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Contemplative practices in the Reception classroom: the perceptions of seven pupils on a series of PSHE inputs

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Abstract

Improved psychological wellbeing has been reported for adults and older children (aged eight to eighteen years) undertaking various programmes of 'mindfulness' and 'contemplative practice' (e.g. Irving, Dobkin & Park, 2009). This research explores younger children's views on a series of short breathing exercises that were adapted from Snel, (2014) on Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy. Mixed methods - drawings and semi-structured post-input interviews - were used in order to assess the impact of the breathing exercises on a group of (7) children aged between four and five years. Placing perception centre-stage highlighted a range of positive results on these individuals' affective states. Recurrent themes included: relaxation, happiness, focus and (increased) memory and self-awareness. These findings tentatively support the integration of contemplative practices into early years Personal Social Health and Economic Education (PSHE) programmes, in order to pre-emptively address childhood anxieties that might otherwise negatively impact learning (Grills-Taquechel, Fletcher, Vaughn & Stuebing, 2012).

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Introduction

This paper takes ‘contemplative practices’ as its starting point. As it unfolds it will become apparent that the practices described are inextricably linked to ‘mindfulness’. Yet, having become fashionable to the point of misappropriation (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013), it is important that mindfulness be defined – precisely – from the outset. Here, the emphasis on contemplation signals a departure from the Buddhist meditation from which mindfulness originated (Teasdale & Chakalson, 2013a; Teasdale & Chakalson, 2013b). Any possible overlap between an overtly Buddhist mindfulness and religious education in schools also raises a number of issues, not least that of the right to withdraw (School Standards Framework Act, 1998, c31, Schedule 19). The procedural neutrality that is commonly held to be fundamental to religious education also risks being undermined (Hull, 2003; Barnes, 2007). While, rightly or wrongly, “understand[ing] each religion on its own terms” (Thanissaro, 2010, p.64) – as against procedural neutrality – presents a contentious backdrop to the Department for Education requirement that “fundamental British values” be taught within maintained schools (DfE, 2014a).

Henceforth – having established the universal secular context described – the terms contemplative practice and mindful meditation will be used interchangeably. They refer to an “operational working definition of mindfulness” as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145). It ought to be noted that even this order of lay, present-focused, mindful meditation incorporates a number of therapeutic strands that vary in their emphasis and ‘unfolding’. The specific emphasis in this paper is on children’s perceptions of a short breathing exercise adapted from Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002) by Snel (2014).

The basis for this study is *Sitting Still Like a Frog: The Little Frog* (Snel, 2014). This is a version of the breathing exercise, noted above, that has been specifically adapted for young children through the tangible character of the frog, but which nevertheless retains the three-step structure of the MBCT original: (1) becoming aware of breathing, (2) gathering and focusing attention on breathing, and (3) expanding attention around breathing (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002). In establishing these contemplative practices this research aims, in particular, to reflect on the following three research questions. First, what themes arose in the children's responses to the contemplative practices encouraged? (RQ1). Second, was the children's understanding of mindful meditation metacognitive? (RQ2) Third, do the children think that meditation and mindfulness were useful in their wider school or home context? (RQ3).

In order to begin to do so, the next section of this paper takes the form of a review of literature on children's wellbeing in general, and as a component of Personal Social Health and Economic education (PSHE). It reflects on the value of interventions that aim to assist children in managing the unprecedented levels of stress associated with modern life (Rempel, 2012, pp.201-202). The specific focus is on the use of mindfulness-based approaches to wellbeing within school settings. Having identified the key themes that have emerged from this earlier body of research, these themes are then used to inform both the methodology and findings, below. In particular the value of the research questions - above - are highlighted, in ascertaining the feasibility of an area of study subject to very little prior research with regards to the age-range concerned. Finally, having presented a critical summary of the conclusions of this research into pupil perspectives on the contemplative PSHE inputs described, this paper explores their future implications for teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Where: PSHE - Its Changing Curriculum Status

The introduction to this paper has already emphasized the undesirability of integrating mindful meditation into the religious education curriculum. The issue then becomes one of where it could – or should – fit within broader national educational objectives. Here, a number of factors appear to come into play, the most prominent of which are (1) the age of the children concerned and, relatedly, (2) the learning intentions with which contemplative practices are concerned. As regards

(1) the changing place of Personal Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) is highly significant. The Coalition government's abolition of the *Every Child Matters* outcomes (DfES 2003), and their failure to act on the recommendations of the Macdonald (2009) Report raises questions of the viability of any study into contemplative practices in primary age phases.

Fortuitously, it was in a Reception class (of children aged four to five years) that I was placed for the period during which the case study that is at the heart of this research was conducted. Notably, in Reception it is the statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which are in play, in which PSHE is explicitly recognised under the guise of "personal social and emotional development" (PSED; DfE, 2014b, p.7). As the non-statutory guidance material that accompanies this statutory framework makes clear, children's wellbeing is central to PSED (Early Education, 2014). As such it is possible to readily link (2) mindful meditation based learning intentions to broader curriculum objectives without any suggestion of statutory elements of the curriculum being compromised as a result.

It is important to note that this research emphasis in no way corroborates the dichotomy described: between the legal enshrinement in the National Curriculum of this aspect of children's wellbeing in the EYFS, and the failure to do so for primary phases thereafter. Nor does it represent any suggestion of the differential efficacy of contemplative practices on children's wellbeing across key stages. As the remainder of this literature review will make clear, whether we are concerned with adults or children, functional evidence for the impact of mindful meditation must be actively sought. What this emphasis on the intersection between the EYFS, wellbeing and contemplative practices does do, is to embed this research in wider debates regarding the importance of the recognition of PSHE education as a statutory subject.

Crucially, the act of listening to children's perceptions is at the fore of these debates, rather than simply being important for its own sake (Christensen & James, 2000). Evaluations of the functional efficacy of contemplative practices are heavily predicated upon self-reporting (Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt & Miller, 2014). As such, in generating data based on children's responses to and understanding of mindful meditation, this paper also aims to offer a preliminary window on its potential efficacy in the Reception classroom.

Why: Self-Reporting of Adult Wellbeing

Scientific evidence for the beneficial effects of contemplative practices is largely derived from studies of adults (individuals ≥ 18 years old), and shows a range of positive outcomes (Khoury et al., 2013). The conclusions of the first wave of clinical research were tentative and the effect size slight. An expansion in the number of outcomes considered, culminating in several major reviews and meta-analyses, has subsequently suggested at least moderate benefits (Baer, 2003; Irving, Dobkin & Park, 2009). Specific effects extend to physical health, including chronic pain management and improved immunological performance (Morone, Greco & Weiner, 2008), and cognitive function. More closely related to the concerns of this research, however, are the demonstrated benefits for psychological wellbeing, defined as positive mental functioning, alongside the more nebulous – but no less important – self-reported notion of “feeling good” (Huppert, 2009, p.137).

With respect to the relationship between positive mood and contemplative practices the majority of these studies formulated the latter within Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) interventions. Since MBCT is an adaptation of MBSR, for use with patients suffering from major depressive episodes rather than stress reduction per se (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002), the two programmes have a great deal in common. Both entail weekly class sessions, overseen by an instructor, lasting between 2 and 2.5 hours, with one session – somewhere between weeks five and seven – extending over a complete day (c.7 hours; Zoogman et al., 2014). The expectation is that the practices taught during these sessions be repeated on a daily basis using multimedia accompaniments (usually a guided meditation CD), in combination with reflective exercises (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2012).

Research concerned specifically with these programmes, conducted using the very latest brain imaging techniques, has confirmed their efficacy on a neural level, with changes in the brain’s gray matter concentration recorded (for example Holzel et al., 2011). Incontrovertible empirical support for the impact of mindful meditation on aspects of psychological wellbeing ranging from emotional regulation to self-perception appears to be mounting (Holzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago & Ott, 2011). One significant result of these developments in Britain has been the integration of contemplative practices into the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2009) guidelines for the treatment of depression in adults.

When: Mindful Meditation in Educational Settings

If the growth in neuropsychological studies into contemplative practices represents one major emergent research strand, then the potential for mindful meditation with children (<18-years-old) in educational settings represents another. These two strands nevertheless remain distinct. Burgeoning movements in the Netherlands ('Mindfulness Matters'), Britain ('Mindfulness in Schools,' 'Breathing Space') and the United States ('Mindful Schools,' 'MindUp') have not reached the type of consensus found within MBSR and MBCT. High fidelity correlations required for mapping the overlap across studies between the brain networks activated have not yet been forthcoming. This is a context for which the relative infancy of research concerned with mindful meditation in non-clinical sub-populations is certainly a factor (Zoogman et. al., 2014).

Whether those contemplative practices in which children are engaged, however, will ever attain the degree of standardization required for major neuroscientific review (Kringelbach & Berridge, 2010) remains a moot point (even before the matter of rapid brain development in childhood, and the resultant need for age-specific comparison is considered). Whether this degree of standardization is indeed desirable, given the importance of ensuring that mindful meditation is modified to meet the developmental needs of younger participants (Semple, Reid & Miller, 2005) raises a further issue. Attempts to use quantifiable measures of the effects of mindful meditation more generally have been problematic on account of the lack of appropriately validated measures of wellbeing in children (Huppert & Johnson, 2010). As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the success of contemplative practices among children has largely been judged using self-reporting against subjective criteria (Burke, 2009).

To these scientific and conceptual challenges ought to be added practical strategic and philosophical out-workings of the relationship between childhood and mindful meditation (Hayes & Greco, 2008, p.4). The nature of these challenges, however, in many cases remains unclear. The research context against which this paper is set, for example, is one from which the very youngest children (aged < 7 years) are virtually absent (Abrams, 2007; Mendelson, Greenberg, Dariotis, Gould, Rhoades & Leaf, 2010). This absence is both confounding, and in urgent need of redress.

The programmes delivered in schools generally exclude the focus on past maladaptive thought processes, found within the early stages of adult MBSR and MBCT. This is entirely comprehensible from the perspective of wanting to ensure that the contemplative practices taught are age

appropriate, since any therapeutic focus on past maladaptive thought processes is necessarily abstract, presenting challenges for comprehension as compared with more concrete preventative exercises. However, where older children (≥ 7 years) are concerned, brain plasticity is already reduced, and negative thought processes are likely to already have become embedded as a result. The question seems to be: would it not be better to establish preventative strategies when children's brains are at their most malleable (< 7 years)? Since contemplative practices are, at base, a matter of skill acquisition underpinned by repetition, in order to bring about changes in the brain (Chang, Hou & Mattson 2010) early mindful meditation would seem to carry the greatest potential for children's wellbeing.

In older children (aged 7 – 18 years) clinical studies of children with heterogenous mental health diagnoses demonstrated parent-ratified increases in attention, positivity, self-esteem, self-regulation and improved sleep, as well as reduced anxiety and depression associated with their participation in mindful meditation (Biegel, Brown, Shapiro & Schubert, 2009). Similar benefits have been shown in school-delivered programmes, particularly for children whose pre-programme psychological wellbeing was at a lower than expected level (Napoli, Krech & Holley, 2005). As such, particularly given the theoretical issues raised above, there would seem to be a clear rationale for extending research concerned into contemplative practices with the under seven age group.

There are several obvious advantages to teaching these practices in schools, beyond the demonstrable benefits to all children at some level, and the potential of these benefits to positively impact learning immediately thereafter (Zenner, Hernleben-Zurz & Walach, 2014). The first relates to the fluidity of wellbeing: the degree to which an individual's wellbeing may oscillate, and – in the case of its reduction – the time likely to elapse before clinical interventions, outside school, are put in place. The second relates to the way in which universal in-school mindful meditation prevents the singling out of children from their peers. Not only does this reduce the associated potential for stigma (Kayama & Haight, 2014, p.94), but it also avoids placing an onus on children, for whom self-esteem may already be a significant issue, in the allocation of support. It is this logic that underpinned my decision to include all of the children in the Reception class concerned in the whole-class mindful meditation inputs described below.

Methodology

Seven four- and five-year-old children from a state maintained school in Cambridgeshire participated in both phases of this study.

Study Design: Mixed Methods

Within the social sciences in general, and educational research in particular, three categories of research design can be identified: (1) quantitative research, geared towards gathering numerical data, (2) qualitative research, which is not, and (3) a ‘mixed methods’ approach (Bryman, 1998) that emerged as an explicit category of research design in the late 1990s, as a reaction against earlier notions of the incommensurability of (1) and (2) (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Proponents of this third design category took a pragmatic philosophical line. They emphasized the benefits of ‘triangulating’ quantitative and qualitative approaches. More specifically, they championed the notion that data acquired or analysed using different methods could be mutually validatory (where it shows a correspondence), at the same time as enriching the resultant understanding of social phenomena that are, by their nature, multidimensional (Ritchie & Ormston, 2013).

My decision to combine the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in my research design was, first and foremost, informed by these strengths. Notwithstanding the wider issue of the epistemological shortcomings of mixed methods – particularly their tendency to curtail the development of a more effective approach (Symonds & Gorard, 2010) – the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in combination emerged as the most appropriate design for this study. In particular, the sequential timing of the collection of qualitative data (children’s drawings), followed by quantitative data (comprised of coded responses to a semi-structured interview), met the needs of four and five year olds for individualised research instruments.

That the children were able to use the former in order to tailor their responses to the latter overcame the two main disadvantages of this order of two-phased strategy. First, it reduced the laboriousness inherent in entirely researcher-designed individualised instruments. Second, it made overt the linkage between the two – qualitative and quantitative – aspects of the study (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib & Rupert, 2007). Perhaps more importantly, however, it provided the children with a practical and developmentally appropriate means of scaffolding their thinking in relation to the contemplative practices taught: all of the interviewees were invited to respond with reference to

their drawings. This approach had the added advantage of dampening the power structures inherent in the school context (Manke, 1997): allowing the child-interviewee, for example, to break eye contact with the teacher-interviewer.

Class Inputs and Instruction

This case study is concerned with children's awareness of, and attitudes to, contemplative practices, as described above, of which they self-reported as having no prior experience. As such, it necessarily had a dual remit: (1) to provide a practical introduction to mindful meditation as the basis for (2) an exploration of their perspectives on these practices. Recent evaluations of the link between children's wellbeing and contemplative practices emphasize the importance, from programme fidelity, of instructors' long-standing everyday engagement with these same practices (Burke, 2009; Kuyken et al., 2013). However, while I am fortunate enough to have undertaken an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course (and associated 'homework' exercises) of the order that meets the standard thirty or forty hour pre-requisite, I did not feel sufficiently well qualified to develop my own contemplative programme.

Instead I based the inputs that I developed on an exercise from Snel's (2014) *Sitting Still Like a Frog*. This had the advantage of pre-determined developmentally appropriate session lengths and lengths of meditation, while being one of the few programmes developed with children younger than seven in mind as part of an ongoing University of Nijmegen (Netherlands) project (Singh, Kristeller, Raffone & Giommi, 2013). A stand-alone PSHE lesson was used to introduce the idea of contemplative practices; repeated short (c. 5 minute) inputs were then based on this initial lesson, but integrated within other lessons across the curriculum (copyright restrictions preclude inclusion of the transcript, though see Snel, 2014, p.104 "The Little Frog" and the accompanying CD). Happenstance opportunities for discussing contemplative practices were also taken in the course of the fortnight during which these planned inputs took place in order to achieve the required repetition (Zoogman et al., 2014).

Drawings and Interviews

Several researchers have identified the ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) as the impetus behind a paradigm shift in the social sciences (Mayall, 2000; Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009). An increasing appreciation of the need to

incorporate the perspectives of even the very youngest – and, indeed, their right to be heard – demanded new approaches to listening to children (Rinaldi, 2001). This reconceptualisation of early childhood, is allied with an emergent concern with the holistic child, itself linked to a growing appreciation of the potential of mindfulness in schools (Huppert, 2009). Of note, however, from a methodological point of view is the impact of this wider political context on researchers' search for new and creative sources of meaning making by children.

Drawings had long been regarded as a way of accessing children's developmental status (Cox, 1992): now researchers began to explore the potential of graphical representations to offer a window on an individual's inner psychological life (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009). In particular, a growing body of work has underlined the importance of examining children's drawings within the context of an adult interaction, and in which their verbal ascriptions of meaning are recorded (Anning, 2002; Taguchi, 2006). It is from here that I developed the approach used.

In brief: children were invited to reflect either on the thoughts, (physical) feelings and emotions of Dave, a character in *Dogger* (Hughes, 1977), or on the same triad in relation to an experience of their own. It was suggested that they might like to use each side of a cardboard cut-out person to indicate how Dave / they might have felt before and after engaging in contemplative practices. Throughout the exercise, which was undertaken in small groups, adults encouraged dialogue: predominantly through the use of open questioning.

The advantages of triangulating data acquired from children's drawings and semi-structured post-input interviews have already been outlined. Although the former certainly reduced the laboriousness of the latter, interviewing remains a time-consuming approach to data collection (Drever, 2003). As such, external limits were imposed on the number of participants in the study, which – in turn – impacted the extent to which the results (described below) could be generalised. It was nevertheless felt that the richness of the seven pupils' perspectives made possible by the flexibility of a semi-structured interview was a counter-balance to these shortcomings. This is a counterbalance that should, moreover, be considered against the backdrop of the very early stage of research into contemplative practices with regards to this age group. Checks were, nevertheless, put in place to ensure that the relationship between individual interviews was sufficiently robust to allow for the meaningful codification of the responses recorded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, I generated a list of questions in advance of the post-input interviews in order to ensure

that similar data was gathered for each individual, but Kvale’s (1996) nine categories of question type were consulted as an organising principle (see Figure 1, below).

The project’s research questions were to act as the organising principle behind the data obtained from the interviews; in coding the data to address RQ2 and RQ3, the themes to emerge would then directly address RQ1. The codes obtained are presented in Appendix 1.

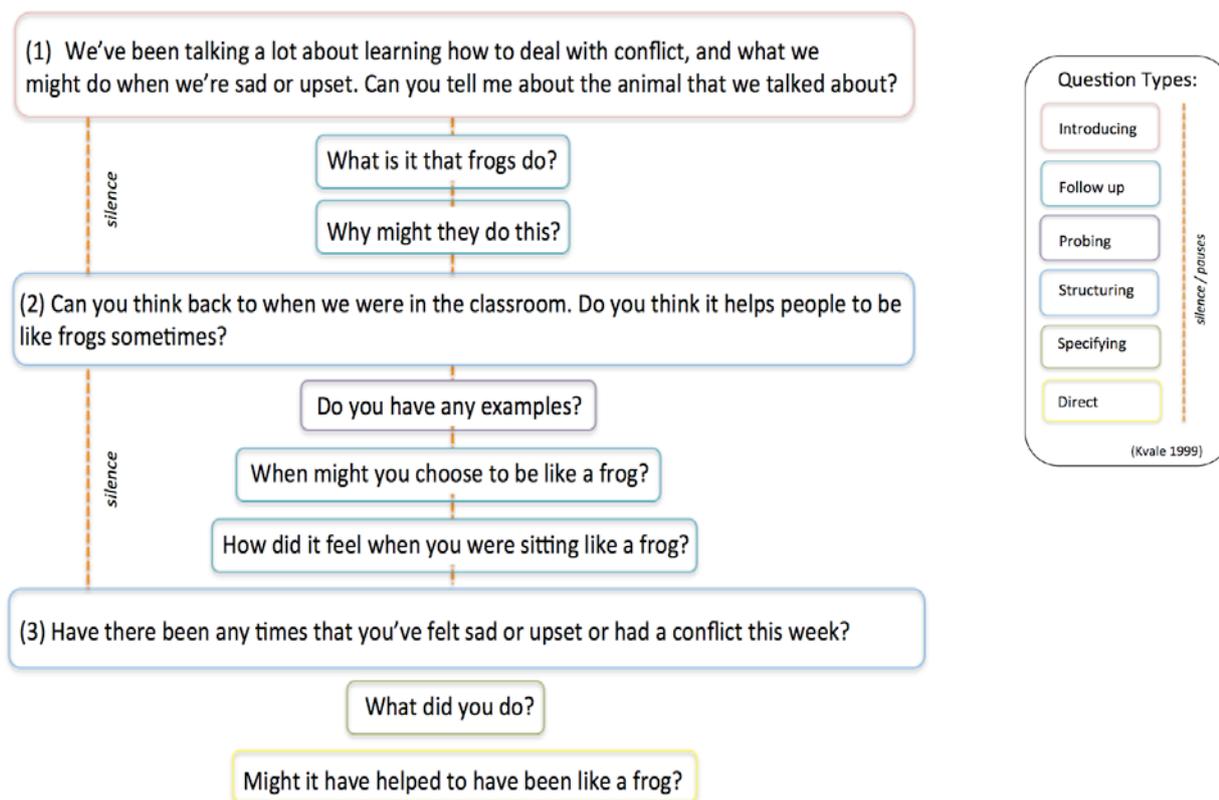


Figure 1: Overview of the Interview Schedule and Question Types

Ethical Considerations

Before commencing the inputs described, approval for my research project proposal was gained from my personal tutor at the University of Cambridge. Informal discussions about school protocol for research consents were conducted initially with my mentor, who added her signature to the proposal. Consent for this research was then successfully sought from the head teacher of the School. Her agreement enabled me to collect my data without the need to obtain specific parental consents in relation to my research intentions. This was possible on account of parents’ prior permission for their children’s involvement in educational research conducted under the auspices of the School.

Further ethical checks were put in place. On the one hand, these were of a directly prescribed nature: relating to the completion of the Faculty of Education ethics checklist. On the other hand, the indirect implications of this checklist, and in particular the requirement to pay due heed to the *Ethical Guidelines for Education Research* (BERA, 2011), informed my research design in a number of tangible ways. All of the names given in the text (whether of individual children or teachers, groups, or classes) have been changed in order to ensure anonymity; names on photographs of children's work have been redacted (BERA, 2011, p.7). Confidentiality was also ensured by the use of a school dictaphone to record interviews, and the destruction of these recordings following the transcription process.

The final – but arguably most fundamental – aspect of the ethical protocol that I followed relates to the matter of pupil consent: parental consent is a necessary condition for research involving children, but it is not the sole condition. Here, especially, there is no 'elusive ethical principle... [to] arbitrate in the midst of a dilemma' (Kushner, 2000: p.47); instead the aim had to be one of avoiding contexts in which such dilemmas are likely to arise. My mentor agreed that all children should be included in the whole-class inputs, however – given the potentially for sensitive disclosures – all of the adults involved were to be reminded of the School's *Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy* (reference redacted). While I addressed the issue of children's informed consent (in age appropriate terms) at the interview stage, prior work is included in this study only if consent was subsequently gained.

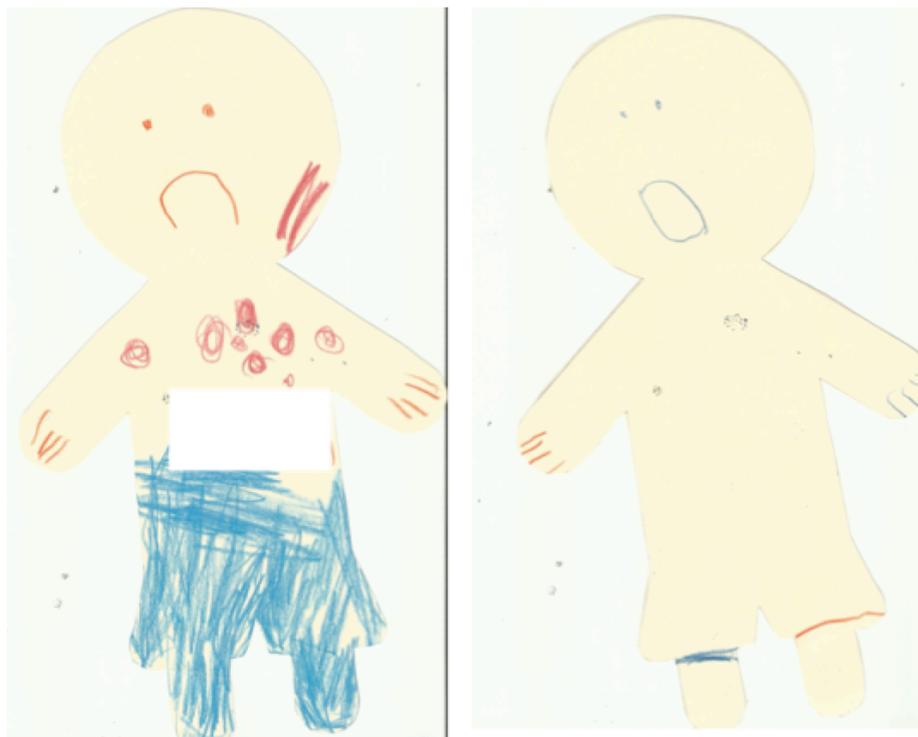
Critical Evaluation of Findings

Drawing on Emotions: Facial Expressions and Emotional Intelligence

Children's drawings and accompanying conversations were intended primarily for use in relation to the first two of the research questions on which this study focuses (see Introduction). In particular, I hoped to find a child-friendly means of ascertaining whether – and to what extent – the children understood the association between contemplative practices and positive affective states. Here, it should be noted that all of the drawings were selected from those of the class as a whole at random; Oscar's is included here despite his exclusion from the second phase of the study for reasons that I will go on to discuss.

Recall

On the most basic level I hoped to ascertain whether the children’s participation in the *Sitting Still Like a Frog: The Little Frog* (Snel, 2014) exercise had proved sufficiently meaningful and engaging to ensure some recall. As an aside, I was interested in whether contemplative practices lacking visual support for aural comprehension presented any significant barriers to understanding among four and five year olds. Leaving Oscar’s picture for the time being, it is of note that all of the children concerned, with the exception of Oliver, were able to offer a perspective that clearly linked with the mindful meditation activity in which they had participated. The themes that emerge strongly correlate with the transcript for this activity. Martin, for example, was interested in the idea of sitting still; Christopher, whose example is shown in Figure 2, pursued an understanding of calm through deeply inhaling; and Phoebe the value of breathing. It is worth highlighting, moreover, that while the link between Oliver’s drawing and the whole class input was not readily apparent, he did engage with the activity and was able to offer *a* perspective.



Accompanying dialogue: [Points to red spots] “That’s where he’s hurt.” [Me: “What’s happening here?”] “His mouth is open wide because he’s felt more calm.” [sic]

Figure 2: Christopher’s drawings before (“hurt”) and after (“relaxed”) contemplative practices.

Metacognition

Metacognition is a term that is used to refer to an individual’s ability to reflect on his or her own thinking. It is inextricably linked to mindful meditation, in which the aim is one of detaching from one’s own thinking so as to avoid becoming emotionally over-involved (Fox & Christoff, 2014, p.305). Children’s demonstration of a metacognitive understanding of mindful meditation is crucial if their perspectives are to be held to provide some insight into wider concerns regarding the potential of contemplative practices in schools, a fact that is reflected in the second of the research questions presented in the Introduction. For the purposes of this study, their drawings – and associated dialogue – operate as an important window on the extent to which they are able to apply the principles of *Sitting Still Like a Frog* (Snel, 2014) to other contexts.

In this regard, Ava, Phoebe, Otto, Emmeline and Oliver’s retrospective application of mindfulness practices to real or imagined ego centric situations is a highly significant starting-point. Observations of Emmeline’s distress in lunchtime situations, in particular, suggest that her drawing (Figure 3) and comments relate to a concrete context: “I’m happy when I’m in the playground,” “I wasn’t feeling well ‘cos there was too much on my plate but then I think I’m going to sit still and half-closed my eyes and... and I’ll feel a bit weller today [sic]”.



Figure 3: Emmeline’s drawings after (“relaxed”) and before (“tired”) contemplative practices.

Body and Movement

Prior research on emotion labels by children has focused on their systematic emergence in relation to standard facial expressions and stereotypical stories (Widen & Russell, 2003). However, given the importance of the confluence of affective states, thoughts and physical sensations the need to extend this focus – beyond the face – was clear. As a medium, the expressive arts would seem to offer significant potential for children to explore these overlapping interests in relation to the mindful meditation practices taught (Pearson & Wilson, 2009), at the same time as making tangible their perspectives.



Accompanying dialogue: “Everything’s funny and then I falled over.” [sic]

Figure 4: Oliver’s drawing L: “funny” and R: “I don’t know”.

The most surprising aspect of the drawings produced was the manner in which the children were able to convey those features of *Sitting Still Like a Frog* (Snel, 2014) that they regarded as salient, in spite of the constraints imposed by the cut out figure they were provided with. The children’s mark making, in particular, shows clear evidence of an attempt to account for movement – chaotic movement even – in their illustration of negative affective states (see again Figure 4, for example). The resulting impression of the pre- and post- meditation intersection of emotion, thought and

sensation shows a strong affinity with the contemplative practices that they experienced in class. Even Oliver, the child who seemed to experience the greatest difficulty in verbalizing his perspective on contemplative practices, was able to produce two distinct drawings that are meaningful from a research point of view, as well as his own. A further area of interest, which will be explored more fully in relation to the semi-structured interviews that were subsequently conducted, is the extent to which the children drew on examples of physical hurt in order to express what they viewed as the potential of contemplative practices. Christopher's figure (Figure 2) is bruised; Otto's "arm fell off"; and Oscar, whose example is shown Figure 5 below, exerted symbolic violence of his own through the use of serrated scissors.



Oscar declined to draw on the other side ("it won't work, it's already cut"). Accompanying dialogue: "Bad boy is angry. It's hurting him so I cut it."

Figure 5: Oscar's drawing before contemplative practices.

How Many Frogs?

Meerkats or Moles? Croaking or Listening

For the purpose of critically assessing the formulation of the interview questions detailed in Figure 1, I have retained, and coded the responses to the introductory question: do you remember what animal we talked about? Table 1 presents the frequency that each animal was mentioned. Here, as with all of the coded data unless otherwise stated, maximum frequency of 1 is given for each code in relation to each child’s interview (equating to a maximum score of 7).

| Animal | Frequency |
|-----------|-----------|
| Frogs | 7 |
| Meerkats | 2 |
| Rabbits | 3 |
| Moles | 1 |
| Giraffes | 1 |
| Elephants | 1 |
| Crows | 1 |
| Foxes | 1 |

Table 1: Frequency for Featured Animals

It became apparent over the course of the interviews that the children were unclear about which of the many animals they had learnt about in the preceding half-term I was interested in their perspective on. While, ultimately, the semi-structured interview format allowed me to scaffold their responses sufficiently to support desired response (and a necessary response if the interview was to continue), it was not until some way into the interview schedule that I was able to reduce the time required to achieve this. Ultimately, it became clear that when children were asked “What animals have we spent time pretending to be?” all immediately identified the frog. This served as an important reminder of the difficulties inherent in, and time-consuming nature of, interviews that rely heavily on follow-up and probing questions, as well as of the future importance of trial run-throughs of interview formats.

Children’s perception of the characteristics of frogs that are related to mindful meditation, in quantitative terms, see Table 2 and Figure 6, gives the impression of similar confusion.

| Characteristic / Activity | Frequency |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| Croaking | 1 |
| Jumping | 2 |
| Swimming | 1 |
| Listening | 1 |
| Stopping | 1 |
| Stillness | 5 |
| Breathing | 2 |

Table 2: Frequency of Frog Characteristics

Here, however, the specifics of the contemplative exercise discussed above need to be considered within the context of the holistic, overlapping domains of the EYFS curriculum (Early Education, 2014). Children’s understanding of *Sitting Like a Frog: The Little Frog* – and the focus on the frog for mindful meditation – was necessarily predicated on a concrete experience of what it is that frogs do, as provided by a documentary video clip. It should be noted that prior to viewing the clip, questioning only elicited evidence of the children’s knowledge of frogs jumping. As such, the children’s identification of the range of frog characteristics / activities is a clear indicator of their learning in relation to the class inputs previously described.

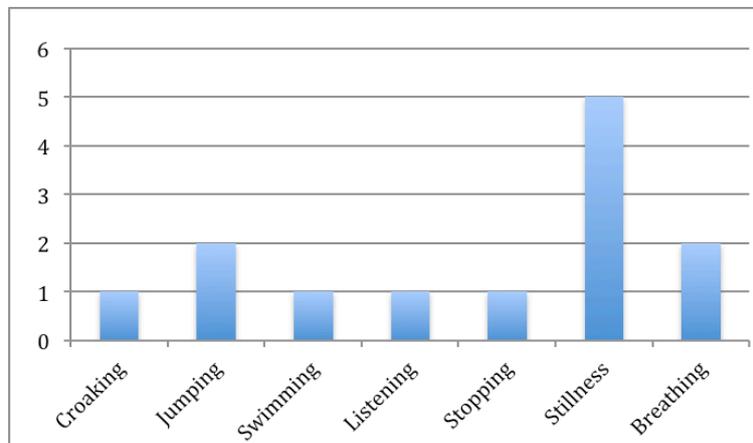


Figure 6: Bar Chart of Salient Characteristics / Activities of Frog

More interesting, however, is the frequency with which the children remarked on frogs’ stillness; particularly in the light of their prior illustration of movement as a characteristic of negative affective states (as referenced by Figure 4 earlier). What begins to emerge is a sense in which this group of four and five year olds value stillness within contemplative practices. Tentative

suggestions might be made, here, regarding the degree of sensory stimulation to which these children are exposed as part of high-quality EYFS practice (Ofsted, 2010). If mindful-meditation is to be geared up towards developmentally appropriate and educationally specific factors that the very youngest children in our schools regard as salient, the question then becomes one of the need for more radical adaptations of MBCT, with its strong emphasis on breathing (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002).

Children’s Perspectives on Mindful Meditation, its Key Aspects and its Effects

Codification of the affective states referred to during interviews is of limited usefulness in the absence of their proper contextualisation. The results from this codification are illustrated in Table 3 and Figure 7. When categorised according to their positive or negative attributes the impression created is one of children’s optimism with regards to their well-being: 21/33 (see smaller pie chart contained within Figure 7) of the instances noted are of mentions of positive affective states and a significant number of these had not previously been mentioned in the class inputs.

| Positive | Frequency | Negative | Frequency |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Happy | 4 | Crazy | 1 |
| Focused* | 2 | Worried | 1 |
| Relaxed / Calm* | 6 | Hurt+ | 4 |
| Well | 2 | Scared | 1 |
| Aware* | 5 | Angry* | 1 |
| Remembering | 1 | Upset* | 1 |
| Amused | 1 | Sad | 1 |
| | | Bad | 1 |
| | | Tired | 1 |

* Codified affective state was mentioned during *Sitting Still Like a Frog* (Snel, 2014, CD)
 + Codified affective state was alluded to during *Sitting Still Like a Frog* (Snel, 2014, CD)

Table 3: Affective States



Figure 7: Positive and Negative Affective States

However, without viewing these affective states in terms of children’s perception of their relationship with (1) pre- and (2) post- meditative contexts, (how the children felt before and after the breathing exercise, respectively) further remarks on the perceived efficacy of mindful meditation are not possible. When these contexts are included, the results, shown in Table 4, proved extremely insightful.

| Pre-Meditative Context | Post-Meditative Context |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Crazy | Happy |
| Worried | Focused |
| Hurt | Relaxed / Calm |
| Scared | Well |
| Angry | Aware |
| Upset | Remembering |
| Amused | |
| Sad | |
| Bad | |
| Tired | |

Table 4: Affective States and their Perceived Relationship with Pre- and Post- Meditative Contexts

With the sole exception of ‘amused’ the pre-meditative contexts were all associated with negative affective states and the post-meditative contexts with positive. Clearly, the children’s perception of mindful meditation was of its status as an intervention with significant potential for enhancing their well-being. While the extent to which many of these attributes had not been specifically mentioned in earlier inputs excludes both the suggestion that these have been learnt by rote, and the likelihood of children’s voices having been significantly swayed by attempts to meet interviewer expectations (Kvale, 1996). In relation to the attributes of the meditative practices that they identified as salient (presented in Table 5) the emphasis unsurprisingly shows clear similarities with the ‘frog characteristics’ (see Table 2) noted above. Practical, physical features appear to be most important to the young children interviewed, although there is also an element of the fantastical (‘floating’) which, perhaps, links to the individuals for whom they identified mindful meditation as being useful (discussed below).

| Aspect | Frequency |
|--------------|-----------|
| Stillness | 5 |
| Calm | 3 |
| Quiet | 2 |
| Practice | 2 |
| Breathe | 5 |
| Floating | 2 |
| Awareness | 3 |
| Listening | 2 |
| Closing eyes | 3 |

Table 5: Key Aspects of Mindful Meditation

Children’s Perceptions of Mindful Meditation: What this Study Tells Us

The themes that arose in the children’s responses to *Sitting Still Like a Frog: The Little Frog* (Snel, 2014) were overwhelmingly positive. Children’s perspectives on contemplative practices identified a range of positive potential effects on their wellbeing: from increased happiness, focus and self-awareness, to its value as an aid to memory and relaxation (see Figure 6). They applied the metacognitive context of mindful meditation – rather than simply recalling its attributes and were able to identify a range of individuals (listed with accompanying frequency in Table 6, below) for whom they felt it might be beneficial. In the first phase of the study contemplative practices were

primarily related to ego-centric contexts; in the second children dramatically extended its remit to include characters from fiction: Peter Rabbit (Potter, 1902), Elsa of Disney’s *Frozen* (Producer: Del Vecho, Directors: Buck & Lee, 2013), and Master Po (*Kung Fu Panda*; Producer: Cobb, Directors: Stevenson & Osborne, 2008). While only one of seven participants reported having thought about mindful meditation at home this may reflect (1) the early stage of its embedding, as well as (2) the developmental status of the children concerned. There would seem to be a clear case for further adapting the MBCT programme on which children’s contemplative practices are conventionally based (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002) in order to reflect the concrete concerns of four and five year olds.

| Individual | Frequency |
|------------------|-----------|
| Myself | 5 |
| Other child(ren) | 1 |
| Adult(s) | 2 |
| Family (member) | 1 |
| Friend(s) | 1 |
| Others* | 4 |
| Nobody | 1 |

* Individuals identified, but not personally known to the child, for example a character from a book.

Table 6: Children's insights into those individuals within their wider community for whom mindful meditation might prove beneficial

Critical Analysis of Research Methodology and Implications for Future Practice

Research Design

Drawings were highly informative at the stage in the research at which they were conducted, allowing the children to explore their own understanding of mindful meditation (Einarsdottir et. al. 2009), as well as providing a tangible prop for use during the interview process. The only major shortcoming related to the children’s production of the drawings in groups. The constraints imposed by listening to four or five children simultaneously made it difficult for the adult leading the group to transcribe all of the salient data, while in some instances children were clearly copying each other’s drawings. This, in turn, created difficulties when attempting to triangulate the perspectives suggested from the drawings and interview responses. Although on the whole the degree of

standardisation in the children's drawings meant that informative comparative data could ultimately be drawn out, this proved more time consuming than was initially anticipated. Nevertheless, it should be noted that far from diluting the order of asymmetric power relationship that I was concerned about with regards to the interviews (between teacher and pupil), the context in which the drawings were produced created imbalances of their own (between pupils) with several children's ideas coming to dominate (Kvale, 1996).

Coding provided a moderately effective method of ascertaining the patterning of themes that recurred most frequently during the interviews (Appendix 1). However, whether this amounted to "something important... in relation to the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82), as set against the richness of the qualitative raw data the interviews produced, remains open to debate. In part this was a result of the newness of research in the field of mindful meditation with the age group concerned. Coding had to be substantially adapted following the interview process, since the a-priori assumptions that had underlain the codes initially arrived at proved inadequate (particularly with regards to *who* the children thought the contemplative practices would be useful for).

Implications for Future Practice

Raising Expectations for Wellbeing: Classroom Ethos

At the beginning of this paper I commented on the degree to which mindfulness has become a fashionable and ill-defined practice. One result of this has been the suggestion, particularly in the popular press, that the practices taught are in some way ridiculous, or – still worse – that those participating might be subject to ridicule (Russell-Graham, 2013, p.19). My main fears at the outset of the inputs described were behavioural: whether the children would fully engage in the contemplative practices, or else spend the four minute meditation session giggling. The most positive aspect of this case study from *my* perspective was, therefore, the extent to which the children fully participated in *Sitting Still Like a Frog* (Snel, 2014). From the first undertaking, the only moment that laughter accompanied the exercise came with the phrase "maybe your bottom can't stop wiggling" (Snel, 2014: CD) – and wiggle they did. Crucially, this was purposeful laughter; it was a necessary moment of release for children of this age, but one in which they remained attentive to their bodies.

In terms of future practice, the fundamental principle here has to be of the importance of giving children an opportunity to meet high expectations. Of the children participating in both phases of the project, six of the seven were able to clearly articulate the logic behind the contemplative exercise in which they participated. They were able to do so because they were engaged; but this engagement was not simply a function of the exercise. Peter Rabbit (Potter 1902), Elsa of Disney's *Frozen* (Producer: Del Vecho, Directors: Buck & Lee, 2013), and Master Po (*Kung Fu Panda*; Producer: Cobb, Directors: Stevenson & Osborne, 2008) were engaging contexts of the children's own creation in which they took responsibility for their own well-being. Rather, it was engagement underpinned by a classroom ethos in which the children were expected to give their all, in this instance forged through the class teacher, but to which mindful meditation might also contribute. Ultimately, it is this ethos that should be created from the children's earliest days in school, with mindful meditation playing a key role: children, it seems, are often more open-minded than adults.

Safeguarding Issues

I was aware, in advance, of the potential for any discussion of emotion with young children, particularly of things that might make us sad, to lead to disclosures of interest in relation to safeguarding. Because drawings, in particular, provide a non-confrontational means through which individual children can voice their thoughts and feelings I certainly intend to use them again as a mechanism through which children's perspectives can be readily articulated. However it is important that I continue to recognise that the removal of these barriers also makes them a susceptible medium for disclosure. This was the case in one instance and, following discussions with the designated child protection officer, it was agreed that the child in question would be removed from the study. Oscar's drawing (Figure 5) and commentary were also deemed by the class teacher to be sufficiently unsettling for his participation in the second (interview) phase of the research to be inadvisable. As regards future PSHE inputs of this nature, these experiences underline the importance of reviewing safeguarding procedures regularly myself, and of ensuring that the other adults who I am managing are also suitably up-to-date. Consequently, I have added a tick box to the planning proforma I use, on which to indicate potentially contentious lessons, so as to double-check everyone's awareness of the appropriate protocol.

Developing an Integrated Programme: Parental involvement

While the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2013, p.13) note only the requirement that teachers' should "communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils' achievements and wellbeing," the positive impact of more sustained parental engagement on children's learning is well established (Desforges, 2003). In the EYFS, home/school reading schemes often provide the principle conduit through which regular written communication (in the form of a 'Reading Record' of comments on a child's reading) between parents and teachers take place. While parental participation in such schemes can be variable, few parents report being unwilling to participate (DfE, 2010, p.12).

Ideally, contemplative practices require only marginally less involvement than reading on the part of parents: with previous studies specifying around 8 minutes practice per day if the impact on a child's wellbeing is to be maximised (Huppert & Johnson, 2010, p.168; although it should be noted that these suggestions are based on older children). The case study described showed that only Christopher actively engaged with mindful meditation at home, despite a more prevalent willingness amongst the other children (5/7) to do so. Clearly, as with emergent readers, this demonstrated that it is unrealistic to expect our youngest children to come to the order of activities described independently. Parental voice links strongly to pupil voice. Unlike the well-established practice of home/school reading schemes, however, contemplative practices are likely to prove unfamiliar for the majority of parents.

Here, the children's responses offer a way forward that underlines the importance that I listen to their perspectives throughout my future practice. Children often have answers to the seemingly impossible. Christopher, for example, provided eloquent testimony of the potential of mindfulness, not for himself, but for Elsa of Disney's *Frozen* (Producer: Del Vecho, Directors: Buck & Lee, 2013): "Elsa gets cross... because Anna pushed her... I think that's what she does when she's scared [mimes shooting icicles]. But she didn't really know how to sit like a frog. [Next time] I should tell Elsa... and then she will be calm". By integrating children's extant interests into contemplative practices children have a means through which they can engage their parents. In doing so, and then by linking the practices described to parents' prior experience of involvement with school, they too are likely to see a purpose in their participation. Parental involvement with home/school reading schemes, and the reported impact of anxiety and stress on early reading (Grills-Taquechel, Fletcher, Vaughn & Stuebing, 2012) brings us full circle: to the beneficial effects

of mindful meditation on mental wellbeing. It is my hope to be able to develop an integrated programme of contemplative practices that works towards involving parents in decreasing negative affective states – and increasing wellbeing – in relation to the types of experiences of modern life which, research attests, children find stressful. In doing so, I hope to be able to move on from the short-term findings of this case study, in relation the children’s perceptions (while nevertheless keeping these perceptions in sight), and towards more measurable outcomes of the impact of mindful meditation on the learning of the youngest children in school.

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Appendix 1: Coding

Codes were organised on the basis of the project's three main research questions. Those listed under (a), (b), (c) and (d) relate to RQ2, (e) with links to (c) and (d) relate to RQ3. These codes then inform RQ1: What themes arose in the children's responses to the contemplative practices encouraged?

RQ2. Was the children's understanding of mindful meditation metacognitive?

(a) Animals

Frogs
Meerkats
Rabbits
Moles
Giraffes
Elephants
Crows
Foxes

(b) Frog Characteristics

Croaking
Jumping
Swimming
Listening
Stopping
Stillness

(c) Affective States

Positive

Happy
Focused
Relaxed
Well
Aware
Remembering
Amused

Negative

Crazy
Worried
Hurt
Scared
Angry
Upset
Sad
Bad
Tired

(d) Aspects of Meditation

Stillness
Calm
Quiet
Practice
Breath
Floating
Awareness
Listening
Closing eyes

RQ3. Did the children think that meditation and mindfulness were useful in their wider school or home context?

[links with (c) and (d) above]

(e) For whom?

Myself
Not myself
Other children
Family
Friends
Others
Nobody