

Rome Wasn't Built in a Day: School Counsellors' Perspectives of Teaching Children Mindfulness

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Across the globe mindfulness is taking a prominent role in a child's education. Research in this field is also expanding rapidly, but failing to keep pace with the practical implementation of mindfulness programs in schools. In the current study the authors address some of the research gaps – reporting on the experiences of two school counsellors introducing mindfulness to thirty-eight New Zealand elementary school students. The methodologies of Thematic Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis were used to understand the children and counsellors' perspectives and experiences. Four super-ordinate themes captured the essence of how the school counsellors made sense of child-based mindfulness instruction: Support Factors; Facilitator Engagement; Motivation and Benefits of Sharing Mindfulness with Children; and Program Adaptions and Additions. A number of recommendations are suggested to help progress the research field and the practical implementation of mindfulness in schools.

Keywords: *mindfulness, school counselling, mindfulness in schools, mindfulness education, mindfulness meditation*

Introduction

School-based mindfulness programs are increasingly being evidenced as a promising approach to enhance the wellbeing of children and their educators (Albrecht, 2016a; Zenner, Herrleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014; Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt, & Miller, 2015). The implementation of these programs is occurring across countries throughout the world. For example, Mission Be, located in the United States (US), has trained over 600 educators and 29 000 children in New Jersey, New York and California (Mission Be, 2015). In the Netherlands, the International Academy for Mindful Teaching (AMT) trains educators, health professionals, counsellors and others working with children in the Method Eline Snel – Mindfulness for Children programs. Method Eline Snel (see www.elinesnel.com/en/field/mindfulness-matters-method/) has been introduced across 20 countries. Over 1 000 teachers have learnt the method, with thousands of students participating in the structured programs (personal communication E. Snel 18th August 2017).

In New Zealand alike, there is also an interest in cultivating mindfulness in schools (Albrecht, 2016a; Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix, & Rubie-Davies, 2016). However, New Zealand mindfulness practitioner/researcher and education lecturer, Bernay et al. (2016) writes that the practice and research of mindfulness is less developed in New Zealand than it is in countries such as the US, Australia and the United Kingdom (UK).

In New Zealand, school-based mindfulness programs are perceived as something new and untested (Albrecht, 2016a). It was with this novelty in mind that the current authors were approached by two school counsellors from a fee-paying school located in Auckland, New Zealand. The counsellors wanted independent researchers to assess the implementation of a mindfulness program with two different year levels in their junior school. The counsellors' primary aim was to understand whether it was worthwhile cultivating mindfulness across the whole-of-the-school, to approximately 1 600 students aged from four to 18 years of age.

In this article, the authors report on the findings – primarily detailing the school counsellors' perspectives. A detailed examination of the students' perspectives can be located at Ager, Albrecht, and Cohen (2015). This is one of the first known studies of its kind to exclusively examine school counsellors' perceptions of teaching children mindfulness. Before discussing the results, the authors will briefly outline conceptions of mindfulness with respect to the Māori culture – the traditional custodians of New Zealand. This will then be followed by a review of research related to teachers'/counsellors' perceptions of introducing/teaching mindfulness in schools, an outline of the epistemology, methodology and methods guiding the research project. In the final section, the authors discuss the implications for future research, practice and policy.

Mindfulness Programs and Principles

For centuries, the concept of mindfulness has inspired various definitions and explanations (Bodhi, 2013). Its common usage today, largely derives from the principles and teachings associated with the popular Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. MBSR was developed by Kabat-Zinn and colleagues in the late 1970s at the University of Massachusetts Hospital, in the US (Kabat-Zinn, 1982).

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The rationale for the program's establishment was to "catch patients who tend to fall through the cracks in the health care delivery system" (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, p. 33). Kabat-Zinn's (1982) aim was to assist individuals suffering from chronic pain; those that were either dissatisfied with bio-medical health care or could no longer be helped by Western bio-medicine. The course creator's primary objective was to develop the internal resources of the client systematically through a spectrum of 1) meditation techniques; such as yoga postures (asana) and mindfulness meditation; and 2) education about the physiology of stress, consequences of disregarding the stress response and understanding the mechanisms involved with the relaxation response, pioneered by Herbert Benson (see www.relaxationresponse.org/) from the Harvard Medical School in 1975.

The program was initially 10 weeks in duration with participants attending a two-hour session once a week. Participants learnt about mindful body scanning, mindfulness of the breath and other sense perceptions; Hatha Yoga; mindful walking; mindful standing; and mindful eating. Didactic material included information on the relationship of stress to physical ailments, consequences of the Flight or Fight response and how to balance autonomic arousal was also incorporated within the program. In a recent interview, Kabat-Zinn emphasized that the intrinsic value of mindfulness is not just about stress reduction for your own betterment, but is an opportunity for humans to contribute to the beauty of our world with goodness, wellbeing and trust (Tickell, 2017).

Many mindfulness teachers and researchers call on the following simple definition devised by Kabat-Zinn (1994) to start to explain the nature of the concept: "Mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p. 4). Through undertaking mindfulness programs, instructors hope that individuals will cultivate and enhance certain qualities, such as: acceptance; authenticity; awareness; compassion; curiosity; discernment; empathy; equanimity; gentleness; loving kindness; non-attachment; non-judgement; non-reactivity; non-striving; openness to experience; patience; and trust (Huston, 2010; Hyland, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Hahn & Plum Village Community, 2011; Moore & Tschannen-Moran, 2010; Schwartz, 2008; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 11; Shonin, 2015; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010).

In a recent article Kabat-Zinn (2017) writes that he used the word "mindfulness" as a synonym for "awareness" or "pure awareness." He also clarifies the uses of the word "non-judgement":

Non-judgmentally does not mean that there will not be plenty of judging and evaluating going on—of course there will be. Non-judgmental means to be aware of how judgmental the mind can be, and as best we can, not getting caught in it or recognizing when we are and not compounding our suffering by judging the judging. (p. 3)

Kabat-Zinn also affirms that since in some Asian languages, the word for "mind" and the word for "heart" are the same, we cannot fully understand the word "mindfulness" in English without simultaneously hearing or feeling the word "heartfulness" – they are one and the same. Thus, the meditative cultivation of mindfulness involves intentionally bringing an openhearted and affectionate attention to our experience." (p. 3)

As MBSR and other programs inspired by its principles have travelled around the world; individuals, groups and cultures have applied their own worldviews to make sense of the construct. In New Zealand, where the current research project was conducted, the Mindfulness Education Group (2016) write that Māori, the native Polynesian population, view mindfulness within the context of enhancing the connection to Te Ao Wairua – the spiritual world) and Te Ao Turoa – the natural world. Māori mindfulness teachings and practices are grounded in the inter-related domains of particular Atua – Gods (for more information see <https://mindfulnesseducation.nz/what-is-mindfulness-and-faq/a-maori-perspective/>).

Mindfulness Research in Schools

Research in the field of mindfulness has expanded rapidly since the early 1980s. Approximately, 3 500 papers related to mindfulness have now been published in peer-reviewed journals, with around 60 new articles currently being published each month (American Mindfulness Research Association, 2017). Studies related to mindfulness education in schools have also grown, with hundreds of articles discussing how mindfulness affects school populations (Albrecht, 2016b). Researchers have predominately focused on the efficacy of mindfulness with children aged from 12 to 15 years, using outcomes-based study designs (Zoogman et al., 2015). In a review of published and unpublished outcomes-based studies in school settings, Zenner et al. (2014) concluded that practicing mindfulness enables children to enhance their cognitive performance and resilience to stress.

Although the rapid expansion of mindfulness has occurred over the last decade, there is one school, located in Dallas, USA, Momentous School, that has been teaching children mindfulness and monitoring their progress for over 20 years (Kinder, 2017). Momentous uses the MindUP (see mindup.org) program and children start cultivating mindfulness when they begin pre-kindergarten at the age of four years. Over this period, the researchers from the school have measured children's English receptive vocabulary, literacy and vocabulary skills, and executive functions (Thierry, Bryant, Speegle-Nobles, & Norrisc, 2016). In one of these studies researchers found that prekindergarten students who received a year-long mindfulness curriculum showed greater improvements in their working memory and capacity to plan and organize than students in a control group. In kindergarten, those in the mindfulness group scored higher on a standardized vocabulary/literacy assessment than those in the control group. Other research conducted at Momentous School has shown that after three years of participating in mindfulness practices, 5th grade students' levels of empathy predicted their scores on standardized reading and math assessments (personal communication K. Thierry 9th September 2017).

Contributing to our knowledge base is a growing pool of in-depth studies documenting the perceptions of teachers teaching children mindfulness (see Albrecht 2016ab; Frias, 2015; Jean-Baptiste, 2014; Kwon, 2015; Mazza-Davies, 2015). Only one study has examined a school counsellor's perspective and this was combined with other teachers' perspectives and experiences. Reviewers of mindfulness studies in schools argue that the field needs well-designed controlled studies as well as in-depth, phenomena finding explorations that use rich ethnographic descriptions, case studies of exemplars and other forms of qualitative assessment (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012).

For example, quantitative studies reveal that only about half of the studies conducted show mindfulness as being effective in reducing teacher stress and strain (Lomas, Medina, Ivztan, Rupprecht, & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017). Therefore, interviewing teachers about their experiences may lead to insights as to why there are mixed results.

In terms of studies tracing teachers' perceptions, most have focused on understanding qualified school teachers' experiences. Studies where researchers have used qualitative methodologies to explore facilitators' perspectives, reveal a number of important findings that help us understand and improve on mindfulness education in schools. First, mindfulness teachers feel a responsibility for nurturing the wellbeing of children. Participant Sarah, in Frias's (2015) study said "I think we actually are social workers [laughs]. It's just that nobody wants to hear that! I just learned that the [name of school] program where they are teaching these kids how to be teachers, one of the first things they say to them, 'You're not social workers,' and I just couldn't disagree with that more." (p. 96)

Teachers interviewed in the studies were particularly concerned with nurturing students' social and emotional wellbeing and saw mindfulness as being key to helping children learn about, manage and regulate emotions as well as resolve conflicts with other students. They also felt mindfulness provided a positive foundational environment for learning and helped children focus, concentrate and improve on their academic performance. Not only did they see mindfulness as a means to improve a child's wellbeing, but the majority of instructors in the qualitative studies believed that mindfulness was critical in maintaining their own wellbeing and relieving some of the pressures associated with working in a teaching role. However, a number of participants said that it was difficult to be in a workplace and teach mindfulness when the majority of their colleagues were not in support of the practices. These workplaces were often described as being toxic and isolating.

A study participant, who had both a counseling and teaching role in her school, explained that mindfulness allowed her to be her authentic self in her many roles. She said, "It's like we wear all these masks. You have to be someone...well it doesn't have to be like that, but sometimes you are someone different at work than you are at home and in your counselling relationship with students, you wear a different mask again than when you are in a staff meeting and it continues. But now I am just mindful" (Albrecht, 2016b, p. 162). Teachers also believed that cultivating mindfulness gave them the ability to holistically view the curriculum and teach in a way that most benefited students – instead of getting overwhelmed by unrealistic government and school requirements (Albrecht, 2016b).

Overall, teachers in the studies generally agreed that it was important to personally learn the mindfulness practices gradually over time and embed them as a way of being in their own lives, before teaching children. They emphasized being a mindful role model. Teachers often adapted mindfulness practices to suit their classes and developmental needs and chose to teach the practices that they resonated with the most. Lead mindfulness teachers in schools, where a whole-of-school approach was taken to teaching mindfulness, said that they often noticed that teachers new to mindfulness found the practice difficult to maintain during heightened times of stress, such as the end of school term.

They felt that this is when the teachers needed the practices the most and expressed that it would be beneficial to offer mindfulness teacher training during pre-service university studies (Albrecht, 2016b). Participants in Jean-Baptiste's (2014) research felt that they received good mindfulness training, however, they also wanted to know how to integrate mindfulness with other subject areas.

The participants in these qualitative studies all mentioned challenges to teaching mindfulness in schools. Apart from a lack of support from colleagues, Kwon's (2015) study revealed that teachers felt North American cultural norms did not support the integration of mindfulness in schools. However, Mazza-Davies (2015) study showed that cultural norms in their country New Zealand enabled a harmonious integration of mindfulness practices in schools. Other challenges included: excessive noise levels in schools disrupting practices; lack of suitable space and time to practice mindfulness; and sometimes, small groups of adolescent students taking delight in disrupting mindfulness lessons.

Methodology

Two different methodologies were used to explore the students' and the counsellors' perspectives. The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to understand how counsellors make sense of teaching children mindfulness for the first time. IPA was developed in the 1990s and stems from the concepts of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, which have much longer histories (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is an experiential qualitative approach to research and has been widely used in a range of disciplines (Smith, 2011), including mindfulness education (see Dennick, Fox, & Walter-Brice, 2013; Carelse, 2013; Hawtin & Sullivan, 2011; Hemanth & Fisher, 2014).

IPA is particularly well-suited to analyzing the experiences of participants where there are small sample sizes. Twelve participants are considered by the creators if the methodology to be a large sample size (Smith et al., 2009). As the focus is on understanding and interpreting an individual's experience and meaning making in-depth larger sample sizes are not readily recommended (Smith et al., 2009). The methodology has predominately been used to explore individuals' suffering, documenting detailed and emotional-laden narrative accounts of people's experiences of psychological distress, surgery and a wide range of illnesses (Smith, 2011). There are few examples of IPA being used to investigate wellness-orientated life experiences. One of the creators of the methodology Smith (2011) highlighted authors' preoccupation with detailing human suffering and suggested that future researchers employing IPA need to focus upon describing and interpreting the experiences of individuals involved in behavior or programs that promote health, as is the case in the current study. A comprehensive guideline on how to conduct research using IPA is provided in the foundational text on the topic, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, method and research* (see Smith et al., 2009).

The methodology of thematic analysis was used to understand student experiences. Similar to IPA, thematic analysis is also a relatively new approach to analyzing and exploring problems in the field of social and human sciences. Its historical origins stem from the older quantitative tradition of content analysis, which dates back to the early twentieth century (Ager et al., 2015).

It is a foundational qualitative analytic research method and is used for: identifying; analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It goes beyond word or phrase counting to identify and describe both implicit and explicit ideas (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 10). Thematic analysis uses many of the same principles and procedures as content analysis by categorizing frequency of occurrences (Joffe, 2011). However, thematic analysis adds an experiential and emotional dimension to the material which illuminates intricacies of meaning. A comprehensive guide to the six phases of conducting thematic analysis is outlined in Braun & Clarke's (2006) paper entitled *Using thematic analysis in psychology*.

Methods for Evaluating Qualitative Rigor

There are a range of alternatives for assessing the procedures, results and reporting of qualitative approaches to research (Carter & Little, 2007; Flick, 2014; Tracy, 2010). In the current study the authors applied three main methods. The first was to ensure commensurability between the methods, methodology and epistemology and to delineate and articulate each clearly, while being mindful of their interconnectivity. The second step involved engaging with broad criteria established for qualitative research; that is guidelines proposed by Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie (1999) and Tracy (2010). The third method was the application of "method-appropriate criteria" (Flick, 2014, p. 481), a method that takes into account the nuances and differences between qualitative approaches. For example, an important aspect to research rigor when using the interview technique, in general, and IPA, specifically, is to ground reporting in examples of verbatim transcripts (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Elliot et al., 1999).

Method

Participants

Two counsellors (one male and one female) and two classes of thirty-eight students participated in the study. The counsellors (given the pseudonyms of Chas and Sarah), both from an independent school located in Auckland, New Zealand, directly approached the researchers about analyzing the introduction of a mindfulness program with two junior school year levels. The participants were aged 65 and 43 respectively, originate from New Zealand and are of European ethnicity. They have held positions in counselling in education settings for 30 years and 15 years respectively, with Sarah also holding the post of Wellbeing Director. Both have post graduate counselling qualifications and Sarah also has post graduate education qualifications. This was the first time the counsellors had conducted a mindfulness program (course) with young people in any setting – including a school setting. Chas had prior meditation experience in a spiritual and religious context, but not specifically mindfulness-based. Sarah did not have any meditation or mindfulness experience prior to completing a MBSR course in 2012, after which she then began a formal meditation practice on a semi-regular basis (i.e., once or twice a week).

As school counsellors, the participants had responsibility for promoting student wellbeing and developing wellbeing programs and tools for children and teachers. After hearing Janet Ety-Leal, the author of *Meditations Capsules*, speak at a seminar in New Zealand, Chas and Sarah felt that the course

would be a good fit for the school where they were employed. The counsellors were passionate about helping students deal with problems and psychological issues in a pre-emptive way, described by the participants as "up-skilling in the junior school." Chas also considered that bringing mindfulness to the school "would enhance youngsters' performance in the classroom." Furthermore, the counsellors considered that they were best placed to conduct the pilot programs themselves in the in-class setting (over the general class teacher), because as counsellors, they felt that they were more aware of the psychological and wellbeing needs that the program could address.

In respect to the school students participating in the study, 18 were aged from six to seven years, and 20 pupils ranged in age from nine to ten years (Ager et al., 2015). In order to protect the anonymity of participants, individual data was de-identified by school staff. Therefore, the cultural background and academic performance of the participants is not known (Ager et al., 2015). It is also not known whether students had any prior mindfulness experiences. The school where the study took place, is non-denominational, fee-paying and welcomes students from all cultures and backgrounds. It has approximately 1 600 students aged from four to 18 years and a staff to student ratio of one to 10.

Mindfulness Program

The counsellors, using a team-teaching method, facilitated the mindfulness program over a ten-week period, during two school terms, from mid-July in 2013. Sarah and Chas taught each age group separately, with their general classroom teacher present and participating in some of the activities. The mindfulness program was based on the text *Meditation Capsules: A mindfulness program for children* (Ety-Leal, 2010). It was developed in Australia by Janet Ety-Leal – see www.meditationcapsules.com. The program is presented in a textbook together with an accompanying CD in a lesson-style format (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012). Lessons are divided into 10 sessions and encourage the teacher to sequentially build awareness of mindfulness (Albrecht et al., 2012). The lessons, in the order following, focus on the topics of: Relaxation, Meditation and Self-awareness; Getting to Know the Body; Awareness of the Breath; Understanding the Stress Response; Words and their Emotional Power; The Sense of Sight, Smell, Sound, Taste and Touch; The Sense of Humor; Observation of Thoughts; Creativity and Stillness Meditation. The program caters for teachers that have no experience with meditation, or practicing mindfulness techniques, but also is designed to suit individuals with an extensive mindfulness/meditation background (Albrecht et al., 2012).

Student Data Collection and Procedure

Students recorded their impressions of the program in a journal throughout the duration of the program (a copy of which can be viewed at Ager, Bucu, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2014). The journal was the focal point of data collection, with activities designed to be age appropriate and match the *Meditation Capsules*' lessons. The journal instructions/suggestions included: illustrating and/or writing feelings and thoughts about the mindfulness session; drawing representations of body feelings such as stress, happiness, loving kindness, focused attention; illustrating and/or writing when mindfulness exercises would be helpful and drawing and writing about favorite feelings, places and aspects of the mindfulness program (Ager et al., 2014).

Prior to the commencement of the mindfulness program parental permission for participation in the program and research was received to collect and analyze student journals (Ager et al., 2015). Ethics approval was subsequently obtained from RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia in February 2014 to explore the data collected from students. Journals were de-identified and sent by one of the school's counsellor to the third author, Ager. Ager analyzed the student journals for prominent themes that highlighted the students' perceptions of mindfulness, and interpreted the data set within the context of her own experience of sharing mindfulness with children in an elementary classroom (Ager et al., 2015).

Counsellor Data Collection and Procedure

There were two main points of data collection related to the school counsellors: demographic information and interviews. Written and informed consent was obtained prior to commencement of the interviews and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Ethics approval was obtained from RMIT University Research Ethics Committee and the Board of Governors and Executive Principal of the host school.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by Bucu. The interviews were undertaken via Skype, as the researcher and the participants were located in different countries. Interviews followed a narrative style and consisted of open-ended questions based on the interview schedule (see Figure 1). Researcher name began the interviews by explaining to each participant that she was interested in understanding their respective experiences of teaching mindfulness for the first time, in as much rich detail as they were able to share. In this regard, the interviewer's role was passive and involved active listening (Smith et al., 2009). Active listening on the part of the interviewer enables appropriate probing for in-depth detail of an experience (Wagstaff, 2014). The open-ended, semi-structured format allowed participants room to expand on spontaneous thoughts and ideas that may not have been evident in the interview questions. Throughout, Bucu encouraged participants to explain in detail their views and perceptions – to share their story. As well as asking questions, Bucu, in line with IPA interview guidance from Smith et al. (2009), also made statements, reframing and confirming what the participants expressed. This method of inquiry generated further discussion on the topic and led to exploring counsellors' meaning making in-depth (Albrecht, 2016ab).

Chas and Sarah's interviews were video and audio recorded and each lasted approximately 90 minutes. They were transcribed verbatim from the audio and video recording by Bucu. Field notes were written during the interview and analysis stage in order to track researcher observations and biases.

Data Analysis and Reporting

As mentioned previously, the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze and collect data, applying guidelines from Smith et al. (2009). The first stage of analysis focused on understanding and interpreting how each school counsellor individually made sense of teaching mindfulness to children. On the first reading of participants' transcripts, Bucu documented preliminary interpretations. On the second reading, Bucu identified and tabulated emergent themes and highlighted meaningful quotations for each participant.

Themes are recurring patterns of meaning (ideas, thoughts, feelings) that have been highlighted by the participants themselves as being important, or interpreted by the researcher as being fundamental to how an individual or a group of people make sense of a particular experience (Smith et al., 2009).

1. Would you mind telling me about your experience with mindfulness before starting the Meditation Capsules program?
2. How did it come about that you introduced the Meditation Capsules program to the school?
3. Would you mind telling me about your thoughts and experiences of the training you experienced of the mindfulness program?
4. Could you describe in detail the typical mindfulness class from your perspective as the teacher?
5. How do you feel about the time allocated to the in-class instruction?
6. Could you share memorable experiences that impacted you or left an impression on you?
7. What do you sense as being the benefit of the mindfulness program on student and teacher wellbeing?
8. How would you make sense of this?

Figure 1. Interview Schedule

After analyzing the participants' data, Bucu created a master table, integrating both participants' data. She tabulated emergent themes as well as the relationships and patterns between themes. Themes were then clustered into superordinate categories with corresponding sub-themes. The creators of the methodology define a superordinate theme as "a construct which usually applies to each participant within a corpus but which can be manifest in different ways within cases" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 166). Direct quotations from the participants were added to this table to ensure the analysis was grounded in the data. Although the analytical methodology has been explained as a step-by-step process, the analysis itself was an iterative process that involved constant re-reading of transcripts and searching for new patterns of meaning at each stage of analysis. The main themes arising from the data set were presented to the school in plain language. The first author, Albrecht, in an independent analysis of the data, confirmed the four main themes that helped describe how the counsellors made sense of introducing a mindfulness program with their school.

Findings

School Counsellors' Perceptions

Four main interrelated themes were found to capture the essence of how the two counsellors – Chas and Sarah, made sense of introducing mindfulness in their school:

- Support Factors
- Facilitator Engagement
- Motivation and Benefits of Sharing Mindfulness with Children
- Program Adaptions and Additions.

Sarah mentioned during the interview how she and Chas thought in a similar way and their transcripts reflect this, showing a high level of convergence, whilst being nuanced by their own individual personality. Following, the authors outline the four main themes.

Support Factors

felt enabled mindfulness instruction in schools. Support was a central theme throughout the interview dialogue. There were five main pillars of support that Chas and Sarah identified as being critical in helping them run the child-based mindfulness program – 1) management, 2) parents/caregivers, 3) students 4) general classroom teachers; and 5) the university. The first hurdle to overcome was support from senior management. Both Chas and Sarah expressed during the interview, that this process went smoothly and they were appreciative of management's support. Chas said that senior management "were rather sold on it," and were supportive in a "distant way." He explained that the management team helped secure permission from the Board of Governors and the Executive Principal, and then gave them general advice about how to communicate and seek permission from caregivers. Senior management gave Chas and Sarah "sole rights to run" the program in the way they thought best. Chas said that the advice the Assistant Principal provided "was quite useful in trying to walk across that minefield." He explained that in a private – fee paying school:

... you know we have to market it well and we have to answer any questions of anxiety that the parents might have. As a result of this two parents pulled out and said that they didn't want their children to be in the program, so we honored that.

Sarah elaborates about the challenges involved with eliciting some parent's support for the program:

On the whole, the parents were generally very open and supportive of the idea, but we did have a small group who weren't and some who wouldn't let their children participate. I found that part of the process really challenging. I was challenged by them so much more than I ever expected. I learnt quite a lot from that process, but I also accept that ...um ...some parents, as hard as you might work to help them to understand the program, they have quite set ideas about things which may not be able to shift.

Nevertheless, dissenting caregivers seemed to be in the minority at the school, with a number of parents asking Sarah whether the program would be run in their child's year level in the following year.

In terms of student engagement, Sarah said that one child did not want to participate in the program after listening to an example of a mindfulness body scan activity. The student said it made her feel uncomfortable. Sarah relays:

I guess I was worried about what impact that would have on the other students, whether other students would think about why they were not attending, um and asking her more or getting any ideas about whether they should be attending.

The classroom teachers enabled this aspect of the program to run seamlessly, as children that did not want to attend, or did not have parental permission, went to an alternate year level class during the mindfulness lessons.

The classroom teachers' support was integral to running the mindfulness program. In order to garner support for the program, Chas and Sarah ran a mindfulness session with the teaching staff. Although they observed that the teaching staff seemed to enjoy it and were engaged, they received no offers from classroom teachers to allow the counsellors to run the pilot

Chas, when prompted, thought that this was perhaps because earlier in the year, the school had promoted another program and the teachers may have thought they would be required to do more work. He said, "Yet we had gone to pains to say that it will be very free of work from you. We're going to run it for you. We just want you to be there for you to experience it, in order to see how the children are responding." Sarah felt that the teachers' reluctance to participate in the mindfulness program was due to the "nature of schools." She explains:

...teachers are so hugely busy and there is a huge amount of pressure for them to be teaching this (International Baccalaureate) curriculum, and some of them actually said to me that they would love to have mindfulness in the classroom, but they were not sure how to fit it in.

Sarah said she was a bit disappointed by the lack of teacher support, but said that she needed "to continue to soldier on," and recognize that "in big institutions Rome wasn't built in a day anyway." The counsellors then personally approached two teachers (one who had an interest in supporting social and emotional learning) from different year levels and asked if they would allow Chas and Sarah to run the mindfulness sessions with their respective classes, which they both agreed to.

With a longer-term view in mind, Chas and Sarah felt that for mindfulness to expand across the school, the program could not continue with them taking sole responsibility and ownership. They said that facilitating the program with the classroom teacher, was the ideal next step. They counsellors said that if classroom teachers were delivering the program, or were more involved in the program then there would be more opportunities "to plant the seeds" with the classroom, via teacher modelling mindfulness, integrating mindfulness during other lessons, using mindfulness as a transitioning activity, and encouraging students to practice during the week. However, they also felt that a school counsellor's psychological knowledge and experience was helpful when introducing mindfulness programs and counsellors could play a key role in supporting classroom teachers to teach mindfulness.

Continuing teacher support and engagement is vital to developing a mindful whole-of-school approach, but Chas said that he thought caregivers also needed to participate in the program. Chas relayed:

So, I really was wondering if we've only done half a job and if the parents should be enrolled in a mindfulness program so that they can match with their kids, what the kids have picked up!

That's the frustration for me, is that we do half the job and you know, because I'm a family therapist, I think that if you are going to make some changes in kids, you have to change their context as well in order for them to revel in that change, to stack and sustain. So, I despair a little about it (mindfulness) being a sustainable skill, that is only personalized, because if it's only personalized I don't think that it's going to have a long life.

The last pillar of support came from the university via training and modelling of mindfulness instruction. Albercht from RMIT University arranged for a visiting Master of Wellness student from Rowan University in the US to attend Chas and Sarah's school in Auckland, New Zealand.

The student, who was also a teacher was specializing in mindfulness education had stayed with Janet Ety-Leal in Australia learning about her methods. She then went to New Zealand and lent her support to Chas and Sarah. Chas said:

She was just...it was natural. It was flowing out of every pore and we were so admiring of her and how easily it sat with her and she was able to communicate it with the kids and we thought, "Oh well...I want some of that..." (laughs).

...she modelled what she did but also her ease with the people who sat with her. It felt like she had a vision ...(laughs) and she was able to ...I think...give us a new perspective if it, and her experience obviously helped.

I think reading off the book is one thing, getting a live witness to it is quite another. To catch the energy gives you an enthusiasm. A renewed enthusiasm. We were always enthusiastic but if give you the extra oomph in delivering the program.

Facilitator Engagement

Bucu and Albrecht found during the analysis of interviews that facilitator engagement played a key role in the successful implementation of the mindfulness program, with Chas and Sarah's enthusiasm, engagement and energy for the program transcending their spoken words. As facilitators, they lived the program and enjoyed working together to deliver Meditation Capsules. The enthusiasm for the program started when Sarah attended a conference in Australia, where Janet Ety-Leal (Mediation Capsules creator) was a key speaker. Chas said:

Sarah was pretty star struck by it. I looked at it and felt that it had real potential and something of a commonality for me because my background made me familiar with a lot of the stuff that was in there. So, we came at it in a combined way.

Chas and Sarah embodied the cultivation and imparting of mindfulness, personally and professionally – it became a way of life. Sarah explains:

Well I suppose for me, I guess, personally and professionally I found it hugely useful. Just one actually, taking the time out from my work and to do something for me. In my work, I spend a lot of time working with students and staff supporting them to manage their own stress and whatever is going on for them. So, it was really nice to be able to take the time out for myself, and to learn some new ways to manage some of my own stress.

Sarah further remarked, "actually going on facilitating the program with the kids has been really great because its reminded me to practice what I preach." Chas tells how the program connected with him on a personal level:

I think what I really had to do was live the program and apply it to myself. And I was under quite a lot of stress in that term, and so I found myself using breathing a lot more, and muscle flexion and relaxation skills taught there.

Seeing the children being engaged with the mindfulness lessons further enhanced the counsellors' engagement and trust in the mindfulness program. Sarah said:

I really found that by about session four, there was a really great sense of engagement. They were really entrusted to see us when we arrived and the whole concept was a lot less foreign, so there was a lot more flow. But hearing of some of their experiences of using mindfulness was very encouraging, and absolutely delightful, when they are suggesting to their brother or sister to "pause" or "take a deep breath," and things like that, yes, quite delightful.

Chas also revealed in some aspects of mindfulness instruction – in particular reading the meditation scripts from the book. He preferred to read these, over playing the CD that accompanied the book. He describes:

So that was really, really easy. I reveled in that because it was really my thing. I loved the "hypnoticness" of that script, and the pausing and the accenting and so forth, that sort of thing.

He also discovered that teaching mindfulness to children was profoundly meaningful from a professional counselling perspective – to develop a deeper level of connection with the children:

I think as a counsellor it was very moving in a way because we were having quite an intimate conversation with these kids. They were having this experience as well as we were trying to impart to them a knowledge that will equip them with a skill to notice their body, having more control over it, being able to enjoy themselves.

I think, for a counsellor to be to get to that level with their client, is an amazing level of learning. In terms of experiential learning it is right at the pinnacle of experiential learning.

Apart from being highly engaged by the content of the program, conveying mindfulness principles, and observing the children's responsiveness to mindfulness instruction, Chas and Sarah also thoroughly enjoyed team teaching and providing constructive critical feedback to each other. Sarah explained:

One other thing for me I actually got a lot of benefit of facilitating it with Chas. We shared responsibilities and took turns doing different things, but the unusual thing for me is that we could critique our facilitation and discuss what went wrong and we could plan for the following week. That was useful for me particularly as it was the first time for me that we did the facilitation together.

However, there was an aspect to sharing mindfulness with children that somewhat dimmed the counsellor's sense of enthusiasm; that being, one of the classroom teacher's lack of engagement with the program. Chas and Sarah said that the Year 5 teacher was openly supportive of them being in their classroom, but did not seem to want to participate, with Sarah highlighting the difference between support and engagement. Sarah said:

...and we would try to engage her but she wasn't engaging and just sat on her email when we were facilitating the sessions. So, Chas and I wondered if maybe she may have misunderstood what her role might be and had possibly thought that we didn't need her involvement. We did try to raise it a few times, and a couple of times there was more involvement and actual participation in the meditation exercises towards the end, but it wasn't consistent.

Chas reflected that the Year 5 students “adore” their teacher, and thought that they “missed out” by her lack of engagement. Chas explained:

Well I personally think that if you got engagement from the significant adult you'll get engagement from the kids. There was a huge engagement in Year 2, and this may well have been because of the age group and that they are putty in our hands, and much more, what would you call it...they were much more conducive to the experience of resting or dreaming, of getting the fantasy world ... not that's not really the right word because mindfulness is not about fantasy, but they went into their own experience much more readily, they were less self-conscious. Whereas the Year 5 were slightly more self-conscious, so I mean they are not incredibly self-conscious like a middle school child. But if they had the role modelling from their Year 5 teacher I think they would have gained a heck of a lot more from the content, because they would have seen how seriously she took it and they would have taken it at a greater level of seriousness.

The Year 2 teacher, however, was extremely supportive and engaged. Chas said she was “incredibly attentive,” would sometimes participate in the meditations and at other times would patrol the classroom – inviting the children with a signal to “close their eyes to lie straight, or whatever it may have been.” Sarah said the feedback the Year 2 teacher had given them was extremely positive and she additionally described to the counsellors her own personal experience of participating with Meditation Capsules and how meaningful it has been to her life.

Sarah also got the impression that the classroom teachers did not encourage, prompt or search for ways to weave mindfulness into the daily classroom life or other curriculum areas. She said, “We did suggest to the teachers that maybe after lunch or after interval they did just take five or 10 mins out to practice some of the ideas, but I don't think that happened as consistently as could have been useful.” Sarah, when prompted during the interview said that in the future she would be “a lot more explicit with teachers from outset.”

I guess I would be a lot more explicit and have a conversation around whether it is something that they may be more supportive of and what the benefits might be as far as the role modelling and encouraging engagement from students.

Underlying Chas and Sarah's engagement for teaching children mindfulness is a moving rationale and in the next section the authors describe the third main theme, Motivation and Benefits of Sharing Mindfulness with Children.

Facilitator Engagement

The motivation and benefits of teaching children mindfulness played an integral role in how Chas and Sarah made sense of introducing mindfulness within their school. The following statement by Sarah highlights the potential importance placed by the counsellors on the explicit instruction of mindfulness in schools:

Particularly because the work that Chas and I do, as I said before, we are often working with students who are having difficulty regulating their emotions, or recognize when they are stressed or distressed and to know how to manage it appropriately. I guess one of the other things is ... we work here at [name of school] from kindergarten right

through to Year 13, I often feel concerned when I see kids in the older years in the senior school, who are really struggling to regulate themselves. Sometimes these stresses are manifesting in self-harm.

Support at a young age, to help children regulate, understand and express their emotions was a primary reason for introducing mindfulness. Chas and Sarah had a vision of preventing severe stress and the resulting physically harming behavior that may occur. By equipping students with skills at a young age and giving children tools to manage their own emotions, they hoped to stem this tide of stress. Chas felt that stress was pervading children's lives on many levels, from caregivers' parenting styles, goals they were expected to achieve, and from the school's behavior management policies. He wanted to keep “kids out of trouble” by giving them tools to regulate their emotions and control their anger, before they suffered punitive consequences. Mindfulness was being used as a preventative behavior management strategy – one that children could actively control. Chas thought the level of stress that was being felt by children went largely unrecognized by parents:

The other thing that I wanted to say. There are some parents, and I don't know if it's more guys than women, who say, “It wasn't like that in our day,” and they lay down the law. They have no way of allowing the knowledge of this extra stress from these kids to break through their psyche, and God knows why they are so resistant, but they are just so embedded in their opinions, and it will work and every signal around them is saying, “it's not bloody well working, you got to actually change your take of parenting.” I had this conversation over the weekend with a parent and it's like, it happens reasonably frequently.

Chas explains the reasons for why he thinks children are so confused and stressed:

The kids are exposed to a hell of a lot more things than what we were ever exposed to, and that has a certain level of confusion to it...of where their value system lies. And if their parents have a bit of difficulty in managing them, in terms of their boundaries, and managing their behavior generally, then the kids can get anxious because they are testing the boundaries a lot more. Like where is the edge that I can push to? You and I probably had some strict parents. We knew where the edges were (laughing) so we could kick back and relax.

He thought mindfulness was a “forgotten skill,” one that perhaps is remembered and more easily embedded when children are young, before they have been socialized or trained out of a mindful way of being. He said as the students grew older they were developing a protective shell – something that prevented them from being tuned into their bodies, tuned into their emotions, and from recognizing signals from their peers. Chas hoped to prevent children learning patterns of reacting that negatively impacted their wellbeing – hence the importance of mindfulness having the whole-of-school's support.

Before implementing the program, Chas and Sarah also said that they believed mindfulness instruction could enhance academic performance, by improving attention and focus. This belief was supported by the classroom teachers who said that they felt the children's attention and focus to school work had improved over the 10-week program. Chas said the benefits of the program were “obvious” and found that the children

became more spontaneous and less guarded. It provided the children with the skills to better manage their lives and for the Year 5s who were under more external stress to manage their response to it. The counsellors were particularly gratified when the children shared their experience of using mindful strategies with their family. This reflected how much they enjoyed the program and how their social and emotional intelligence was improving. When discussing the benefits of Meditation Capsules, Chas remembered the case of one Year 2 boy where he thought mindfulness may have made a profound difference to his life:

There is a little boy in Year 2 who is extremely stressed because of a parental situation. Family litigious battle going on, and he's actually managed quite well. This year even though, I'm getting reports, because I'm sort of the middle man, receiving a lot of grief from the parents. It doesn't seem to be having an impact on his ability in the classroom nor in his relationships with the kids, so I was really impressed with that. Maybe we can take some credit for that, I don't know.

Mindfulness played a special role in the counsellors' hearts and appeared to have a positive impact on the children's wellbeing and that of their families. However, Chas and Sarah had to overcome a number of hurdles to teach mindfulness. Some of these relate to support and engagement factors, which have been discussed previously, others relate to program adaptations and additions, which will be discussed in the next findings' section.

Program Adaptions and Additions

The last major theme to be presented is Program Adaptions and Additions. A number of program adaptations and additions were incorporated by Chas and Sarah to aid learning and developmental differences. Program adaptation is encouraged by Janet ETTY-Leal. She suggests that teachers use their intuition and wisdom when cultivating mindfulness in the classroom (Albrecht et al., 2012, p. 3). In her book she explains, "This program will provide you with the basic "recipe" – so add whatever "spices and toppings best suit you and the children in your class" (ETTY-Leal, 2010, p. 5). The counsellors, during the interview process, discussed the adaptations and additions they made during the inaugural program and made suggestions for future mindfulness program delivery.

In regards to their delivery of the program, Chas and Sarah found that they could not simply teach children mindfulness from the instructions provided in the book. They had to complete a substantial amount of extra work as preparation to learn some of the content personally and also needed to devise strategies to teach particular aspects of the program in a developmentally appropriate way and in "minute detail." Chas explains:

For the actual content that was a little bit of a challenge because I hadn't done biology and so here we were talking about details to do with the nervous system and other systems. It had to be put in way that would mean something to Years 2s and 5s, 7-year-old and 10-11-year-old. That was a little bit of challenge. We had to do some extra work, and I found that personally a bit of challenge, I had to put a lot more effort into it, perhaps more than Sarah because she had a nursing background. I had to prepare it more before we actually did the sessions ... in terms of "How do we engage them?" "How do I keep the group cohesive as a group?" ... and that took a little bit of a while to do.

Chas and Sarah both said they would have benefited from more training before they started the program. Chas shared:

I think that we could have received a lot more training. I think that when we got into the first or second session we thought, "Oh hell, we've got to translate this stuff." We've got to use the language and the ah ... gestures and set up experiences so that in fact the essence of the message that Janet was putting across was absorbed by the kids at their appropriate age level.

Sarah said that when teaching the program to Year 2s, some of the quiet inner awareness practices were too long for their attention span, but half way through the program she said, "...we had a good hold and understanding of the students and what sort of worked." Chas said that they "had to simplify things," and "had to leave a lot of stuff out." Apart from simplifying and adapting activities to suit the learners, Chas and Sarah also made additions to the program helped by the Master's student from Rohan University. Additions (supplementary to the text) they found to be most effective for either or both of the classes included: 1) the pause button – a technique allowing the students to pause/calm before responding; 2) the glitter jar – a tool to enhance awareness about the turmoil of thoughts and feelings; and; 3) dolphin and shark thoughts – connecting the use of positive and negative thoughts.

Chas and Sarah also made a number of suggestions to improve upon the delivery of the mindfulness program. First, Sarah said that she thought it would be better to teach two sessions a week, with the classroom teachers reminding children of the practices during the week and integrating mindfulness principles and practice during other lessons. The counsellors also thought it was essential to teach children mindfulness at a young age before they develop a "protective shell." Sarah said, "I just can't stress how valuable it would be to have a program and be able to start young. I'm sure that by the time the kids get to Year 5 and they've been doing it since Year 1 or Kindy, it's just an everyday part of life."

Sarah also mentioned that she would like to attend a training program that described how to adapt activities for different age levels. Chas thought there needed to be more action in the delivery of the program. He explained:

Because what I was feeling is that it's very wordy, and the concepts are very worthwhile and unbelievably valuable, but how do you do that in a way that's animated, lively engaging them and is not a constant blur of words. And so, that's where I think we need to be much more on the board, getting them up doing things, using illustration, maybe using sound a lot more, maybe using music, which we didn't use. I think we only used it once in one session.

Chas talked about running other social and emotional programs such as the Incredible Years (www.incredibleyears.com). For these programs, they had developed a resource/instruction manual, which housed everything they needed to run the programs. They intended to create a similar resources manual the second time they ran the Meditation Capsules mindfulness program. Chas said that they then could go on "automatic pilot" so there would be "less emotional energy in setting everything up" the second time they ran mindfulness lessons. "We will be able to use that energy more economically."

Students' Perceptions

The students' perspectives of learning mindfulness for the first time are slightly different from the counsellors' perspectives, given they had a different role in the program – they were the receivers of mindfulness instruction. However, as Chas and Sarah noted during the interviews, they also became the givers. It was found by researcher name in the analysis of student journals that many of the children started sharing mindfulness with their families and friends and used the skills they learned in class to resolve conflicts. For example, students wrote that mindful breathing was something they used “when friends are crying,” “when friends are hurt.” One student wrote that she helped her father when he was stressed, “I help dad to breathe when he is feeling stressed.” Chas and Sarah mentioned how gratified they were to hear that children were integrating mindfulness in their daily life, which in turn enhanced the counsellors' faith and engagement in Meditation Capsules. The findings from the students' journals, gives validity to the counsellors' perspectives that the children were using the skills in their day-to-day lives. However, the students' journals also indicated that the children were using mindfulness more than Chas and Sarah observed through classroom conversations.

While it was not a major theme throughout students' journal, a small number of children initially resisted mindfulness activities, writing things such as, “This is boring,” however, journal reflections demonstrated that as the program continued, reluctant students gradually became more engaged with the lessons. The counsellors' interviews also reflected this pattern. Sarah, when talking to Bucu about her own experience of learning meditation, said that she found learning mindfulness and meditation initially challenging and this gave her the knowledge and experiential awareness to not give up when some of the students seemed to be feeling the same way. She explained:

I guess because I hadn't done a lot of meditation or anything like that before, so it was quite a new concept, so for the first few weeks I found it quite challenging at times, but I felt that as time went on I became more comfortable with the concepts and the more I practiced I guess I started to experience the benefits, so that had a big impact I guess on, you know, the training and facilitation I did with the kids, and the need to hang in there with them. Because I think when we started they found a lot of the ideas quite foreign, and maybe a little bit overwhelming, but it was delightful to actually see their progress and that flow we started to see after a few weeks.

Three main interrelated themes captured the essence of how the Year 2 and Year 5 students made sense of learning mindfulness. The first theme related to their perspectives on their personal wellbeing, the second their engagement with learning mindfulness and the last theme was associated with conflict resolution.

Within the theme of Students' Perspective on Their Wellbeing five sub-themes emerged, in concern to:

- Awareness
- Happiness and love
- Calmness and inner peace
- Stress and anger management
- Readiness to learn and creative wellness and flow.

Within the theme of Students' Mindful Engagement three sub-themes emerged:

- Heightened Awareness of Self
- Heightened Awareness of Others and Mindful Word Choices

- Heightened Awareness of Environment.

Within the theme of Conflict Resolution two sub-themes emerged. These included an explicit awareness by the students of the strategies used to solve problems with:

- Siblings
- Friendships (Ager et al., 2015).

From closely analyzing the students' journals it seems that the children received more from the program than Chas and Sarah estimated and were readily using mindfulness in their day-to-day lives. The students often used mindfulness as a self-regulation tool. For example, one Year 2 student said, “If I am not allowed to play on my play station I feel angry so I press my pause button.” Students' journals were littered with phrases describing how much they enjoyed activities, how it enabled them to learn and to feel calm and curious. These responses matched both the classroom teachers' and counsellors' impressions.

Happiness and love were recurring themes throughout students' journal in relation to participating in a range of mindfulness activities and also when considering their favorite words and feelings. An awareness of their own feelings of happiness and love was mostly indicated when writing about family and friends. Students wrote about feelings when they received a hug, and their desire to express their love through words; such as saying to family members, “I love you.” Inherent in the happiness theme was the association of happiness with playtime and friendship. For example, one student wrote, “Can you play again with me?” “Can you be my friend?” she wrote, “I feel happy” (Ager et al., 2015). Mindfulness activities seemed to enable children to find a deeper level of awareness, appreciation and connection to their families and friends and value the important role they played in their young lives. The student journals provided a perspective beyond facilitator observation – they gave voice to the children's thoughts and opinions; demonstrating the rich inner workings of the children's minds and hearts and the meaning the program was having in their lives. For example, one student wrote that he loved mindfulness because it made him “feel calm and honest.”

The students' favorite activities linked closely to what Chas and Sarah observed and talked about in their interviews. The children's favorite activities were mindful eating, mindful breathing, the mindful pause and mindful walking. A Year 5 student writes, “I love mindfulness because I liked the chocolate. It helped me to do slow eating. I eat slower now.” Chas and Sarah said that for the students who were previously getting distracted the lessons associated with mindful eating and walking enabled them to become fully focused and engaged.

Discussion

Overview

Mindfulness offers those that are looking to nourish, protect and care for the young – hope. Chas and Sarah felt that the explicit teaching of mindfulness was a key ingredient in enabling children to develop increased awareness of their emotions and behavior, choose their responses with care and manage external stressors. They thought it was critical to start mindful lessons at a young age. Chas and Sarah had a long-term vision for the school – hoping that mindfulness instruction would help give students the skills to manage difficult situations and reduce the incidence of self-harming behavior that was occurring with some students in their final years of school.

They needed the whole school community's support to create a mindful school culture and through the process of introducing mindfulness they learned that not only did they need support, but they also needed engagement. Chas and Sarah hoped for the whole school community to be as enthused and engaged with mindfulness instruction as they were, but acknowledged that "Rome wasn't built in a day." They noticed and felt that when a classroom teacher supported and additionally immersed themselves in the mindfulness program, the children were also more responsive. They hoped that in the future more classroom teachers would become involved and engaged with the program.

The counsellors found that they needed to adapt and adjust Meditation Capsules to suit the developmental needs of their students and said that this took considerable time and energy. However, they felt better prepared to facilitate the program the following year. During their interviews, Chas and Sarah also both highlighted the need for more training. They found watching an experienced mindfulness teacher with education qualifications model mindfulness instruction at their school invaluable, and wished that they could have participated in child-centric mindfulness teacher training before facilitating the program. The students' perceptions, while slightly different to the counsellors, corresponded in many respects. Chas and Sarah were able to pick up on the children's favorite mindful activities and noticed when the energy shifted to complete engagement and enthusiasm. It is unclear whether this engagement was a function of specific activities (e.g., mindful eating and walking), facilitator confidence, and/or the time it took the whole class to feel comfortable with mindfulness instruction.

How do the Findings Compare to Research in the Field?

There is a lack of research documenting school counsellors' experience of introducing mindfulness in a school setting. Hence, it is difficult to directly compare the current results with other relevant studies. The findings highlighted the overall success of implementing mindfulness with a Year 2 and Year 5 class – the program seemed to have a meaningful and positive affect on the lives of the children, the counsellors and one of the classroom teacher's. Cultivating mindfulness allowed children to regulate their emotions, respond to others in a less reactive way, and improve their focus and attention towards school work. These results are a common finding in mindfulness studies – both qualitative and quantitative (see Ager et al., 2015; Arthurson, 2015; Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2015; Coholic, 2011; Coholic & Eys, 2016; Terjestam, Bengtsson, & Jansson, 2016). A mindfulness practice also enhanced children's curiosity and creativity towards learning – something that is less mentioned in the research field (Albrecht, 2014), however, could be considered a natural by-product of cultivating mindfulness. A key element of the MBSR program is to cultivate what is described as "Beginner's mind" – an attitude or state of mind, whereby it seems that we perceive everything as if for the first time. It is a state where the individual is set free from expectations based on past experiences and is receptive and open to new possibilities (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). It may be that children, who adults think are naturally open, curious and creative, may have already closed down on new possibilities and need extra training in this domain. Counsellor Chas mentioned that he thought the children in Year 5 had already started to develop a protective shell of defense

mechanisms.

Another finding not commonly mentioned in research, is children passing on mindfulness skills to their caregivers and siblings in order to ease parental stress or resolve conflicts at home. The sharing of mindfulness seemed for the students to be a natural by-product of learning mindfulness at school. A news item from the Mindful Life Project (www.mindfullifeproject.org) substantiates this finding. Founder and Executive Director J.G. Larochette shared this experience, "A child learning mindfulness through the program at school rushed up to me and said, "I have something really important to tell you." The student explained that his parents had been arguing a lot and "it was getting bad." A couple of weeks ago, he realized that he could help them with mindfulness. He invited his parents to sit on their couch and wait to listen to the rings of the doorbell (he didn't have a vibratone bell like the instructors). He rang the bell three times and then ran back to lead them through a session of mindful breathing and listening. He told me that he repeated this every night since and he ended by saying, with a huge smile and sense of pride, "And guess what? They're not fighting anymore." (Mindful Life Project, 2017).

This phenomenon has been observed with adult populations (Albrecht, 2016b; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). For example, a counsellor's initial purpose for beginning a mindfulness practice may be to decrease his own stress levels (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). As he continues his mindful journey the counsellor might realize that his intentions and way of being extend to his students through increased levels of compassion and empathy. Studies have verified this phenomenon, whereby a person's intentions for practice shift along a continuum of enhanced wellbeing, moving from concerns consumed with the self to an expanded worldview where the individual considers how and in what way his or her actions can benefit the wider community (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). These findings suggest that when considering implementing mindfulness in schools, as Chas recognized, caregivers need to be involved – we need to understand that unprompted, children may also start instructing their caregivers in mindfulness.

Schools are realizing the importance of involving the whole school community. For example, Pinecrest School, located in Quiet Cove, Annandale in the US, in order to create a mindful culture that extended beyond the bounds of the school yard, offered mindfulness sessions to parents as well (Pinecrest School, 2014). There is little research documenting long-term, whole-of-school approaches to teaching mindfulness – most researchers assess the efficacy of short-term programs (Sheinman & Hadar, 2017). A whole-of-school approach to mindfulness education involves full integration of mindfulness in the school curriculum, engagement of school teachers, incorporation of caregivers, and a gradual long-term process which influences the school's culture and climate (Sheinman & Hadar, 2017, p. 77). In Israel, the impact of such an approach, over a 17-year period, has been so remarkable that a school in a low socioeconomic neighborhood with chronic violence and widely considered disreputable is now, in standardized nation testing, among the top primary schools in the country (Samucha, 2012, as cited in Sheinman & Hadar, 2017).

A crucial factor in the success of the whole-of-school program is teacher support coupled with engagement (Sheinman & Hadar, 2017). Current study participants, Chas and Sarah both mentioned the necessity of teacher support and engagement, but noted that teachers felt overwhelmed and overburdened with

their current work load and were reticent to commit to a mindfulness program – even with the counsellors “taking the reins” of mindfulness program instruction and delivery. Teacher stress and burnout are commonly cited reasons for conducting mindfulness programs for teachers, however, as mentioned previously there is no clear evidence as to whether the programs have the capacity to counteract the external stressors and pressures teachers are facing (Lomas et al., 2017). Aidin Escobar (personal communication 10th October, 2017), who works in a Texan school in the US, wrote, “My school started incorporating the idea of mindfulness in the classroom, which I’m excited is finally happening, but there is a huge discrepancy between what a mindful school is and our actual school atmosphere. We teachers need time to (figuratively) breathe first!”

Participants in Albrecht’s (2016ab) study noted a similar concern, with teachers new to mindfulness struggling to make the time to learn the skill. In order to resolve this problem, at one of the participant’s schools, they first created a breathing room for teachers. Angelica said “They just don’t have the time to commit to a six week or year-long mindfulness course. However, they want to embrace the concept” (p. 248). The school created a breathing room for teachers as a first step, next a 40-minute in-service introduction, followed by reading an introductory book on mindfulness. Angelica said that these simple steps helped mindfulness to gain momentum and she is now training teachers in the whole school (Kindergarten to Year 12). Angelica described how the whole school’s culture is slowly changing and becoming more mindful, with staff members working collaboratively to create calmer environments in which to learn – “the ripple effect” as she termed it. The findings indicate that a systems approach is needed when implementing mindfulness programs in schools, paying attention to the parts, cultivating programs with care and taking steps to ensure mindfulness training for children is embedded within a mindful school culture.

Additionally, as was found in the current study, some teachers may be receptive to learning mindfulness, however, others may be ambivalent. Mindfulness instructor and creator of Meditation Capsules – Janet Etty-Leal, said in an interview about her experience of teaching mindfulness in schools, that one of the most difficult challenges she has faced does not come from the children, but from a small number of teachers. She said, “There can be many reasons for this. Sometimes the decision to introduce a mindfulness program has been made by a Co-ordinator or Deputy Principal and this decision is not necessarily understood or embraced! It is very difficult to teach children with a teacher who is not committed and disinterested and who even may display this by sitting up the back with their laptop on their knee!” (Albrecht, 2016a, p. 214). Wherever possible, she now requests to have an introductory session with staff to provide a theoretical and practical understanding and allow time for questions and discussion (Albrecht, 2016a). These findings culminated with other qualitative research in the field (see Frias, 2015) suggest that even though mindfulness is growing rapidly in schools around the world a number of teachers may not be ready to support, embrace or engage with the concept. Thus, exploring teacher receptivity and understanding of mindfulness is essential to further the research base in the area – asking questions such as: “Are child-based programs situated in a mindfulness school culture?”, “What experience do teachers have in regards to mindfulness education?” and “Do teachers feel overwhelmed

having to learn a new skill?”

Another aspect underscored by the current research and that of Frias (2015) and Jean-Baptiste (2014), is the need to train teachers in developmentally appropriate mindfulness activities and in methods that assist instructors with integrating mindfulness throughout the school day and with other curriculum areas. Chas and Sarah felt that role modelling by an experienced mindfulness teacher was invaluable to their development as mindfulness instructors. This qualitative research highlights that teachers do not always feel adequately prepared to teach children mindfulness and more training is required. It was also difficult to ascertain whether some of the children’s initial disinterest in mindfulness was due to facilitator confidence, factors intrinsic to the individual, the activities and/or the time it took the whole class to feel comfortable with mindfulness instruction.

Sarah seemed to feel, from her own personal experience, that mindfulness may be initially uncomfortable for some people, as looking within is not an experience everyone is familiar with. When asking a range of experienced instructors in a mindfulness group about their thoughts on this problem (Lyn Osborn, Amber Micah, Seth Soothers, Nalini Lomova, Michelle Palladini & Shakta Khalsa, personal communication 10th October, 2017) they all replied in slightly different ways and did not mention children feeling uncomfortable with any mindfulness activities. Seth Soothers from Nebraska in the US said he felt the activities that worked best in his classes were student driven. Shakta Khalsa, founder and director of Radiant Child Yoga in the US, wrote that activating the body, through yoga, or movement, or qi gong, along with using a coordinated breath is essential for mindfulness.

In Radiant Child Yoga, they use songs with arm/body movements to express the affirmative quality of songs. For a seated mindfulness exercise, they engage the child with an activity like blowing a feather softly and feel how it extends the breath, and then blowing hard and noticing how it activates and shortens the breath. When the children are ready, they can take note of which breath feels calming (slow) and which breath feels energizing (short and fast). Radiant Child Yoga have developed hundreds of mindfulness practices and Shakta believes that the body needs to move and the breath needs to be coordinated with the movement, in order to sustain mindfulness. She notes that this is particularly important in the case of children – before entering into mindful meditation.

The second author, Bucu, who teaches mindfulness to children in out-of-school settings, affirms Shakta’s message. Bucu has consistently found that children under eleven enjoy the activities that do not restrict their ability to move and those that focus on other activities than mindful breathing. Whereas teenagers and pre-teens enjoy the opportunity to be still and focus attention on simple things like their breath and body – permission to relax and get to know the physical self. Bucu has found that younger children have to move and they are generally restricted from doing so in classroom environments. Therefore, she doesn’t restrict them in mindfulness classes but asks them to really pay attention to what moves, why it moves and what may be causing it to move. Bucu says the movement also encourages children to open up to and explore their senses, which they find fascinating. These findings suggest we need more research into a best practice approach to teaching mindfulness to children and adolescents; hearing from the students themselves and teachers running successful mindfulness programs.

The Study's Strengths and Limitations

Inherent within research methodologies are both strengths and limitations. However, carefully choosing a methodology congruent with research objectives and aims serves to minimize the restrictions a methodology may impose on the creation and evolution of knowledge in a field (Albrecht, 2016a). Additionally, it is necessary for a researcher to ensure that there is a high level of connectivity between the epistemology, methodology and methods in the design and implementation of a research project (Carter & Little, 2007). A whole systems mindful inquiry paradigm (for more information please see Albrecht, 2016a) was applied to understand how counsellors made sense of teaching children mindfulness for the first time. In essence, mindfulness concepts underpinned the research gathering and analysis process.

The essence of whole systems mindful inquiry was highly compatible with the epistemic content of the methodology, IPA, in that it respects and acknowledges: that researchers research with people rather than to people; knowledge is co-created; there are multiple ways of knowing, such as the use of the intuitive senses; the necessity of keeping an open mind; interactions with others are dynamic and unpredictable; data gathering is holistic; the interpretation of wisdom requires a mindful way of being; observing and understanding the whole, the parts and the interconnection between the parts (Smith et al., 2009).

The idiographic nature of IPA analysis, where the uniqueness of an individual's feelings and perceptions is considered paramount, may be viewed as a methodological weakness (Albrecht 2016a; Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). However, in the case of IPA it is seen as a strength; as each individual is considered to be an important part of the whole and one individual's experience while not mirroring another individual's may lead to important insights and understandings (Albrecht, 2016a). Another limitation in a study of this nature is that the researcher cannot control, for example, counsellors embellishing benefits of the practice (Albrecht, 2016a). This is perhaps a limitation of a number of methodologies. Research has shown that people being studied may be inclined to report mostly what is to their own advantage or what they think the researcher would like to hear (Cropley, 2001, p. 19). However, in the current research it appeared to the researchers that the participants gave an honest account of their experience; stressing both the challenges and the highlights. Additionally, collecting data from the children learning mindfulness helped to corroborate the counsellors' narrative and this method of triangulation is suggested to be an important element in understanding and verifying the perspectives of individuals (van Aalderen, Breukers, Reuzel, & Speckens, 2014).

Conclusion

Millions of people around the world are learning mindfulness. Over the last two decades, the school sector has played a pivotal role in the global expansion of mindfulness education. In the current research project, for the first known time, Bucu and Albrecht examined how school counsellors made sense of introducing mindfulness into a Kindergarten to Year 13 fee-paying school. Coupled with the exploration of school counsellors' perspectives the authors also analyzed student perspectives. Four main interrelated themes captured the essence of how the two counsellors –Chas and Sarah, made sense of introducing mindfulness in their school: Support Factors;

Engagement; Motivation and Benefits of Sharing Mindfulness with Children; and Program Adaptions and Additions.

The students' perspectives were slightly different to the counsellors' experiences, given their different role in the program, but aligned with and supported the experiences described by Chas and Sarah. The students illustrated in their journals how mindfulness enhanced their wellbeing and gave them skills to help friends and family solve problems in the school yard and at home. Mindfulness education had a profound impact on the children's lives. This was highlighted by a majority of children, who undirected, started sharing mindfulness with their caregivers. This evidence suggests that it would be valuable to have mindfulness programs for caregivers, available either face-to-face or online.

The research also underscored the critical role teacher support combined with engagement played in the introduction of mindfulness within the school. Interestingly, after a presentation by the counsellors, not one general classroom teacher volunteered to allow Chas and Sarah to come into their classroom and teach mindfulness to the students. Chas and Sarah had to approach teachers individually to gain their consent. The counsellors thought that this might be due to the teachers being overworked and not having enough energy to commit to introducing another program. Jennings and DeMauro (2017) write that the process of burnout, which we are witnessing in the field of education, often "involves depersonalization, whereby the ethic of care erodes and teachers lose the connection between their values to care and their day-to-day experience in the classroom" (p. 229). This lack of receptivity indicates that teachers at Chas and Sarah's school may be facing considerable stress.

High-levels of teacher stress has a marked effect on student wellbeing (McCallum & Price, 2010) and will undermine attempts to cultivate mindfulness with children. When introducing mindfulness programs in schools we need to adopt a whole-systems outlook, such as in Israel, considering the many people, practices and policies that interact to provide the platform for a child's education. The current research shows how valuable implementing mindfulness is to a child's life, but we also need to find ways to reduce external stressors and pressures facing staff in schools – without this mindfulness will merely be a panacea trying to balance the corrosive elements undermining teacher wellbeing and underpinning a child's education.

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