

Does implementing regular mindfulness in EYFS support children to regulate their behaviour?

Hoxton Garden Primary School, EYFS

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of regular mindfulness and to find out if it supported children to regulate their behaviour within the classroom. Using a focus group model, the study followed the impact of mindfulness strategies in practice. For ten weeks children received mindfulness sessions four times a week for 10 minutes daily. They were reminded and encouraged to observe their body sensations, feelings and thoughts with interest and curiosity and to learn to accept these without judgement. They were supported in gaining more insight into their own feelings and behaviour to allow them to become more aware and sensitive to the feelings of others. By reflecting rather than reacting to feelings, teachers felt that pupil regulation of emotional responses has increased.

Introduction

Hoxton Garden Primary School is a multi cultural primary school situated in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium is significantly higher than the national average and pupils typically enter nursery and reception below the expected level for their age across a number of areas of learning. The proportion of pupils from a minority ethnic group and those who speak English as an additional language are also much higher than national averages.

Personal, social and emotional development is a prime area of learning in the EYFS curriculum. Children's development relies in part on influential adults such as parents and carers to provide positive feedback and model appropriate behaviour. In order for a child to meet their early learning goal by the end of EYFS they need to understand their own feelings, be able to talk about their behaviour and its consequences and make choices over behaviour related actions. It is important to recognise how complex this may be to a child who has not experienced expectations of behaviour in a wider

social setting outside the home. Children need the support of adults to help them to understand these complex and often challenging areas. Greco and Hayes (2008) explained the challenges that children face when they become more verbal. They begin to derive rules either implicitly or explicitly from their interactions within their social verbal community. Therefore, when children have not been exposed to modelled social behaviours, they may struggle with the rules that are embedded within a school setting.

It had been discussed across Early Years Foundation Stage that some children were displaying negative learning behaviour within the classroom, many of whom were below age related expectation in their personal, social and emotional development. They were unable to self-regulate their emotions causing ineffective coping and decision making within the classroom. A number of research studies support the theory that regular mindfulness teaches children the correct skills to cope with new events and to self regulate their emotions. According to Monteiro (2015), the ability to control impulsive behaviours, as well as self-regulating behaviour leads to positive outcomes in school. He also suggests that children require control of attention to enable them to effectively learn new skills. Children need strategies implemented by adults to support them in maintaining focused attention to allow for such success. Greco and Hayes (2008) believe that a full range of contextual social problems can be rectified using acceptance and a mindful approach.

While children make good progress from their starting points in their personal, social and emotional development by the end of EYFS, a group of vulnerable children were identified as not making expected progress or progress in line with their peers. Saltzman (2014) describes how impulse control and the ability to manage emotions have a tremendous impact on children's ability to choose their behaviour. Mindfulness is a practise of 'being'. It is the slowing down and single tasking that creates awareness of state of mind and understanding associated feelings. It teaches individuals how to control the mind-set focusing on the current moment in physical presence (Willard and Saltzman) 2017.

In order to investigate this theory, a group of focus children were tracked across ten weeks participating in regular mindfulness and data analysis identified to review the effectiveness of the sessions. It was expected that regular sessions of mindfulness

would allow children to develop coping strategies to use independently when a challenging situation arose.

Research Process

The process was co-ordinated by the phase leader and delivered by two classroom teachers and two nursery education officers. All children in reception were involved in the study however a total of 6 children were identified as focus children and progress was measured for this group. The attitudes and behaviours of these children were measured through baseline, interim data and end of term data and this was used to identify the progress made throughout the research process. In addition, qualitative data in the form of pupil interviews was also collated at key points. The phase leader led training to support class teachers and nursery education officers in leading mindfulness sessions as well as supporting them in observing developmental change in personal, social and emotional development.

The implementation of these sessions happened over a series of days. The class teachers introduced strategies to support children, with a particular focus on the key children. It was important to ensure that children understood the purposes of these sessions and gained an insight as to what these sessions entailed before beginning a whole session. During the next 10 weeks, teachers delivered mindfulness sessions 4 times a week for 10 minutes daily. These sessions included mindfulness stories for children, breathing exercises and meditation. Early years assemblies were also focused on delivering a 10 minute session on mindfulness every second week. The assemblies were led by the phase leader and included stories, reminders and encourage children's feedback in relation to the strategies that they had learned. Children were encouraged to support their peers by offering advice about how they could calm themselves down when angry or upset. The class teachers also created a yoga studio in their setting. The role play consisted of props to use to support newly taught strategies and children were encouraged to visit the role play when they were demonstrating a difficulty in coping with a particular situation.

Weekly phase meetings provided an opportunity for dialogue between professionals who were undertaking the research project. This allowed essential time to share and discuss methods that were successful and those that were not as successful. The

dialogue gave the professionals further support in developing ways to ensure children were beginning to use the strategies taught independently and how to implement this successfully through adult consistency. The progression of statements which include managing behaviour, feelings, self-confidence and self-awareness were visited throughout each meeting and the evidence discussed for consistency in judgements.

Findings

The children responded positively to the mindfulness programme. The results from the children’s questionnaires and discussions with class teachers show that the implementation of mindfulness sessions were successful and enjoyed by the children. There were a number of very quick noticeable differences in ways that children supported their peers in finding coping tactics when showing signs of challenging behaviour. Class teachers fed back that the use of the role play provided an opportunity for children to deepen their understanding of mindfulness further through independent play and gave them the opportunity to develop their own games and strategies.

Children’s ability to understand that their own actions affect other people was where the most rapid progress was made evident. Figure1 is used to identify the statements that were discussed within regular meetings to ensure consistency of judgements (highlighted in red).

| Managing feelings and behaviour 40-60 months | Managing feelings and behaviour ELG |
|---|---|
| <p>Confident to speak to others about own needs and wants, interests and opinions</p> <p>Can describe self in positive terms and talk about abilities</p> | <p>Children are confident to try new activities and say why they like some activities more than others. They are confident to speak in a familiar group, will talk about their ideas and will choose the resources they need for their chosen activities. They say when they do or don't need help.</p> |

| Self-confidence and self-awareness 40-60 | Self-confidence and self-awareness ELG |
|--|--|
| <p>Understands that own actions affect other people, for example, becomes upset or tries to comfort another child when they realise they have upset them</p> <p>Aware of the boundaries set, and of behavioural expectations in the setting</p> <p>Beginning to be able to negotiate and solve problems without aggression e.g. when someone has taken their toy</p> | <p>Children talk about how they and others show feelings, talk about their own and others behaviour and its consequences and know that some behaviour is unacceptable. They work as part of a group or class, and understand and follow the rules. They adjust their behaviour to different situations and take change in their routine in their stride.</p> |

Children became confident in speaking about their own needs and abilities. It was apparent that children had developed an emotional intelligence that allowed them to recognise their current feelings and use the strategies that were taught to make changes to any negative feelings that they may be experiencing. Many pupils were able to reflect on their current mental state rather than reacting to feelings, which allowed the number of emotionally dysregulated incidents to be significantly reduced. As the weeks continued a shift in priority was necessary to provide opportunities to challenge further by developing an awareness of others with the expectation that pupils would transfer the knowledge and skills they had learned to deal with more complex situations. Figure two identifies the statements that were later discussed within regular meetings to ensure consistency of judgements (highlighted in green).

| Managing feelings and behaviour 40-60 months | Managing feelings and behaviour ELG |
|---|---|
| <p>Confident to speak to others about own needs and wants, interests and opinions</p> <p>Can describe self in positive terms and talk about abilities</p> | <p>Children are confident to try new activities and say why they like some activities more than others. They are confident to speak in a familiar group, will talk about their ideas and will choose the resources they need for their chosen activities. They say when they do or don't need help.</p> |

| Self-confidence and self-awareness 40-60 | Self-confidence and self-awareness ELG |
|--|--|
| <p>Understands that own actions affect other people, for example, becomes upset or tries to comfort another child when they realise they have upset them</p> <p>Aware of the boundaries set, and of behavioural expectations in the setting</p> <p>Beginning to be able to negotiate and solve problems without aggression e.g. when someone has taken their toy</p> | <p>Children talk about how they and others show feelings, talk about their own and others behaviour and its consequences and know that some behaviour is unacceptable. They work as part of a group or class, and understand and follow the rules. They adjust their behaviour to different situations and take change in their routine in their stride.</p> |

The data that was collected throughout three collection points during the academic year showed good progress for all 6 children as a result of the sessions and strategies taught.

| Managing feelings and behaviour | | | | |
|---|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| | Baseline | Interim | End of term | |
| Child A | 30-50 D | 40-60 E | ELG | |
| Child B | 30-50 D | 40-60 E | 40-60 D | |
| Child C | 30-50 D | 40-60 D | ELG | |
| Child D | 30-50 S | 40-60 D | ELG | |
| Child E | 30-50 D | 30-50 S | ELG | |
| Child F | 30-50 S | 40-60 D | 40-60 S | |
| Self-confidence and self-awareness | | | | |
| | Baseline | Interim | End of term | |
| Child A | 30-50 D | 40-60 D | ELG | |
| Child B | 30-50 E | 40-60 D | 40-60 D | |
| Child C | 30-50 D | 40-60 D | ELG | |
| Child D | 30-50 E | 40-60 D | ELG | |
| Child E | 30-50 D | 30-50 S | ELG | |
| Child F | 30-50 S | 40-60 D | 40-60 S | |
| Key: | E = emerging | D = developing | S =secure | ELG = Early learning Goal |

Impact and conclusion

Evidence concludes that the impact of implementing regular mindfulness sessions were positive. Only 2 out of the 6 focus children did not meet their Early Learning Goal however they made exceptional progress from their starting points. The evidence gathered from the pupil questionnaires identifies the positive impact that regular sessions have had on the overall well-being of the participants and these sessions have given pupils tools to use when they are finding it hard to cope with their feelings and emotions.

Teacher enthusiasm and passion was a powerful motivational tool which enhanced the outcomes of this research project. Teachers noted that the results were noticeable from the very start which gave them the inspiration to continue with regular sessions. The conversations they over heard from children and the way in which they supported their peers were influential. The use of assemblies and reminders contributed towards the success of this project. The role play allowed a consistent reminder and acted as a prompt to teachers to refer to when needed.

The findings that have been identified within this project conclude that the teaching and practise of mindfulness, if implemented effectively and continually, can change the attitudes of learning, self-esteem and behaviour of children throughout the whole school.

References

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Appendix

Appendix 1 (children using mindfulness strategies independently)



Appendix 2 (Role play area)



Appendix 3 (examples of questionnaires)

| Reception | Summer 1 |
|--|---|
| Do you enjoy coming to school? Yes/No | I like learn new things |
| Why? | |
| Do you ever feel worried or upset at school? Why? | Sometimes, when my friends made me sad |
| What could you do if you feel worried or upset? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Count to 10 Take deep breath Blow out the candles |
| How could you help your friend if they felt upset? | They could go to the yoga area or they could back and think about something happy |

| Reception | Spring 1 |
|--|--|
| Do you enjoy coming to school? Yes/No | Because I don't know what to do and I need help. |
| Why? | |
| Do you ever feel worried or upset at school? Why? | yes Because I find things hard |
| What could you do if you feel worried or upset? | Speak to my mummy. |
| How could you help your friend if they felt upset? | Give them hug |

Appendix 4 (EYFS mindfulness assembly)

