; Channawar, 2023). Nonetheless, pupils began to identify conditions that supported their focus, suggesting early development of self-regulation.

Cycle Four, combining the five senses exercise with pupil-led delivery, brought the most positive engagement shift. Allowing pupils to lead increased motivation, participation and pride. These findings align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2022), which highlights autonomy, competence and relatedness as essential to intrinsic motivation. Pupil-led sessions fostered ownership, built confidence and strengthened peer relationships. Their involvement transformed mindfulness from a teacher-led activity into a shared classroom practice.

Overall, these findings suggest that mindfulness can support pupil engagement when activities are interactive, age-appropriate and co-constructed. Though limited in scale, the study offers practical insight into embedding mindfulness as a meaningful, pupilcentred routine that promotes calm, focus and readiness to learn.

Impact on Academic Performance

Although academic achievement was not measured using standardised tests, observational measures, such as task persistence and peer collaboration which

provided a more responsive way to evaluate how mindfulness influences the behaviours that underpin academic success. After mindfulness sessions, pupils appeared more focused and better prepared to begin lessons, especially following unstructured times, such as breaks and lunch. These findings support Rybska and Błaszak (2020), who argue that emotional regulation and clarity of mind are foundational to academic engagement.

In Cycle One, body scanning helped pupils settle more quickly and begin tasks with fewer prompts. This aligns with Sheinman and Russo-Netzer (2021) and Alomari (2023), who link attention regulation to academic success. As pupils became more confident, their independent engagement increased, suggesting growing self-regulation.

By Cycle Two, improvements in task persistence were noticeable. Pupils approached challenging work, particularly in writing and mathematics, with greater resilience. Castly, in particular, demonstrated increased concentration and emotional control. This supports Dvořáková et al. (2019), who found mindfulness reduces academic stress and builds persistence.

Collaborative learning behaviours also improved. Pupils were more inclined to share ideas and resolve conflict calmly, which reflects Levi-Keren, Godeano-Barr and Levinas (2021) who note the role of mindfulness in developing interpersonal skills that enhance group work. Overall, post-session lessons were calmer and more conducive to learning.

Engagement declined in Cycle Three. Pupils needed more redirection, and their feedback suggested that mindful breathing lacked novelty and sensory stimulation.

This supports research by Phan et al. (2022) and Channawar (2023), who stress the importance of designing stimulating, age-appropriate mindfulness tasks. Cycle Four re-energised academic focus. Pupils reported that leading sessions helped them feel more prepared, with some commenting that mindfulness helped them “clear their minds” before work. These observations align with Indriaswuri et al. (2023) and Ünsal (2024), who link mindfulness with improved executive function and cognitive flexibility. One pupil mentioned improved writing fluency, echoing Marie and Mänty (2024), who suggest mindfulness reduces anxiety, thereby supporting processing.

Although the intervention formally involved six pupils, class-wide participation grew, and teachers observed broader improvements in classroom atmosphere. This suggests that mindfulness may offer whole-class benefits when embedded into routine practice.

The study’s findings highlight several practical applications for both classroom and whole-school practice. Mindfulness could be introduced at key transition points, such as after lunch or before demanding subjects like mathematics, to support emotional regulation and learning readiness. Embedding short activities within PSHE lessons or morning registration could provide consistent practice without disrupting curriculum delivery (Nelson et al., 2021). Co-construction also proved to be a valuable engagement strategy; involving pupils in choosing or adapting activities increased motivation and ownership. Schools may also benefit from integrating pupilled mindfulness into peer assemblies, form time or wider wellbeing initiatives. These approaches offer a sustainable and inclusive method for promoting emotional development, aligning with national priorities around mental health and wellbeing (Department for Education, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

In summary, while academic outcomes were not formally assessed, behavioural indicators, such as persistence, focus and readiness to learn suggest a positive relationship between mindfulness and academic engagement. Structured, varied and pupil-led sessions supported the emotional and cognitive conditions necessary for learning.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations that affect the overall reliability and validity of its findings. Its small-scale nature and limited participant group reduce generalisability, as the sample may not reflect the diversity of the wider pupil population (Andrade, 2021).

Further limitations arise from the school-based context. Teacher feedback, collected via an anonymous online form, lacked opportunities for follow-up, limiting the depth and reliability of responses. Potential bias may also have influenced data collection and interpretation, particularly given the dual role of the teacher-researcher. The presence of the researcher may have affected pupil behaviour or responses due to social desirability, despite efforts to minimise this through informal settings and the use of pseudonyms during focus groups.

The supportive nature of the school environment, including the class teacher's enthusiasm and established classroom routines, may also have contributed to the intervention's success. These context-specific factors should be considered when applying the findings to other educational settings. Additionally, the absence of

standardised academic measures limits the ability to draw firm conclusions about attainment.

These highlight the need for cautious interpretation and point to directions for future research. Longer-term studies could examine the impact of pupil preferences and the effectiveness of co-constructed mindfulness routines. Exploring these factors may offer deeper insight into sustainable implementation across diverse primary settings. Additionally, future studies could mitigate potential bias by involving an external observer to conduct pupil interviews, thereby reducing the influence of the teacher–researcher dynamic and enhancing the credibility of qualitative data.

Conclusion

This action research study explored the impact of mindfulness practices on pupil engagement and academic performance in a primary school classroom. Using teacher questionnaires, classroom observations and pupil voice, the study examined how mindfulness, when implemented consistently, can support learning behaviours and emotional wellbeing.

The literature review established a strong theoretical foundation, drawing on frameworks such as SEL and SDT. Existing research supports the view that mindfulness enhances attention, emotional regulation and self-awareness, all of which are key factors in pupil engagement and academic success. However, barriers such as limited curriculum time and the need for teacher training were also identified, along with the importance of adapting mindfulness practices to meet individual needs, particularly for pupils with SEND.

Teacher questionnaires reflected these findings. While recognising the benefits of mindfulness for focus and emotional regulation, respondents raised concerns about time constraints and behaviour management. The intervention addressed these by demonstrating that brief, well-structured sessions can be embedded into the school day without reducing teaching time. Just five minutes each morning helped create a calmer classroom and smoother transitions. The class teacher's decision to continue using mindfulness after the research period highlights its perceived value.

Across the four research cycles, structured activities such as body scanning and the pupil-led five senses exercise were associated with improved engagement and regulation. Observations using the Leuven Scale indicated increases in pupil

involvement and wellbeing, especially in Cycle Two. Pupil feedback revealed that mindfulness helped them focus, feel calm and prepare for learning. Over time, their definitions of mindfulness became more nuanced and reflective, indicating deeper understanding and emotional investment.

Cycle Four highlighted the value of pupil-led delivery. When given responsibility, pupils showed increased motivation, attentiveness and pride. This reflects the principles of SDT, which emphasise autonomy, competence and relatedness as key to intrinsic motivation. It also underscores the value of co-constructing routines that give learners ownership.

Although academic attainment was not formally measured, indicators such as improved task persistence and collaboration suggest positive outcomes. Castly's development from limited engagement to leading sessions illustrates how mindfulness can support neurodiverse learners when tailored to their needs.

While the small-scale limits generalisability, the findings offer practical insight. When adapted to developmental stages and preferences, mindfulness can promote both emotional wellbeing and academic readiness in primary classrooms.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethical Documentation

A1. Headteacher consent forms

QTS6004M Research Project Permission form

Student name: Sarah Chapman

SE3 School: _____

Headteacher permission:

I have read this student's ethical clearance form and give my permission for the conduct of this small-scale research project.

Additional parental passive consent is not required/has been obtained (please delete as applicable)

Headteacher's name: _____

Headteacher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Students:

This completed form must be scanned or photographed and uploaded to the permission submission area on Moodle **prior to commencing your research project and by 27 January 2025 at the latest**

A2. Parental consent forms

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Miss Chapman and I am currently serving as the student teacher in your child's class. As part of my final year research project, I am investigating the impact of mindfulness practices on pupil engagement and academic performance in primary school children.

Your child has expressed interest in participating and I would like to formally invite them to take part in a focus group for this study. The primary goal of the focus group is to gain a deeper understanding of how mindfulness practices have influenced your child's wellbeing and engagement in the classroom.

Your child's involvement would be highly valuable to my research and I believe it will contribute important insights to this area of study. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, please feel free to reach out.

What Will Participation Involve?

Your child will be invited to participate in a focus group discussion with five other students. Each session will last approximately 10 minutes and will take place before and after each mindfulness practice is introduced to the class, including box breathing, Body scanning and the Five senses exercise. The discussion will be supervised and recorded for research purposes using a recording device and the recordings will be transcribed into a Word document for further analysis. Please be assured that all recordings will remain confidential, stored securely and will not contain any identifying information.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All information shared during the focus group will be kept strictly confidential. Your child's name or any identifying information will not be used in any reports or publications. I will take all necessary precautions to ensure that their identity remains anonymous throughout the research process.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Your child's involvement in the focus group is not mandatory and they may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Potential Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research. While there may not be any immediate benefits to your child, their participation will provide valuable insights that can help teachers effectively teach mindfulness.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the office and request to speak with Miss Chapman, the student teacher in your child's class. On the reverse side, you will find a summary of each mindfulness practice that will be introduced to the class and a withdraw form.

Please DO NOT return the form if you agree to allow your child to participate in this research project.

Parent/Guardian Non-Consent Form

I have read and understood the information provided about the research focus group.
However, I would like to withdraw my child.

Child's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Date: _____

A3. The information on the practices

Mindful breathing

Mindful breathing, also known as square breathing, is a simple and effective deep breathing technique used to calm the mind and reduce stress. It involves four equal steps, each lasting the same amount of time:

1. **Inhale:** Breathe in deeply through your nose for 4 seconds.
2. **Hold:** Hold the breath for 4 seconds.
3. **Exhale:** Slowly exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds.
4. **Hold:** Hold your breath again for 4 seconds before the next inhale.

Body scanning

Body scanning is a mindfulness technique used to promote relaxation and body awareness by focusing attention on different parts of the body. The practice typically involves these steps:

1. **Get comfortable:** Sit or lie down in a quiet space, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax.
2. **Focus on each part of the body:** Starting from either the head or feet, bring your attention to each body part, one at a time. Notice any sensations, tension, or discomfort.
3. **Acknowledge and release:** Without judgment, observe how each area feels and if tension is present, try to consciously relax that part.
4. **Move systematically:** Gradually scan through your body, moving from one area to the next.

Five senses exercise

The Five senses exercise is a grounding technique used to reduce stress and anxiety by bringing attention to the present moment. It encourages mindfulness by focusing on each of the five senses. Here's how it works:

1. **Notice 5 things you can see:** Look around and identify five different things you can see, focusing on details.
2. **Notice 4 things you can touch:** Bring attention to four things you can physically feel (e.g., your 58 clothes, the ground beneath you).
3. **Notice 3 things you can hear:** Listen closely to three distinct sounds in your environment.
4. **Notice 2 things you can smell:** Focus on two scents in your surroundings or memory.
5. **Notice 1 thing you can taste:** Pay attention to the taste in your mouth or something you can taste in the moment.

A4. Ethical approval letter

Section 7: Declaration

Declaration – I have read the ethics policy and guidance and the general data protection regulation information alongside abiding by the practice in place within my research discipline. The information supplied here is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Student Signature

S.Chapman

Name

Sarah Chapman

Date

04/12/2024

Staff Signature for approval

MK Jagdev

Name

Manjinder K. Jagdev

Date

4.12.24

Appended material

Headteacher consent form / withdraw form for parent or guardian for focus group

Focus group beginning and ending questionnaire (same to show contrast)

Teacher survey provided in placement and wider teaching community

Participant information sheet

Checklist

Participant Information Sheet(s)

Attached

N/A

Consent Form(s)

Sample questionnaire(s)

Sample interview format(s)

Any other documents (please specify below)

I consent that my results can be used in research anonymously Yes

1. **Which of the following best describes your understanding of mindfulness?
(Tick all that apply)**

- Being present in the moment
- Focusing on breath
- Enhancing awareness of feelings and emotions
- Relaxation techniques
- Not sure

2. **If you practice mindfulness, which of the following techniques do you use?
(Tick all that apply)**

- Breathing exercises
- Guided meditation
- Body scans
- Mindful movement (yoga, walking, etc.)
- Journaling
- Five senses exercise
- I do not practice mindfulness

Other comments:

3. **Which mindfulness techniques have you introduced to your pupils? (Tick all that apply)**

- Breathing exercises
- Guided meditation
- Body scans
- Mindful movement (yoga, walking, etc.)
- Journaling
- Five senses exercise
- I have not introduced mindful practices to my pupils

Other comments:

4. **How do you feel mindfulness benefits your pupils? (Tick all that apply)**

- Improves focus and attention
- Reduces stress and anxiety
- Enhances emotional regulation
- Promotes empathy and kindness
- Boosts classroom atmosphere and collaboration
- I am unsure

5. Have you noticed any challenges in implementing mindfulness in your classroom? (Tick all that apply)

- Lack of time
- Lack of resources or materials
- resistance
- Uncertainty on how to teach mindfulness
- School policy or curriculum restrictions

Other comments:

Appendix C - Questionnaire given to focus group.

1. **What do you think "mindfulness" means?**

- Paying attention to what is happening right now
- Focusing on my breathing
- Thinking about my feelings
- Something to help me calm down
- I do not know

Other comments:

2. **How often do you practice mindfulness in class?**

- Every day
- Once or twice a week
- Only sometimes
- I do not remember
- Never

3. **What mindfulness activities do you do in class? (Choose all that you do)**

- Breathing exercises
- Sitting still and closing your eyes
- Listening to sounds quietly
- Drawing or colouring quietly
- Thinking about things that make you happy or grateful

Other comments:

4. **How do you feel after you do mindfulness exercises in class? (You can choose more than one answer)**

- Calm
- Happy
- Sleepy
- Focused
- Bored
- Still worried or upset

Other comments:

5. **Do you think mindfulness helps you do better in school (like paying attention or getting your work done)?**

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No