Evaluating the acceptability of Mindfulness-based Courses for Schoolteachers

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Aims of the evaluation:
The primary aim of this research was to evaluate the acceptability of mindfulness-based courses (Phase 1) delivered from Autumn 2020 to Summer 2021 to schoolteachers in Ynys Môn and Gwynedd Counties. The evaluations included both quantitative and qualitative assessments. In a small group of schoolteachers, we have also investigated changes in their wellbeing, perceived stress and mindfulness from before to after mindfulness courses using standardised measures. The secondary aim of the study was to evaluate acceptability of training schoolteachers in delivering The Present Curriculum (Phase 2) using quantitative ratings.

Phase 1 Results:
Thirty schoolteachers completed acceptability evaluations for Phase 1. These included 20 participants who attended Living in the Present Course (LiTP) and 10 participants who completed the Mindfulness Stress Reduction Course (MBSR). Six schoolteachers from Phase 1 courses also completed pre-post evaluations.

Acceptability - Quantitative Results:

Time spent in mindfulness practice per week
Participants in the MBSR course spent approximately 2.5 hours (*Mean* = 151.67, *SD* = 68.01) in formal mindfulness practice per week while participants in the LiTP course spent about 47 minutes per week (*Mean* = 47.06, *SD* = 38.81). This difference was statistically significant. In addition, participants in the MBSR course spent little more than one hour (*Mean* = 71.11, *SD* = 66.42) practicing mindfulness informally per week while participants in the LiTP course spent about 40 min in informal practice (*Mean* = 40.74, *SD* = 25.61). This difference was not statistically significant.

Continuing to practice mindfulness after the course completion
All participants who completed the MBSR course stated that they would continue practicing mindfulness after the course completion. 90% of participants in the LiTP reported the same and the remaining 10% said that they might continue practicing after the course completion. This difference was not statistically significant.

Supporting schoolteachers' wellbeing
When asked whether mindfulness training supported their wellbeing, all schoolteachers, in both MBSR and the LiTP courses, reported that attendance of the courses was definitely useful for their wellbeing.

Recommending the course to others
All schoolteachers who completed the MBSR course said that would definitely recommend the course to others. Ninety percent of those who completed the LiTP courses would also definitely recommend the course and the remaining 10% said that they might recommend the course to others. This difference between the courses was not statistically significant.

Pre-post Quantitative Results:

A small group of six participants also completed pre-post evaluations of the mindfulness courses. These evaluations included assessments of changes in wellbeing (World Health Organisation Wellbeing Index - WHO-5 and WEMWBS - Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale), perceived

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stress (PSS – Perceived Stress Scale) and mindfulness (TMS -Toronto Mindfulness Scale with subscales of Curiosity and Decentering). All changes in scores were in the expected directions and the improvements in wellbeing reported by WEMWBS and improvements in mindfulness measured by TMS were significant (see Figure 1, please note that the differences across measures are not to be interpreted due to differences in scale ranges).

Figure 1
Comparisons of well-being and mindfulness's measurements between pre- and post-test

Error Bars: 95% CI
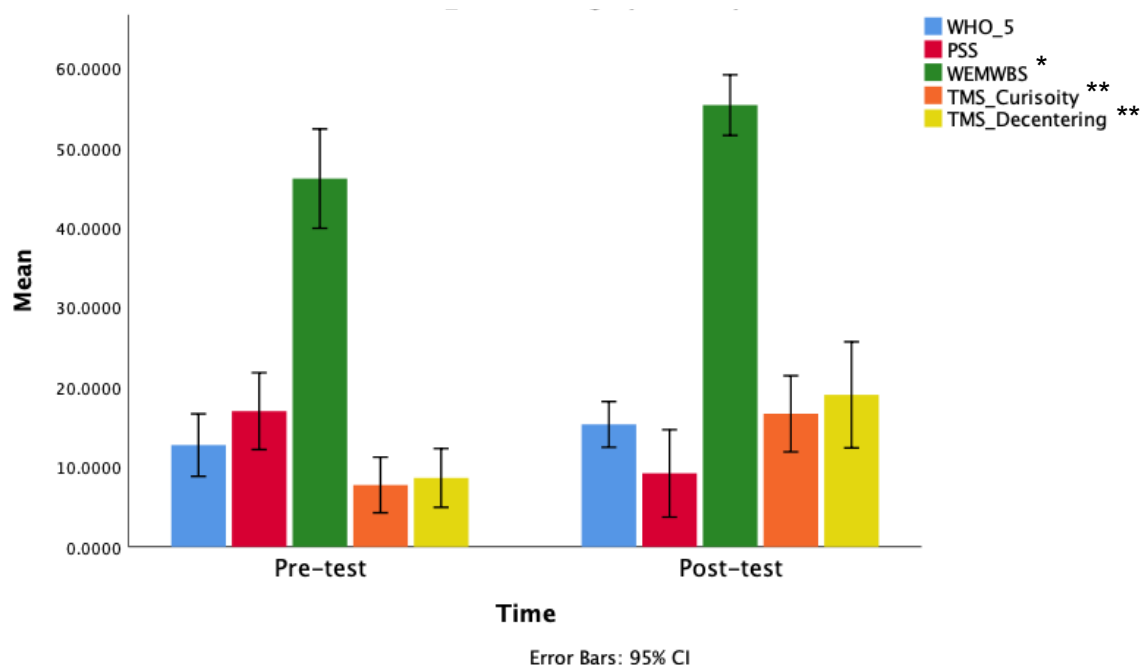
Acceptability - Qualitative Results:

Schoolteachers were also surveyed regarding their perceptions of the mindfulness-based courses using open-ended questions. Responses to both MBSR and LiTP were combined in the analyses, but some interesting comments specific to each of the courses are detailed in the themes below. In addition to the written responses,10 participants indicated their willingness to be interviewed, but only three participants responded to the interview invitations. However, the three interviews complemented the survey in many ways, providing both information on gender-specific differences in perceptions of the course and details of how mindfulness was used with children in the schools. A thematic analysis of both the survey results and the interviews was carried out to identify the main cross-cutting themes.

Main Themes
The first, very salient, main theme running through the responses to all survey questions was the extent to which benefits to oneself fed into both one's personal and one's working life, and therefore, in the long run, resulted in benefits to the pupils.

A second theme, by contrast, was how both "home" and "work" constituted spaces competing with the personal space of "the self" which the course aimed to promote. Both were seen as presenting challenges to participants' ability to "zone out" and devote their full attention to the course. The need to do the course from home because of the pandemic was seen as a "double edged sword" – home protected participants from the stresses of the workplace, but also had its distractions, which the interviews showed could be gender-specific, being experienced more by females than by males.

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The online nature of the course was also seen as a "double edged sword"; some participants saw it as advantageous as it avoided the necessity of travelling, others felt that it impeded interpersonal communication. Yet others were more comfortable with the comparative anonymity of the online format than with the challenge of meeting face to face in a room.

Interconnectedness of impact on self, home and working life, and pupils

The theme of interconnectedness permeated responses to all the survey questions In listing their reasons for doing the course, participants viewed a greater awareness of mindfulness on their part as leading to beneficial changes in themselves (Diagram 1). They saw this as leading in turn to beneficial changes in their personal and working lives. They hoped to be more able to cope with the pandemic, and more tolerant of others; more able to focus on the here and now to manage a busy lifestyle; and to manage workplace stresses. These changes would lead in turn to an enhanced ability to teach mindfulness to pupils. The interviews particularly provided many examples of how mindfulness was used with pupils, a full account of which is provided in the "Use of Mindfulness with Students" section below.

That these potential benefits were viewed as having been achieved in reality was evident when participants talked about what stood out for them as having been gained from the course (Diagram 2). An additional important gain, as well as benefits to home and working life and to pupils, was the ability to form relationships with others on the course, especially important when the pandemic prevented many other forms of interaction. The ability to share with others on the course was mentioned, along with the invaluable contribution of the session leaders, as a highly appreciated support mechanism (Diagram 3)

Impact of home and working life on the creation of personal space

The impact of home and working life on the course was experienced as beneficial on the one hand (Diagram 2) and challenging on the other (Diagram 3). Some participants saw doing the course at home as avoiding the need to travel and enabling them to work from the privacy of their own home.

Others found it difficult to get peace and quiet at home due to interruptions from partners and children. The interviews in particular provided details of gender-specific differences in perceptions of home life. Two female participants and one male participant were interviewed. Both female participants found it difficult to get peace and quiet at home:- "Because I was doing the course at 4 o'clock, the children were around, and…just sometimes it's difficult to concentrate" (Participant 1), and "The oldest were coming home from secondary school and the course began at the same time they came home, so they were asking me questions when I was trying to do it…" (Participant 2). The male participant stated by contrast that "It's great to get someone to look after the children after school…I am meant to do it, but I see it as an obvious space where I can do something different." (Participant 3).

Once the schools re-opened, work intruded with any peace and quiet available at home; it was hard to switch off from work, and also difficult to get home in time for the course, which began at 4 o'clock, just after school finished. One of the survey respondents felt that the course should be run during working hours, rather than eating into participants' personal time. Two-hour sessions were perceived as over-long, especially on top of a full day's work, a common view being that an hour and a half would have been sufficient.

The online environment

The online working necessitated by Covid was similarly regarded as both beneficial and challenging (Diagrams 2 and 3). Working online meant working from home, and from that point of view its impact mirrored that, mentioned in the previous paragraph, of the home as opposed to the work environment.

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Online communication also occurred in its own, discrete space, regardless of the physical environment, whether home or work, where it took place. To be effective it required both an efficient technical infrastructure and a certain level of technical skills. From the technical point of view, some participants experienced slow connection speeds and other difficulties. Levels of technical skills varied, but improved as the course progressed, and there was a view that developing one's technical skills was necessary in the contemporary world.

The nature of online communication was also essentially different in some ways from that of face-to-face communication. A number of participants felt that the group dynamics would have been better face-to-face. One of the participants who was interviewed commented that "it's a touchy-feely course, isn't it" and said she had sometimes wanted to cuddle someone or hold their hand to reassure them when they felt stressed. One interviewee commented that meaningful communication was easier within the smaller groups in the breakout rooms than within the larger group.

Other participants felt that communicating online was less challenging than meeting a group of strangers in a room, perhaps because the online medium made it easier to avoid contributing. Participants who did contribute felt that the sparse contributions of others placed extra pressure on them, sometimes leading them to feel that they were talking too much. Participants who found contributing to the discussion difficult, by contrast to those who were keen to communicate, experienced "speaking in front of others, especially in the break-out rooms" as particularly stressful.

Which were the "best" exercises?

The short exercises, just doing some breathing and taking five minutes to oneself each day – "little and often, to bring us back to where we are", to quote one interviewee - were mentioned as being especially beneficial and easy to incorporate into a busy life. One interviewee mentioned the long, 40-minute body scans as being "a huge mountain to climb" and felt she would only be able to do them once a week, but knew nevertheless that they were there when needed. The videos available to use from home were much appreciated.

Use of mindfulness with students

Both survey responses and interviews provided considerable detail of how mindfulness was used with pupils. The survey responses (Diagram 4) mentioned using breathing exercises and the "take five minutes in your day" technique to help pupils cope with stress; this had met with a good reception from secondary pupils.

Interview Participant 1 had tried mindfulness exercises with Year 10 and 11 girls and discovered that they found it difficult to sit down, so got them to practice mindfulness while walking rather than sitting. Activity-based exercises, such as stretching and having a story read to them, were also found to work better with Year 2 girls. Mentoring individual pupils using mindfulness was found to be more successful than working with whole classes.

Interview Participant 2 had used mindfulness in a primary school where many pupils had attachment disorders. At first, a quarter of the class had not turned up, and those who had walked out soon after the class began. Currently, every pupil was able to sit still and engage for at least 10 minutes every day. Like Participant 1, Participant 2 used activity-based techniques, making pictures or taking photos, or sitting with eyes closed and listening.

Participant 3 stated that mindfulness was not used in their secondary school and doubted whether many of the pupils would be mature enough to benefit from it but thought that it might have potential uses with certificate-level pupils to help cope with examination stress.

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Benefits and challenges, what could be changed

Feedback on the courses was overwhelmingly positive, with a number of participants expressing a desire for more, higher level input. The qualitative analysis has shown a high level of benefit not only to participants, but, crucially, to pupils.

A few suggestions for change were proposed. Easily implementable suggestions which might be worth considering included making a follow-up session available for participants to share subsequent experiences and making recordings by the facilitator available to enable practice at home with a familiar voice.

Two participants suggested that the sessions should be shorter to reduce the pressure of having to attend a two-hour session immediately after a full day's work. One of the survey responses suggested running the course during working time, rather than eating into participants' home time. Participants' perceptions of both "home" and "work" as distractions from getting "time for oneself" has been noted in the analysis; this timing risked amplifying both, as it meant participants, especially female participants, coming home still stressed from work and having to cope with interruptions from partners and children. The high level of benefit associated with the course may well justify considering running the course during working time, although the practical feasibility of this would have to be investigated.

As discussed in the analysis, opinions were divided regarding the relative merits of online versus face-to-face communication in terms of ability to physically attend the course or to engage with the course to maximum effect. Regardless of these debates the pandemic did, and may in the near future, indicate a need to run the course online. Improvement of the IT infrastructure and of access to adequate computer equipment, and perhaps instruction and mentoring of staff in effective use of online media, may perhaps assist with the difficulties reported by some members of staff. In the long term, the question of whether face to face, online or blended learning is preferable remains to be addressed.

Phase 2 Acceptability findings
Eight schoolteachers completed the quantitative acceptability assessments for training in delivery of The Present Curriculum to their pupils.

The training supported schoolteachers' well-being
Even though the course focused on delivery of training to their pupils, all participants reported that the training was useful in supporting their own well-being.

Recommending the course to others
All schoolteachers who completed the Phase 2 training stated they would definitely recommend the course to others.

Feeling prepared for delivery of mindfulness training to pupils
Majority (85.71%) of participants reported they were very well prepared to deliver The Present to their pupils while the remaining 14.29% felt they were well prepared.

Possibility of joining local networking meeting
Three quarters of participants (75%) reported that they would be very likely to join networking meetings following the course and remaining quarter felt they were likely to join.

Conclusion

In sum, both quantitative and qualitative findings from these evaluations highlight high acceptability of mindfulness courses and training in the delivery of The Present Curriculum. The results show that the

acceptability of MBSR and LiTP did not significantly differ, except for significantly more formal practice being reported for MBSR and some qualitative comments suggesting that the MBSR session length and practice requirements might be too long for schoolteachers. Overall, these results show that mindfulness training can be a valuable tool in supporting wellbeing of teachers and their pupils in Welsh schools.

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