

'Are Mindfulness Techniques Practised in the Early Years Setting?': A Study of the Use of Mindfulness in the Early Years

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Edel Palmer graduated from Marino Institute of Education with a first-class honours with a degree in B.Sc. in Early Childhood Education. From engaging with children with various needs while on placement over the last four years, she was always very interested in using mindfulness techniques to encourage self-regulation in young children.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education, Mindfulness, Effects, Benefits

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a more extensive dissertation carried out as part of a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education degree in 2020. This research sought to investigate the use of mindfulness practices by educators in early years settings in Ireland. The research aimed to gain insight into early years educators' understanding of mindfulness and experience, as well as their perceptions regarding its practice with young children.

The research question asked: "Are mindfulness techniques practised in early years settings? I wanted to set out to explore whether there was a relationship between the use of mindfulness techniques and how it may affect young children's emotions and behaviours. The study was conducted across a sample group taken from four early years settings, with varying services and socio-economic backgrounds. The rationale for this study is based upon a gap identified in research into the use of mindfulness techniques during the early years in Ireland. This distinct lack of investigation and supporting literature, into mindfulness practice for young children (2-6 years) as led to this study being conducted. As there is limited evidence proving the benefits of mindfulness for young children, it is not currently defined in Irish early years curricula.

While Aistear, the National Early Years Framework (2009), includes wellbeing among its themes, mindfulness is not specifically identified or recommended as part of that practice. Practice is therefore wholly dependent on the educator's own motivation and commitment to implementation within the setting. Baer (2003, p.125) defines mindfulness as "the non-judgemental observation of the ongoing system of internal, and external stimuli as they arise". Similarly, Kabat Zinn (1994) defines mindfulness as the awareness that arises through "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally" (p. 4). Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Sanders (2012) argue that wellbeing is very difficult to define explicitly, however they claim that wellbeing is linked to positive and negative effects, quality of life, personal growth, self-acceptance and positive relationships in life. This research study explores the following questions:

- (1) Does mindfulness have positive effects for children? What are these effects?
- (2) Does mindfulness play a role in behavioural and emotional regulation?
- (3) What are the benefits of regulation to children through the use of mindfulness?

CONTEXT

Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn is known as the 'founder of modern mindfulness'. He undertook the study of mindfulness and was influenced by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who taught him about the fundamental beliefs and practice of mindfulness. He used his knowledge acquired to develop his own programme in the 1970's and called it 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction' (MBSR).

Gallen (2017; 2018), who references the work of leading theorists and experts in her books for teachers, details how the theories of mindfulness can be practiced in the classroom with children. Employing a variety of methods, educators can use basic concepts of mindfulness providing children with everyday practices to help with self-regulation and techniques to manage their emotions and feelings. These techniques can be practiced under a range of categories. These include, Mindful Senses (eating, seeing and breathing), Mindful Movement/Body Awareness, Mindful Feelings and Emotions and Mindful Thinking/Gratitude.

Mindful Senses deals with the five senses and advancing the ability to isolate a particular sense and use it to increase awareness of one's current surroundings and the present moment. Mindful Movement/Body Awareness brings awareness to body movements that are usually automatic in nature and can help children build a better understanding of their own body's capabilities. It can highlight how to control their bodies and understand the positive effects of movement. Saltzman and Goldin suggest an effective way of explaining awareness of one's

thoughts and emotions to children: “children may be told that thoughts pass through the mind like floats pass by in a parade; some of the floats (thoughts) may grab their attention more than others but just as they would not jump onto a float at a parade, they simply observe their thoughts as they occur” (2008, p. 150).

Mindful Thinking nurtures the ability to maintain non-judgement by using a heightened sense of awareness of one’s thoughts on an ongoing basis. One’s perception of positive and negative experiences encountered become clear. It helps children to consider their own thoughts and feelings, and those of others in social interactions with their families, peers and educators. The child can be aware of their thoughts before speaking and the criticism that may arise thereafter (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011). It is my belief that mindfulness is a powerful tool to support and guide people of all ages through challenging scenarios and life experiences through self-awareness and focused, mindful reflection. Through my research and personal practice of mindfulness I have become a passionate advocate for this Middle Eastern technique and firmly believe in its benefits and the positive contributions it makes to a person's wellbeing and ability to develop their coping skills and self-acceptance.

The benefits of mindfulness have been well documented. According to Gallen (2017; 2018), increased ability to self-reflect and self-regulate (the child’s capacity to control, for example, their emotions and behaviours) rank among the many benefits associated with using mindfulness practices with children. Research studies reviewed by Nieminen & Sajaniemi (2016) into mindful awareness in early childhood education support Gallen’s viewpoint. They say mindfulness practices improve impulse control, enhanced attention and concentration skills helping children stay focused and engaged. According to Rempel (2012), for mindfulness to be practiced to maximum effect, educators need to be committed to the theories of mindfulness and have a personal interest in, understanding of, and appreciation for the practices. It is essential for educators to keep an ‘open, compassionate and accepting attitude’ toward mindfulness practices (Germer, 2005, p. 7). They must be receptive to new ideas and techniques they can implement for best practice and welcome these opportunities for improvement. This will be very beneficial to children as they begin to open up about their personal experiences and heightened emotions. Children will feel more comfortable and keen to participate in this new learning experience if educators take a motivated approach (Gallen, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the practice of mindfulness in early years’ settings and determine its benefits for young children in Ireland. All methodological approaches were considered and a

quantitative approach to data collection was chosen as most relevant for this research and is best suited to answering the research question 'are mindfulness techniques practised in early years' settings?'.

A twelve-question written survey comprising of open-ended and closed questions was designed. In addition, respondents could formulate their answers and further express their opinions with a comment box. Four early years' settings were selected to participate in this study. These settings were chosen for their diversity, which allowed for a broad and balanced range of opinions and perspectives to be gathered on mindfulness practices.

As this is a quantitative study, simple frequencies, descriptive statistical analysis and inferential statistics were applied to interpret and summarise the data (Lewin, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007). Numerical data is collated and used to measure frequencies and identify links between variables. This can be further explored to determine whether it supports or refutes theories (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 206). Once this data is evaluated, common patterns begin to emerge, and become evident. This was then analysed using the previously discussed quantitative method. These findings will be presented and interpreted in the following chapter.

This study was conducted in a limited group of four early years' settings only. Most settings were selected based on proximity to the researcher to facilitate collection of the data within the timeframe allocated. The study would benefit from a more comprehensive, nationwide scale of research to establish a broader sampling to determine if mindfulness techniques are practised in early years' settings. Another challenge encountered was the lack of opportunity to carry out follow up interviews, allowing respondents to elaborate on their comments and insights already stated in the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented here are part of a wider study exploring ECE use of mindfulness techniques. This section will focus on two findings as they provide a better understanding of both mindfulness practice, understanding and the value placed on mindfulness by early years educators.

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF MINDFULNESS FOR CHILDREN

An overwhelming number of the educators surveyed indicated a belief that mindfulness is beneficial for children (93%). 0% of respondents answered 'No'. 7% selected 'don't know' but did not elaborate. In order to gather more detailed insights, a comment box was provided for further described positive effects.

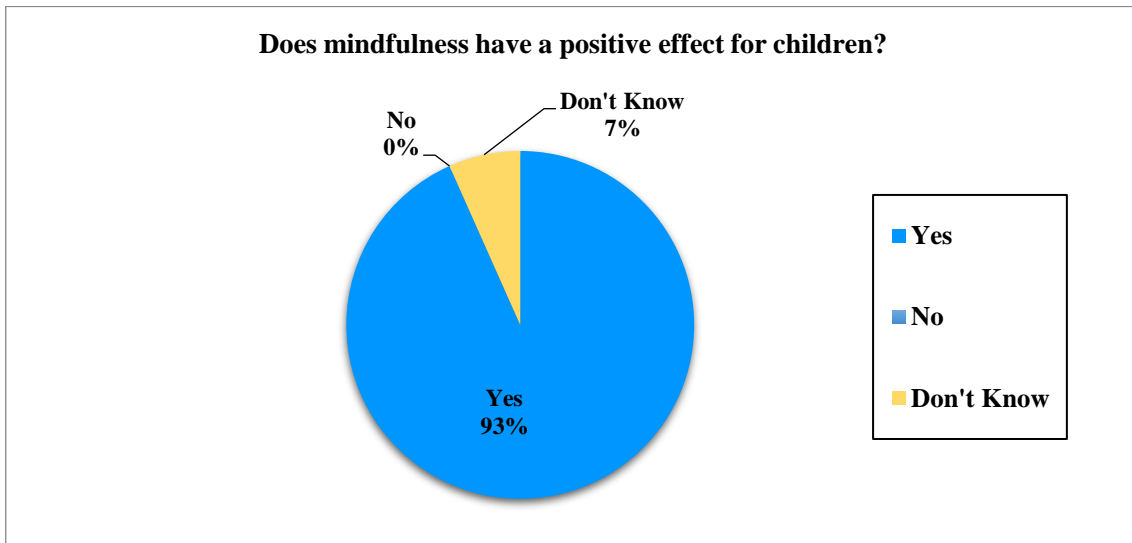


Figure 1. Respondents were asked their opinion if mindfulness practices have positive effects for children.

The results indicated in Figure 2. below demonstrate a number of benefits to using mindfulness, as expressed by respondents. From their comments, four prominent benefits appear: 'Relaxation and Calming Effect', 'Self-Regulation', 'Presence and Awareness' and 'Focus and Thoughts'. More than half noted relaxation and calming as a significant positive outcome (Figure 2 (54.8%)). For example, respondent 20 stated: *"Calms children down, helps them to learn to regulate their emotions"*. A high percentage of respondents (48.3%) also see 'Self-Regulation' having a significant positive effect when mindfulness practices are used (Figure 2). Respondent 13 explains their understanding of self-regulation. *"Helping a child to name an emotion and 'be with' that feeling is a big step towards self-regulation, and that all feelings are safe and can be shared"*. Similarly, respondent 17 noted *"I really feel it helps in self-regulation as it gives children the awareness and tools to know they can lean into these uneasy or upsetting feelings and learn to calm themselves"*. Another benefit reported is 'Presence and Awareness' at 32.2%. *"It encourages self and body awareness"* (Respondent 15). *"Help children to relax and unwind and become more aware of themselves and their bodies, emotions etc."* (Respondent 29). 'Focus and Thoughts' was also outlined as a positive effect with 22.5% of respondents noting it in their answers. Respondent 19 says it *"Helps them think before they do. Keeps them in the moment."*

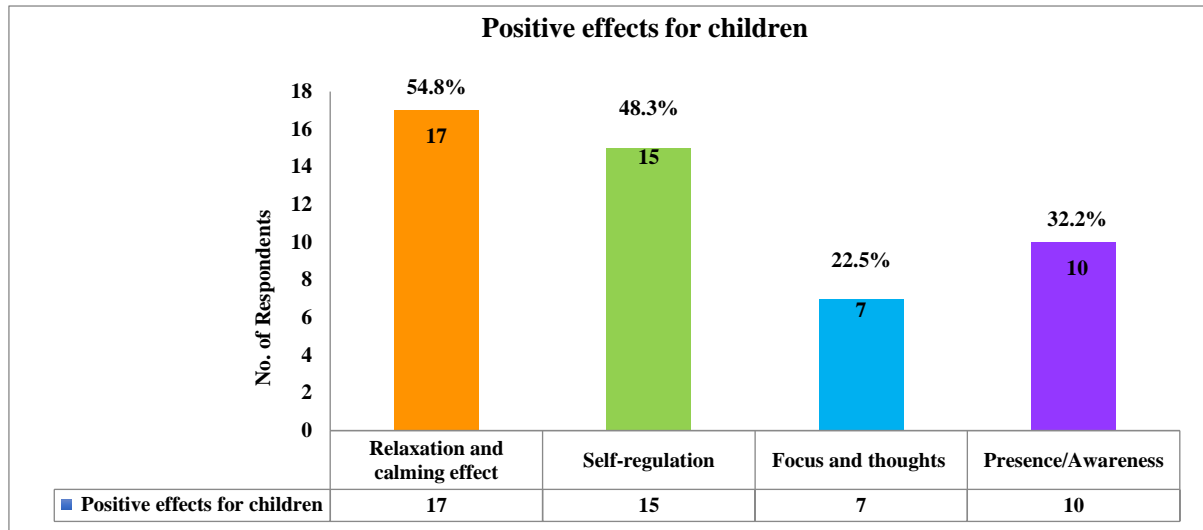


Figure 2. Respondents were asked to elaborate. The most commonly occurring positive effects listed.

The results in Figure 1 confirm that a clear majority of respondents believe mindfulness offers positive effects for children. This supports the work of Saltzman and Goldin (2008) who recognise mindfulness practice with young children can alleviate stress and results in the development of coping skills, better focus and improved social skills. Figure 2 shows respondents believe ‘calming effects’ to be one of the main benefits to practicing mindfulness techniques with young children. Crescentini et al. (2016) support this finding in their research demonstrating young children struggling to self-regulate can learn to become calm independently over time in a setting where mindfulness is practiced. Self-Regulation is another significant positive outcome for children and through engaging in activities like meditation and yoga, songs and games, children can practise connecting with their feelings and emotions. It helps them be present and reduces anxieties and worries (Weare, 2012). Hanh and Hyland recognise the importance of “paying attention to the present moment” and “accepts everything without judging or reacting” as key to effective mindfulness practice (1999, p. 64; 2011, p. 171). Similarly, Kabat-Zinn (2003) also acknowledges that mindfulness accomplishes heightened awareness. Improvements in children’s ability to Focus and pay attention to their thoughts was also acknowledged by respondents. Napoli et al. (2005) carried out a study with children and reported results showed participants were more focused and demonstrating heightened attention skills.

THE ROLE OF MINDFULNESS IN BEHAVIOURAL AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

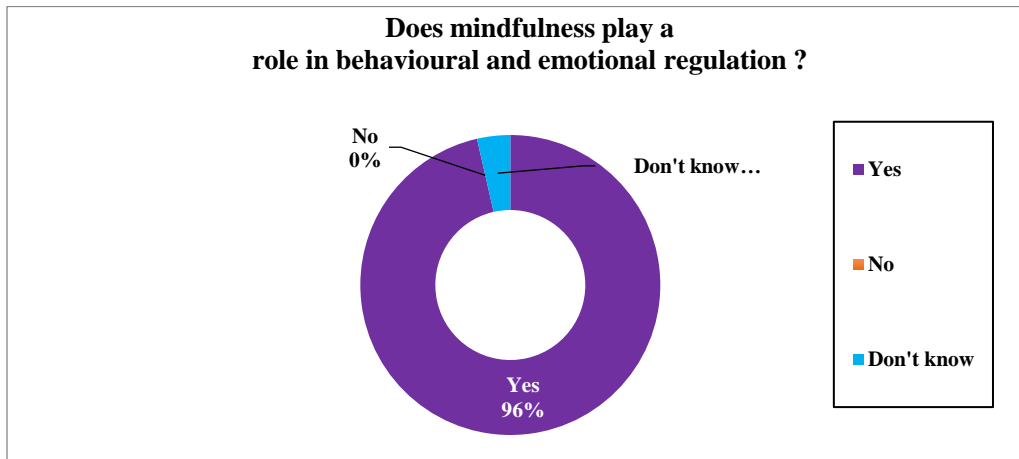


Figure 3. Results of respondents' answers when asked their opinions on the question.

A question posed to respondents queried the role mindfulness plays in helping regulate children's emotions and behaviours. Three of the sample group gave no answer, therefore the results displayed in Figure 3 represent answers given by 28 respondents. 96% said 'yes', 0% said 'no' and 4% answered 'don't know'. The sample group were then invited to elaborate through an open question on the role mindfulness has in helping children regulate their behaviours or emotions. They were free to formulate their own opinion, providing insight into their thoughts and practices. Figure 4 below displays the answers offered. Respondents were asked to elaborate on their answer, if they chose 'yes'. Common responses recurred throughout the sampling, and four key benefits emerged in the role of mindfulness practices in regulation.

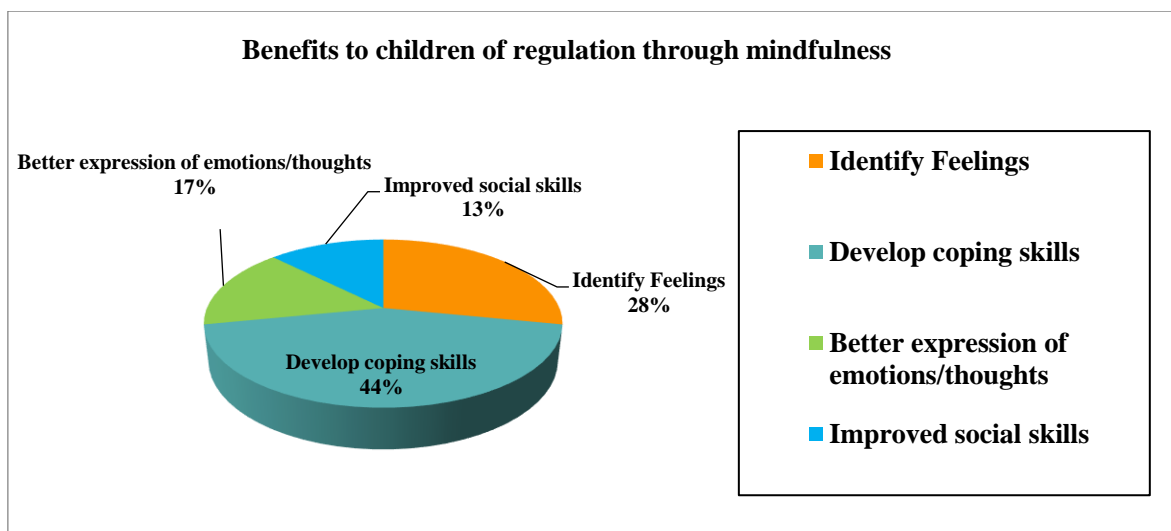


Figure 4. Respondents' answers when asked the role of mindfulness in regulation.

A significant number of respondents (44%) identified the development of ‘coping skills’ as a key benefit. Respondent 7 demonstrated this saying *“learning different techniques to cope with their emotions and how to cope when they are frustrated or angry...breathing exercises, taking time out for themselves”*. The second most commonly occurring attribute mentioned by the group was “Identify feelings” which was acknowledged by 28%. This is illustrated in respondent 13’s answer saying; *“Being able to name and share a feeling makes that feeling feel safe and strengthens the relationship”*. ‘Better expression of emotions and thoughts’ was another significant regulatory factor for children with 17% of respondents noting it as a benefit to practice. Respondent 8 illustrates this in their comment: *“I think it allows the children to express their emotions more openly when it’s talked about”*. The fourth attribute recognised at 13% was ‘better social skills’ *“It helps them develop empathy and sympathy...helps them feel [sic] from another perspective”* (Respondent 26).

These findings confirm that respondents have identified four key areas where they have witnessed improvement and shared their views on how mindfulness practice has a positive impact on emotions and behaviours. By allowing children opportunities for openness and expression, they develop better self-esteem, enhanced resilience, a stronger sense of identity and self-confidence (Siegel, 2007). It can be concluded from this study’s findings and supporting research that mindfulness plays a significant role in better outcomes for their behavioural and emotional regulation and improved social skills and interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study researched early years educators’ understanding of mindfulness and their perspectives on its implementation in early years settings. The findings reveal openness to practice among educators, and there is strong evidence suggesting their belief in many positive implications for young children. However, some challenges to practice arose and will be addressed through suggestions below.

The findings indicate these educators have a reasonable understanding of the concept of mindfulness. According to educators’ own experiences and observations, connections exist between practising mindfulness with children and positive outcomes. Kabat-Zinn (2003) places specific focus on ‘paying attention to the present moment’ and many respondents supported this, noting it as a key feature. Some reported benefits include better self-regulation skills, a relaxing and calming effect on children and increased awareness and presence.

This study encountered a distinct lack of Irish research and supporting literature on the topic. Irish studies found were more focused on adult and adolescent mindfulness practices. The researcher experienced hesitant participation in some instances due to recent investigations

carried out into malpractice in some early years settings conducted by RTÉ. Allocation of time was revealed as a barrier. Low staffing levels can restrict educators' time and opportunities to run mindfulness activities. In addition, they are under constraints to implement recognised curriculum sessions and have no structured time allocated for mindful activities.

From this study, there is evidence that more in-depth investigation into mindfulness-based practices for early years in Ireland is needed to prove its benefits. This would involve a larger scale study, with a broader sample size, conducted over a longer time period. Settings could dedicate specific time to mindful activities as this would encourage regular practice. The findings suggest short, effective sessions between 2 to 5 minutes are best when working with young children, as they have limited capacity to remain focused.

For practice to be most effective, educators could be offered sufficient training by way of mindfulness courses. This would offer opportunity to explore the concept, design, and implementation of mindfulness techniques. Educators would gain the necessary skills, and raised levels of confidence, to encourage practice with young children. It is important to develop social and emotional skills for personal wellbeing. Young children can acquire these skills through the practice of mindfulness, becoming more resilient to life's stresses and challenges. This study answered the question that mindfulness is indeed practiced in early years settings. Newly emerging international research, relating to integration of mindfulness techniques in educational settings, are currently producing positive results. However, for practice to be fully embraced, further research, training and education on the topic is recommended. As educators, we have a responsibility to nurture children's environmental, emotional, social, and physical wellbeing, and mindfulness can help fulfil this duty. Quoting Kofi Annan to conclude, "We were all children once. We all share the desire for the well-being of our children, which has always been and will continue to be the most universally cherished aspiration of humankind".

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