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Pupil perspectives on approaches to school wellbeing promotion

**Experiences of Mindfulness-based
exercises and Relaxation techniques**

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Introduction

Funded by the Department for Education, Education for Wellbeing is one of England's largest research programmes for school-based mental health interventions. The aim of the programme was to evaluate pioneering ways of supporting the mental wellbeing of pupils.

The programme was split into two trials: AWARE (Approaches for Wellbeing and Mental Health Literacy: Research in Education), tested in secondary school settings, and INSPIRE (INterventions in Schools for Promoting Wellbeing: Research in Education), tested in both primary and secondary school settings (see AWARE Impact Findings and INSPIRE Impact Findings for more detail). Recruitment was conducted in three waves (2018, 2019, 2022).

This briefing reports findings from a qualitative investigation into children's experiences of school-based Mindfulness-based exercises and Relaxation techniques in Wave 1. Both interventions were delivered on a universal basis as part of the Education for Wellbeing programme. Other briefings relating to this programme can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-wellbeing-programme-findings>.

Many children within the qualitative research subsample reported benefits of the Mindfulness-based exercises and Relaxation techniques on their mental health and wellbeing, as well as on classroom dynamics, including learning, behaviour, and peer relationships. However, some also experienced annoyance, stress, or physical discomfort from the activities.

The Study

The Sample

Each primary school selected up to two classes from Years 4 and 5 (age 8-10) and each secondary school selected up to three classes from Years 7 and 8 (age 11-13) to be involved in INSPIRE. The Mindfulness-based exercises and Relaxation techniques interventions were delivered by school staff (such as class teachers) to students in selected classes, for around five minutes every day, for four months during the spring term of 2019 (January to April).

Prior to the start of the interventions, school staff received a half-day training session in late 2018 in either Relaxation techniques or Mindfulness-based exercises led by the Education for Wellbeing intervention development team. At the training, school staff were invited to express interest in their school being a qualitative case study school for Education for Wellbeing.

Of the schools that expressed interest in being a qualitative case study school, eight schools were selected to achieve equal representation across interventions and trial hubs, as well as variation in contextual factors (including level of current mental health support and barriers faced to providing support, as measured through the trial's usual provision survey). Qualitative data collected from seven¹ co-educational, state-funded schools were included in this study – three primary schools and one secondary school delivering Mindfulness-based exercises, and three primary schools delivering Relaxation techniques. This means that the findings presented in this briefing primarily reflect the perspectives of primary school students.

School staff invited students to express interest in taking part in focus groups and then they selected up to 10 students with a range of views on the interventions to take part. The Education for Wellbeing evaluation team conducted 14 focus groups (two per school; 65 students in total), with 3-6 students in each. Eight focus groups focused on students' experiences of Mindfulness-based exercises (35 students; 59% female; aged 8-12), and six focus groups focused on students' experiences of Relaxation techniques² (30 students; 50% female; aged 8-10).

¹ Parent or carer consent was unable to be obtained from the eighth school for students' data to be used in this study.

² Self-report age data were missing for two students and self-report gender data were missing for one student.

Data collection

Children and their parents or carers received information sheets and gave written informed consent to join the focus groups. The Education for Wellbeing evaluation team explained that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw any time, and discussions would be kept confidential, except when there were apparent safeguarding concerns.

The focus groups (approximately on average 30 minutes in length) took a semi-structured format and were conducted by the Education for Wellbeing evaluation team in private rooms at participants' schools during the mid to late stages of the interventions. The focus groups explored three main areas relating to the interventions: students' experiences and opinions, suggestions for improvements, and perceptions of impact. All focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The areas of research interest outlined in the focus group topic guide (topic guides available in the [Technical Report](#)) were used as categories to which relevant extracts of the transcripts were systematically coded, taking a 'top-down' approach initially to analysis. Categories included: aspects liked or found helpful, aspects disliked or found unhelpful, suggestions for improvement, and perceptions of impact. Then, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) approach to thematic analysis, the data coded to each category were recoded, taking a 'bottom-up' approach to analysis, which involved applying codes (labels) to transcript extracts describing their content. Similar codes were then grouped into themes within each category. Themes were defined, refined through team discussions, and repeatedly checked against the data to ensure that they were sufficiently representative of the contents of the dataset. As a final step in our analysis, we explored any potential variation between themes in terms of schools' levels of current mental health support and barriers faced to providing support, as measured through the trial's usual provision survey.

Findings

Barriers and facilitators to delivery and impact

Calming atmosphere

A quiet, distraction-free environment and a space where children could sit, stand, or move comfortably were seen as important. This was indicated by participants in five Relaxation and seven Mindfulness focus groups.

“Now that people aren’t always laughing, I feel like I can close my eyes more and just imagine it and enjoy it” (Mindfulness-based exercises)

A time-out

Participants across all focus groups preferred having the interventions after lunch or breaktime and before lessons began, as this provided an opportunity to calm down and focus again after physically and/or socially engaging activities and was helpful in preparing for subsequent lessons.

“[...] it's just been lunch so everyone's been playing like on the field and stuff if it's been nice... and we all get we like do the Relaxation techniques and then we have a better afternoon. Like not everyone's talking and it's quieter and you feel, you go home like feeling happy that it's been calm, not just really noisy and stuff”
(Relaxation techniques)

Importance of variation

While many participants enjoyed the activities, those in five Relaxation and five Mindfulness focus groups suggested including more variety in activities to prevent boredom. Suggestions included voting on activities, expanding the intervention booklet with more options, or creating their own versions of activities to avoid repetition.

“You find it fun the first time but if you keep on repeating, it starts getting boring”
(Mindfulness-based exercises)

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

Happiness and positivity

Participants in five Relaxation focus groups reported feeling happier or less sad due to breathing exercises that had helped them relax, both during sessions and in their own

time. Participants in six Mindfulness focus groups felt happier or less sad, attributing this to both calming down and being able to forget problems and think more positively.

“You feel a bit calmer. You don't feel sad. You feel happy. Everything changes after you do it. It's better, especially when you feel sad” (Mindfulness-based exercises)

Anger

Participants in five Relaxation focus groups mentioned feeling less angry after relaxation exercises, mainly through using calming breathing techniques. Participants in seven Mindfulness focus groups experienced reduced anger through feeling calmer and distracted from their anger.

“Say if you've had like a really rough play, it will kind of like make you forget about it and make you calm down, make sure you're not like really angry, and you're like all calmed down” (Relaxation techniques)

On the other hand, participants in five Relaxation and two Mindfulness focus groups noted that sometimes the activities did not help and could induce frustration or annoyance due to repetition or difficulty.

Worry, anxiety, and stress

Participants in five Relaxation focus groups felt that breathing exercises helped calm nerves and reduce stress. Participants in seven Mindfulness focus groups found that exercises, like breathing or mindful colouring, alleviated stress by calming them, providing a distraction, and helping them to let go of worries.

“In what way do you think it's easier to focus on the colouring than some of the other ones? Because you just are focussing on how you want yours to look and how it's going to be. And then you're not bothered about anything else. It distracts you from the stress you are in” (Mindfulness-based exercises)

Conversely, some participants (in two Relaxation focus groups and one Mindfulness focus group) reported that certain activities (e.g., mindful colouring, belly breathing) could in fact be a source of stress for them.

Physical wellbeing

Participants across all focus groups mentioned physical benefits, such as cooling down after play, feeling less hyper, and more mentally awake. Mindfulness-based exercises helped regulate breathing and heart rate, while relaxation techniques were beneficial for physical ailments and school tasks (e.g., handwriting). However, participants in six

Mindfulness focus groups and four Relaxation focus groups found some exercises physically uncomfortable, for example, because they made them feel tired or short of breath.

“Sometimes it makes us a bit more tired. But sometimes it wakes us up more”
(Relaxation techniques)

Self-help skills

Participants across all focus groups reported that they had previously used or intended to use learned techniques outside of sessions to manage anger, stress, or other problems. Mindfulness-based exercises were also noted for improving sleep. However, there were other participants from all Relaxation and six Mindfulness focus groups who did not always like or find the activities helpful and doubted that they would use them outside of sessions. Reasons included boredom, not understanding the purpose, and seeing the activities as suitable for others (such as those who needed help to manage their feelings) but not themselves.

“I just enjoy it. I think it’s just fun but it doesn’t really... Because I’m not really a stressed person or anything. I’m just fine” (Mindfulness-based exercises)

Impact on classroom behaviour and learning

Calm and quiet

Participants in four Relaxation and five Mindfulness focus groups reported that the classroom was generally quieter due to the calming effect of the interventions. Participants in five Relaxation and six Mindfulness focus groups also noted better behaviour within their class following the sessions, often attributed to the interventions helping to manage excess energy after breaktime.

“Some boys that used to mess about, have really calmed down and really started behaving a bit better” (Relaxation techniques)

However, participants in four Relaxation and four Mindfulness focus groups mentioned experiencing distracting behaviour from classmates not engaging or misbehaving in the sessions (e.g., when everyone closed their eyes).

“Sometimes they do talk and they say it’s not helping or anything. I think they shouldn’t do it, they should just go to a different room and let others do it because it helps them” (Mindfulness-based exercises)

Ready and focused

Participants in all Relaxation and seven Mindfulness focus groups described how the sessions, particularly breathing exercises, had helped them to feel more ready to learn, concentrate better, and listen to the teacher. The calming effect reduced stress and noise levels, aiding focus and hard work in lessons.

“Say we’ve just been out and playing a lot, it’s something, get back into the learning zone because it’s all relaxing, we’re relaxing and just lets you let go of all the energy, basically, and lets you get into the learning so you’re ready”
(Mindfulness-based exercises)

That said, participants in two Mindfulness focus groups mentioned that the exercises sometimes made them feel tired, thus hindering schoolwork, whilst participants in one Relaxation focus group felt that the sessions could waste valuable lesson time.

Working together

Participants in two Relaxation and six Mindfulness focus groups observed that the interventions had helped to improve peer relationships, including enabling them to calm down and reconcile after arguments. Mindfulness focus group participants in particular noted fewer arguments and better collaboration and listening among classmates.

“I think because we’re just thinking about something else and nothing was happening. You forget and you start being friends. And you don’t fall out as much”
(Mindfulness-based exercises)

Contrary to this, participants in one Relaxation focus group and two Mindfulness focus groups felt that the sessions did not always impact peer relationships, especially if arguments during breaktime were particularly intense.

Conclusions

There were no significant main effects identified through the main trial for both interventions. However, implementation findings indicated that there were potential benefits to receiving Relaxation techniques in primary (but not secondary) schools if the intervention was delivered frequently and consistently. Conversely, Mindfulness-based exercises showed potential benefits when delivered frequently and consistently in secondary, but not primary school settings. Yet, in some conditions or at some levels of implementation, both interventions were associated with more emotional difficulties for some students. These mixed findings suggest that schools should be careful when implementing anything new, ensuring to monitor outcomes to assess benefits and also to check if any groups are experiencing negative effects.

Many children within the qualitative research subsample reported benefits of the Mindfulness-based exercises and Relaxation techniques for their mental health and wellbeing, as well as on classroom dynamics, including learning, behaviour, and peer relationships. However, some also experienced annoyance, stress, or physical discomfort from the activities. The interventions appeared to differ in terms of some of the mechanisms behind impact described by participants. Relaxation techniques were noted for taking difficult feelings away as a result of breathing or muscle relaxation exercises; whilst Mindfulness-based exercises were seen as distracting from or helping to forget problems and let difficult feelings go. Overall, the qualitative findings illustrate how and why school-based, universally delivered Relaxation techniques and Mindfulness-based exercises can have an impact, as well as what can undermine their impact, from the perspectives of children receiving these interventions.

Implications for delivery

Schools should be careful when implementing any new mental health programmes, consulting the evidence base to identify interventions that are known to be effective for the specific age and/or stage of education, and ensuring to monitor outcomes to assess benefits and also to check if any groups are negatively impacted. The qualitative findings presented in this briefing suggest that for schools delivering Mindfulness-based exercises or Relaxation techniques, the following factors are important for school staff to consider:

- Providing a quiet, distraction-free environment and a space where students can sit, stand, or move comfortably
- Delivering the interventions after lunch or breaktime and before lessons begin
- Including variety in activities
- Ensuring that students understand the purpose or potential benefits of the interventions
- Managing behaviour issues during sessions.

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