



Mentally Healthy WA

Mentally Healthy Schools

Benefits of being spiritually active Mindfulness and wellbeing

As the use of mindfulness has increased globally, its importance in education has also been recognised.

Though it is not yet on any curriculum, it is being used in schools around the world to improve pupils' well-being, mental health, social and emotional learning, concentration and cognition. Many schools are now enrolling their teachers on mindfulness courses too, so that they can eventually teach these skills to their pupils, without relying on external specialists.

Teaching mindfulness to teachers not only gives them the skills and knowledge to progress onto further courses to be able to teach it to children, but it may also have the added benefit of improving their own well-being. And, as better teacher well-being is associated with better pupil well-being, there are clear wider benefits to them learning it too.

In the UK, teachers usually either learn about mindfulness by taking a more traditional Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course, or by taking a *.b Foundations* course. A number of research studies have already shown MBSR to be beneficial for reducing stress and improving quality of life. Courses like *.b Foundations* meanwhile have been adapted from MBSR, and developed to specifically teach mindfulness to school teachers. The styles of the two courses are quite different – *.b Foundations* consist of eight 90 minute sessions as opposed to eight two hour sessions, with no

silent practice day. It can take more of a interactive classroom style approach, including optional slide presentations and includes reference to the neuroscience underpinning the mindfulness.

Stress reduction

For our recently published study, which involved 44 teachers from UK primary and secondary schools, we decided to find out how teachers' mental health and well-being benefits from different mindfulness courses, and what they think about them. We did questionnaires on stress and depression levels and interviewed a sample of the teachers who had taken the courses on their experiences.

A less stressful classroom is better for both children and teachers. We found that both courses reduced the teachers' anxiety and stress, with MBSR having the added benefit of reducing their symptoms of depression. The majority felt that the course made them calmer, more aware and less reactive, which was also believed to roll over into their teaching. As one said:

“I'm so much calmer and ... more patient with the children in my class”

'Airy fairy' attitudes

Another key point raised by all of the teachers concerned attitudes towards and beliefs about mindfulness. Many thought that mindfulness was widely seen as "hippy", "fluffy" and "airy fairy". We heard comments such as "they all thought I'd cracked" in several interviews. These attitudes and beliefs as to what mindfulness is and what it entails could not only act as a barrier to teachers engaging with it, but may influence how their pupils see it too.

Some teachers did tell us, however, that once they attended the course, their initial "cynical" attitudes changed. They also suggested focusing on the evidence and science behind the approach, and possibly changing the name of the course, so that it didn't mention mindfulness, to help breakdown some of these barriers and encourage greater attendance. This is in fact what the .b foundations teacher-focused course does.

Ultimately our research has shown that it does not really matter which course teachers attend, they can personally benefit from mindfulness education. And this also has potential to improve the classroom environment and hopefully pupil well-being too. However, this research has also highlighted a number of barriers which may exist and need to be taken into consideration. The root causes of teacher stress must be addressed alongside giving teachers tools to deal with it.

As schools focus more and more on improving child health and well-being, it is an absolute necessity that teacher well-being does not get neglected. Ignoring this would be counterproductive to improving child well-being.

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