



A class at Ysgol Pen Y Bryn practises mindfulness to get into the right frame of mind for work

Focusing on the here and now

Mindfulness brings calmness to classrooms and equips pupils with skills that will improve the quality of their lives. **Karen Russell-Graham** investigates

The concept of mindfulness is difficult to define, but essentially involves learning to direct your attention to your experience as it is happening, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance. Instead of worrying about what has happened in the past, or what might happen in the future, it trains you to respond skilfully to what is happening now – good or bad.

It is learned through regular practice – starting with bringing attention to the minute sensations of the body and also the breath – and has been found to help people maintain calmness, overcome anxiety, think more clearly and perform better.

GPs refer patients to mindfulness courses to alleviate stress and prevent recurrent depression; businesses use the techniques in the workplace to improve productivity and reduce absenteeism.

And now, thanks to initiatives like the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP), it is making a difference in schools.

A long-term investment

The Mindfulness in Schools Project was founded by secondary school teachers

Richard Burnett and Chris Cullen, who designed a programme based on classic mindfulness teaching, but presented in a way that would appeal to teenagers and be relevant to their lives.

“It’s important to take care of your teachers first, or else it is counter-productive”

It is not a quick fix, however, and must be taught by staff who have completed a validated mindfulness course and continue to practise regularly. Only then

are they in a position to train to teach mindfulness to pupils.

‘It’s important to take care of your teachers first and then bring it to the classroom, or else it is counter-productive,’ explains MiSP operations director Claire Kelly. ‘Frustratingly, this takes time, but it’s a long-term investment.’

Launched in 2010, the secondary school course is called .b [pronounced dot-be] – standing for Stop, Breathe, Be – and comprises nine modules delivered through lively audio-visual resources and practical activities. Areas covered include recognising worry and learning to deal with it, developing the ability to respond rather than react to events, using mindfulness to improve performance in sport and dealing with difficult emotions.

.b for younger pupils followed four years later, developed by two primary school teachers in Wales and a senior mindfulness trainer with the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at Bangor University. Taught as a series of formal PSHE lessons in years 3-6, it should also be integrated informally into everyday learning.

.b objectives

- To feel happier, calmer and more fulfilled
- To get on better with others
- To be able to concentrate and learn better
- To learn to handle stress and anxiety
- To perform better in music and sport

paws.b in action

Tabitha Sawyer, assistant headteacher of Ysgol Pen Y Bryn school in Colwyn Bay and co-creator of paws.b, outlines the key elements of the primary school programme.

‘The first lesson looks at the Amazing Brain,’ she says. ‘The children really key into using words like “hippocampus”, the part of the brain that links new experiences with what has gone before, and “amygdala”, the part that processes emotions. From here they go on to Puppy Training, which tells them that it’s OK for the mind to wander, as a puppy might do, and then to gently bring it back.’

A total of six sessions includes Dealing with Difficulty, which explores the fight, flight or freeze response, and Storytelling, which is about stopping the mind from picking over past events or worrying about future ones and concentrating on the moment instead.

Since she began piloting the scheme, Ms Sawyer has noticed that pupils are using the paws.b toolkit in all areas of their lives. ‘When some girls fell out in class, they found they could step back from their argument,’ she observes, ‘not to ignore it, but to deal with the “here and now” of the lesson. Kids tell me, “I used it at football... before my ballet exam... or when my brother wound me up.” Meanwhile, parents report that their children focus more, are less worried and don’t display as much sibling rivalry.’

Mindfulness and SEND

Ms Sawyer acknowledges that some children with special educational needs may take longer to benefit from the programme.

In some cases, adaptations might be needed. For example, one child with autism found it hard to be still, so it was made clear that it was OK for him to rock. He could still focus and he accepted that it was all right to feel the way he did.

Another child was initially very resistant and dismissive. ‘The teacher said: “Fine, but give it a go and just listen,”’ she says. ‘Gradually he began



Three students close their eyes to focus on breathing and ground themselves in the moment



Mindful walking at Melland High School – students pay attention to every tiny sensation as their heel slowly makes contact with the ground, followed by the ball of their foot and finally their toes

to participate more. By the end of the year he was a different child. It would be misleading to attribute that entirely to paws .b, but it certainly contributed.’

“If mindfulness is embedded in the school ethos, everyone becomes more emotionally literate”

For her part, Claire Kelly recalls teaching two children with ADHD whose outbursts of disruptive, aggressive behaviour led to their frequent removal from class. In her first session just getting them to sit down was a challenge, but by lesson four, they had begun to self-manage.

She explains that paws.b includes instruction in neuroscience, which the children then use as a reference point. She describes it as metacognition: something happens, you notice how you are thinking, then you pause and respond appropriately.

The potential of this as an anger management tool was apparent one day when one of the boys began to ‘kick off’, then suddenly stopped. He was directing his gaze at the floor, focusing his attention on his breathing, and then he looked up. ‘That was my amygdala, wasn’t it Miss?’

he said, then calmly added: ‘It’s OK – I think my prefrontal cortex [concentration and problem solving] has started now.’

Preventing exclusion

Kieran McCarthy is director of Three Ways Brighter Futures, a not-for-profit social enterprise that provides parents, schools and other organisations with specialist services to improve outcomes for children with special educational or additional needs.

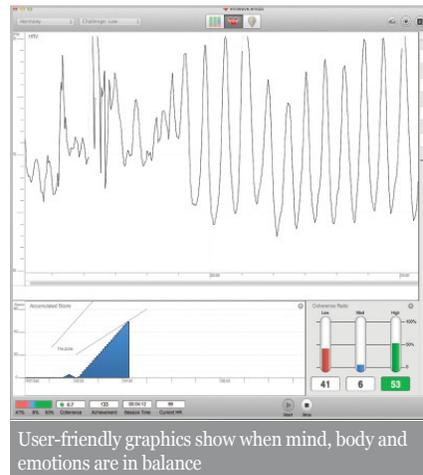
Working with young people at risk of exclusion, he has found that whilst mindfulness can’t take their stress away, it helps them learn to manage it, so they become able to regulate and deal with conflict. ‘The top-down approach of teaching adults first is important,’ he says. ‘One of the objectives is for children to build resilience, and to do that they need mindfulness to be modelled by the people supporting them.’

When asked if some students might be wary of taking part for fear of being ridiculed, he responds that if mindfulness is embedded in the school ethos, then everyone becomes more emotionally literate. ‘Even if it just helps a student with some situations,’ he says, ‘it could make the difference between keeping them in school or excluding them – with a huge difference to learning outcomes.’

Starting with the breath

Jill Cinan, vice principal of Melland High School, a special school in Manchester, has taught .b to a group that included students with severe learning difficulties, ASD and ADHD, as well as children on pupil premium funding and others who were living in care or experiencing problems at home.

At first, they had trouble regulating their breathing, so she turned to emWave Pro from HeartMath, a biofeedback program that teaches breathing and



self-regulation techniques. Using a finger sensor, the software tracks how your thoughts and emotions affect your heartbeat and identifies when your heart, mind and body are in coherence.

The students could measure their coherence levels, displayed on screen in a coloured chart, and then watch how these improved when they focused on their breathing. Playing the built-in games further developed awareness. ‘I am 80 per cent stressed,’ they might say, looking at a reading. Then they would play a game, practise their breathing and begin to regulate – which meant they could now access .b.

Creating a safe space to practise

Ms Cinan differentiated the course to make it relevant to the group’s particular issues and created a culture of ‘what goes on in the room stays in the room’ to give them the confidence to express their opinions and open up about personal matters.

Sometimes she modelled emotions, worries and specific feelings they found difficult to deal with, or acted out scenes with a colleague they trusted. ‘Now when someone is struggling, I can say: “Why not stop and breathe, ground yourself in the moment?”’ she says.

When educational psychologists evaluated the intervention using the short version of the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory, they noted a significant increase in the mean mindfulness score of the group. These findings were corroborated in interviews conducted by an impartial member of staff. Teachers also noticed an improvement in the speaking and listening component of English lessons.

Parental feedback was equally positive. At the annual review of a boy with inappropriate behaviours, one family member stated: ‘Mindfulness is so very important to have in his personal health care kit; perhaps the best thing he has ever done so far.’ ‘Since he did the course, there have been no further instances of these behaviours,’ notes Ms Cinan.

The children themselves recorded their appreciation in a video. ‘I’ve been having some troubles at home and it’s helped me to get through it and to sleep much better,’ observed one. ‘It’s helped me to learn to calm down my temper... I used to shout; now I’ve learned I can communicate properly... and can talk in a group,’ remarked another.

Caring for mental health

In a bid to address potential mental health issues before they have a chance to set



A student at Melland High School uses emWave Pro to measure his coherence levels

in, Sacred Heart High School, a Catholic girls’ comprehensive in Hammersmith, incorporated .b into the Year 7 PSHE curriculum to enable students to fine-tune their attention and proactively look after their mental health.

“The challenge is to encourage students to keep on practising”

At the same time, it offered the course as a voluntary lunchtime activity to a group of Year 11 students, selected on the basis of the areas of need outlined in the Code of Practice: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health; and sensory and/or physical needs. After the introductory lesson, three quarters chose to see it through to the end.

Although educational psychologists (EPs) are still collating evidence to evaluate short- and long-term outcomes, feedback sheets show the 7/11 breathing technique to be popular, especially prior to tests and exams. The EPs were also impressed by the language used by a random selection of Year 7 students who were interviewed four weeks after completing the course.

The 7/11 breathing technique

Start by feeling your feet on the ground, and then gradually move your attention upwards to feel all the sensations of the lower half of the body.

Now turn your attention to your breathing. During the length of your in-breaths, count up to 7 in your head. During the following out-breaths, count up to 11. You may have to speed up the counting to fit the complete sequence of numbers into the rhythm of your breathing.

The exercise takes your focus away from the worry and places it on the counting and the sensations of breathing. It may also lengthen both your in-breath and your out-breath. This will automatically calm you down, slow your heart rate and take you towards emotional balance.

‘Being able to say: “I know I’m catastrophising,” has given them a vocabulary to describe difficult emotions,’ says head of special educational needs Tess Reid. ‘In mindfulness, you practise being aware of your breath and using it as an anchor at times of pressure, but also as a means to focus ever-straying attention. It’s not difficult to learn. The challenge is to encourage students to keep on practising.’

A whole-school approach

To help bring this about, mindfulness is being expanded across the school, starting in Year 7 and then continuing each year to refresh and further develop skills. Sessions have been adapted for whole-class teaching by adding movement, getting students to work with a partner and bringing in more technology.

In addition to these school-wide developments, individual and small-group initiatives have included the following.

Using .b with a high-functioning autistic student who has eating issues and high anxiety to complement a cognitive behavioural therapy intervention. She took the course with friends, and the support they provided reinforced the impact.

Teaching mindful walking to a student who was in danger of becoming a school refuser. It has enabled her to get from class to class without panicking. Establishing a volunteer lunchtime group of Key Stage 4 students who were experiencing anxiety, worry and broken sleep due to concerns about family, friendships or work.

Working with a student who has problems with peers both in and outside class. While she is not yet using .b when extremely agitated, if she is becoming upset it’s now possible to say: ‘Remember 7/11,’ and it calms her down.

Karen Russell-Graham is a self-employed hypnotherapist and freelance writer

FIND OUT MORE

Mindfulness in Schools Project: The website offers further insights into the benefits of mindfulness and provides an outline of MiSP courses, with evidence of impact. www.mindfulnessinschools.org

Training requirements: Staff must complete an eight-week course, such as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) or the .b Foundations programme. A further six months’ regular practice qualifies them to attend a MiSP three- or four-day teacher-training course. <http://bit.ly/sc222-12> emWave Pro: <http://bit.ly/sc222-11>