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Literature Review by Pat Duncan

The following is an abridgement of Katherine Weare's " Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence and policy context."

Katherine Weare, Emeritus Professor at the universities of Exeter and Southampton is trained to teach mindfulness and has a long-term mindfulness practice. She is known as an international expert on evidence-based practice and has authored several leading books in the area of mindfulness. She has conducted several definitive reviews and has informed policy and practice in many countries. Katherine Weare can be contacted at : skw@soton.ac.uk

In her literature review based on 20 significant and good quality studies it was found that mindfulness has been capable of improving mental health and well-being, mood, self-esteem, positive behaviour and academic learning, and that there are many promising locations for mindfulness within mainstream education.

The term "mindfulness" refers to the ability to direct the attention to experience as it unfolds, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance { Kabat-Zinn, 1996 }

It enables those who have practised mindfulness to be with present experience and respond more accurately rather than moving through experience rarely noticing the present moment, ruminating on the past or worrying about the future and making premature and unhelpful judgements coloured by ingrained preconceptions and mental patterns leading to stress as one's experiences constantly fall short of one's expectation { Williams and Penman, 2011 }.

Learning to be mindful includes gradually acquiring the ability to be aware of and pay close attention to inner states such as thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, as well as what is happening in the outside world, and with curiosity and with interested attention rather than premature and critical judgement.

Participants regularly report that they gradually learn to sustain and focus their attention for longer periods and accept their experiences in a more curious, interested and open-minded way rather than a judgemental way.

They come to see that thoughts are mental events rather than facts and can be allowed to come and go rather than turned into distractions that preoccupy the attention. This helps loosen the grip of mindless habitual activity and produces less reactivity and impulsiveness and a greater ability to examine thought more rationally and experience greater acceptance and kindness.

This gradually modifies habitual mental behavioural patterns, which otherwise create and maintain negative mental states, such as rumination, stress, anxiety and depression, and makes for greater mental stability, calm acceptance, appreciation of what is rather than hankering after what is not and thus higher levels of happiness and well-being.

Mindfulness also links with the increased interest in the importance of emotional intelligence and coping skills in such contexts as the school, the workplace, the home and the family { Goleman, 1996,2006. }.

Mindfulness has been shown to have an effect on emotional and social qualities in both adults and children, such as the ability to feel calm and in control of one's emotions, to make meaningful relationships, to accept experience without denying the facts, to manage difficult feelings and to be resilient, compassionate and empathic.

Adolescents who are mindful either through temperament or training tend to experience greater well-being, and mindfulness correlates positively with positive emotion, popularity and friendship-extensiveness and negatively with negative emotions and anxiety { Miners, 2008. }

Semple et al {2010} assessed the impact of a 12-week school-based programme based on MBCT with 25 children aged 9 to 13 who were struggling academically, Compared with controls significant improvements were found on measures of attention and reduction of anxiety and behavioural problems.

Beauchem et al {2008} conducted a pre-post no control evaluation of a 5-week meditation involving 34 volunteer students with learning difficulties aged 13 to 18 in classrooms in a special school. All outcome measures showed significant improvement with participants who completed the programme, decreased state and trait anxiety, enhanced social skills and improved academic outcomes.

Joyce et al { 2010 } looked at behaviour problems and depression and reported pre- and post-group differences in children aged 10 to 13 years from a 10- week mindfulness programme delivered by school teachers. It led to a significant reduction in self-reported behavioural problems and depression scores, particularly in pupils with clinically significant levels of problems before the intervention.

Bogels et al { 2008 } evaluated the impact of mindfulness on an 11 to 18 aged group of adolescents diagnosed with attention and behaviour control deficit. They reported significant increases in self- and parent reported measures of personal goals, sustained attention, happiness and mindful awareness.

Mindfulness fits well with the general emphasis on education, health and social policy on evidence based practice, mindfulness has been developed with a clear involvement of scientific departments in universities and other research units and has retained a strong attachment to the idea of a robust evidence base and proof provided by systematic reviews and randomised control trials.

Mindfulness training is popular with funding bodies across the globe because it is relatively cheap to run and promises fairly rapid and sustained benefits. In some follow ups of mindfulness intervention the immediate effects on stress and anxiety were still apparent after 3 years, and the majority of subjects continued their formal mindfulness practice over this period, time spent learning mindfulness does not have to be extensive to produce benefits. Pre-post analysis showed that 5-days of 20-minute mindfulness in adults reduced anxiety,

depression, anger and fatigue, improved immune-reactivity and decreased stress-hormones, while 4-days of mindfulness was sufficient to improve mindfulness, visual-spatial memory, working memory and sustained attention. Holzel et al { 2011 } .

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