

An Investigation into Irish Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Mindfulness

Orla Danaher

Marino Institute of Education

Affiliated with Trinity College Dublin

Supervisor: Olive Hogan

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Author's Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

Dated 10 May 2019

Orla Danaher

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Abstract

In recent years mindfulness-based practices have begun to permeate classrooms throughout Ireland, resulting in the need for additional research focusing on the experiences and perceptions of the teachers carrying out the practice. This study examines the experiences and perceptions of eleven Irish primary school teachers surrounding their implementation of mindfulness-based practices in the classroom. Three main themes emerged in the findings, the motivating factors behind the inclusion of mindfulness practices in the classroom, the benefits teachers found after incorporating mindfulness into the classroom and finally, the challenges confronting teachers when incorporating mindfulness into the classroom. The findings that emerged suggest that teachers are open and willing to incorporate mindfulness practices into the classroom, however the lack of time available in an already overloaded curriculum appeared to be the main obstacle in the implementation of the practice. To encapsulate, there is need now, more than ever, for mindfulness interventions to be incorporated in schools throughout Ireland to provide children with the necessary tools and skills to alleviate stress and worry. Mental health issues experienced by primary school children in Ireland have escalated in recent years. Evidently there is need for the provision of tools, time and resources to enable teachers to incorporate a comprehensive mindfulness programme into the school curriculum.

List of Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CPD	Continued Professional Development
MBCT	Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy
MBSR	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
PDST	Professional Development Services for Teachers
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education

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Chapter One: Introduction

The American professor, Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 143). Mindfulness practice originates from the Buddhist tradition. Kabat-Zinn, the founder of secular mindfulness, has taken the core elements of mindfulness rooted in Buddhism and applied it to mainstream settings such as hospitals, workplaces and schools. In recent years research has begun to focus on the benefits of the practice in the mainstream.

Early mindfulness research focused on its effect on adults, however, in recent years, mindfulness research has begun to shift its attention towards the value the practice can bring to the lives of young children (Napoli, Krech & Holley, 2005). The modern, digital world has led to increased levels of stress and pressure on young children, which has affected their mental health. Teachers are confronted with increased social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the classroom. The implementation of secular mindfulness in school settings is on the rise in recent years, in an effort to address such issues. Studies in the literature refer to the emotional and behavioural benefits that can result from engagement with the practice. The inclusion of mindfulness-based practice is a debated topic in the educational discourse, with mixed reviews in the literature relating to the justification of the practice (O’Donnell, 2015).

Analysing the experiences and perceptions of teachers is a valuable and comprehensive way of gaining insight into the benefits and the challenges associated with the practice. There has been a myriad of research conducted on the topic internationally, yet a significant gap exists in relation to the experiences and perceptions of teachers in Ireland. In relation to the position of mindfulness in Ireland, the Irish education system has recognised the value of mindfulness practice, as there are now an increasing number of mindfulness courses available to teachers from the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST).

The primary aim of this qualitative research study, therefore, is to shed light on the experiences and perceptions of Irish primary school teachers regarding the implementation of mindfulness-based practices in the classroom. It is hoped that the semi-structured interviews will provide a true insight into the benefits and challenges associated with the implementation of the practice in a classroom setting and in turn highlight its importance in modern society.

This research study is comprised of five chapters. Chapter one introduces the research study. Chapter two provides an overview of the practice and examines its place in the worldwide educational context as well as in Ireland. Chapter three discusses the assumptions relating to the research design, including the practicalities of the chosen method. Chapter four provides a detailed account of the main findings of the study with reference to the literature. Finally, the concluding chapter presents the summary of the overall findings and provides recommendations for future research relating to mindfulness in the Irish educational context.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides an insight into the literature concerned with mindfulness practice. It discusses the traditional meaning of mindfulness and its origins. It examines its relevance generally in modern-day society and its importance in the educational context. The effectiveness of mindful interventions in medicine and in education are then investigated and discussed. Finally, it explores mindfulness in the context of the Irish education system.

The Origins of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a practice originating from Eastern contemplative traditions that have been around for thousands of years. The concept of mindfulness “was developed in the Buddhist tradition” (O’Morain, 2009, p. 16). The practice of being ‘mindful’ is involved in several religious and more recently secular traditions. The literature relating to mindfulness encompasses a variety of definitions, from the traditional Buddhist philosophies to the more contemporary Western descriptions. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), the founder of secular mindfulness, defines it as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally” (p. 143). Thich Nhat Hanh, a famous Vietnamese Buddhist monk, describes mindfulness as being “at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching” (Hyland, 2011, p. 27). He believes that it involves paying “attention to the present moment” which is “inclusive and loving” and “which accepts everything without judging or reacting” (1999, p. 64). Brown & Ryan (2003) define it as a state of consciousness in which there is “enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality” (p. 822). Though its origins stem from Buddhism, mindfulness is a basic practice that has multiple multicultural applications. For example, it can also be found in Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, as all of these religions practice various forms of mindful-like meditation. Within the Christian tradition, meditation and spiritual practices are regarded as expressions of prayer. The Council

for Catechetic of Irish Episcopal Conference (2018) stated that mindfulness “is not a prayer but it is a context in which prayer can occur” (p. 17). Mindfulness meditation can be utilised by individuals as a way of stepping back from the fast-paced world and taking a moment to connect with their inner-spiritual selves.

Mindfulness is often difficult to define in words as it is fundamentally about “developing forms of awareness which are not verbal but are meta-cognitive” (Weare, 2013, p. 143). Mindfulness practice has been described in the literature as embodying three core elements: intention, attention and attitude (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin & Freedman, 2006). Firstly, an individual’s intention or purpose for engaging in the process of mindfulness is seen as a fundamental element of the practice. Kabat-Zinn (1990) stated that “your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practicing in the first place” (p. 32). Research shows that intentions play a key role in overall benefits and individual gains through engagement in the process (Shapiro, et al., 2006). Secondly, the practice of paying attention is central to the process of being mindful. Present moment awareness “involves suspending judgement and observing the changing field of thoughts, feelings and sensations as they occur in the mind-body” (Albrecht, Albrecht & Cohen, 2012, p. 4). Attending to the present moment is essential in helping individuals to see clearly. Finally, successful engagement in the process is dependent upon the attitude that one brings to the present moment. Attending the moment without judgement is key. Shapiro et al. (2006) highlight the importance of the individual practising kindness, acceptance and openness to others and themselves. The three core elements of intention, attention and attitude teach individuals to respond rather than react to situations, as a space is created between their thoughts and actions. Mindfulness, as a practice, ultimately aims to relieve the distress caused by “the dysfunctional ways people habitually tend to respond to their experience” (Weare, 2013, p. 142).

Evidently, the universal interest in the topic of mindfulness and the numerous classifications of mindfulness contained in the literature affords the opportunity to explore how current practices of mindfulness in schools compare with the origins of mindfulness.

The Benefits of Mindfulness

In recent times, contemporary mindfulness has emerged in Western societies as a means for addressing health and wellbeing. The remarkable interest in mindfulness in recent years has occurred as a result of Kobat Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Programme, an eight-week treatment programme initially developed for the management of chronic pain (Kobat-Zinn, 1982). The programme is now commonly used to reduce psychological illnesses associated with chronic pain and as a treatment for emotional and behavioural disorders. MBSR has gained widespread acceptance among clinical workers and it continues to obtain support from emerging research. A further programme that has come on stream, Mindfulness Cognitive Based Therapy (MCBT), created by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale, has also helped to bring mindfulness to the forefront of the mainstream public. MCBT incorporates elements of mindfulness-based practices with cognitive therapy. The programme is commonly used to treat psychological disorders such as depression and generalised anxiety. Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt & Oh (2010) acknowledged that both MBSR and MBCT are described in the literature as being beneficial for the treatment of depression and anxiety. The accomplishment of both of these programmes has resulted in mindfulness being practiced in the treatment of various clinical disorders.

As mindfulness experienced a surge in popularity, researchers undoubtedly became interested in the effects it had on individuals' mental and physical health (Bishop et al., 2004; Shapiro et al., 2006). It is widely accepted that one's mental and physical health can be enhanced through engagement with mindfulness. Weare (2012) noted that developments in the field of

neuroscience indicated that mindfulness practices produced improved changes to the structure and functioning of the brain, by improving one's thoughts and feelings. In recent years, there has been a major growth of mindfulness-based programmes into a number of different areas of modern-day life, including the workplace, clinical settings and schools.

More recently, mindfulness-based practices have been introduced into clinical settings as a means of supporting individuals with psychological disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The adoption of mindfulness-based practices as an alternative intervention for children with ASD and ADHD is a relatively new area of research. Individuals with ASD and ADHD can experience high levels of stress and anxiety, which can have a detrimental impact on their mental health. In recent years, more detailed studies have taken place into how mindfulness interventions may be implemented to alleviate high levels of stress and anxiety amongst children with these conditions and ultimately give them the ability to take some control over their emotions. A study carried out with adolescents in 2011 shed light on the fact that mindfulness practices can help youths with ASD to self-regulate stress responses and have a positive impact on their wellbeing (Singh et al., 2011). Byrne (2017) noticed the positive impact that a seven-week mindfulness course had on a young boy with ADHD. It helped him to recognise the power he could have over his emotions. He realised that he had a choice and did not have to react to situations. Keenan-Mount, Albrecht & Waters (2016) suggest that early research supports the view that mindfulness-based programmes can support young people with ASD. However, there is still a significant gap in research relating to the impact that mindfulness can have on children with ASD and ADHD in a school setting. For the most part, the research is limited to the benefits that mindfulness can have for young people with ASD or ADHD and their caregivers. While research in this field is in its infancy stage, studies demonstrate that mindfulness practices can have a positive impact on children with ASD and ADHD.

The universal nature of mindfulness has led to its surge in popularity worldwide. Kobot-Zinn (2015), stated that in terms of meditative practices, mindfulness “is perhaps the most basic, the most powerful, the most universal, among the easiest to grasp and engage in, and arguably, the most sorely needed now” (p. 1481). It should be noted however that contemporary mindfulness is in its early stages of clinical use and experiential study in the West. Critiques of the benefits of mindfulness suggest that several areas need further investigation and clarification before the positive effects of mindfulness-based programmes can be regarded as valid and reliable (Hanley, Abell, Osborn, Roehrig & Canto, 2016). However, the literature suggests that the various social, emotional and mental health benefits resulting from mindfulness practice are widely recognised and as a result, mindfulness is now being used more often in mainstream settings.

Mindfulness and Mental Health

Concern over the mental and emotional health of children worldwide is increasing, with both national and international studies showing growing numbers of school children are suffering with serious mental health problems. The World Mental Health Organisation (2003) noted that children across the globe are suffering from issues such as anxiety, depression, disruptive behaviour and eating disorders. Research shows that these issues can have a profound negative impact on children’s academic success, as well as their overall wellbeing.

There is a growing awareness of the mental health crisis affecting young people throughout Ireland. Recent Irish studies found that an alarming number of children are suffering with their mental health. Cannon, Coughlan, Clarke, Harley & Kelleher (2013) identified that 1 in 15 children aged between 11 and 13 years had experienced deliberate self-harm and suicide ideation. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) reported that 986 children aged between the years of 10 and 17 presented at hospital emergency departments throughout Ireland

in 2013 as a result of deliberate self-harm. McElvaney, Judge & Gordon (2017) found that children in primary schools throughout Ireland “are presenting with a significant range and severity of complex psychological difficulties” (p. 47). Their study is the first of its kind in Ireland, providing an insight into the emotional, behavioural and psychological needs of children in primary schools throughout the country. Children growing up today, in this fast-paced, online digital world, need to engage in mindfulness practices more than ever. Stresses and demands are now part of everyday challenges facing young children. The fast-paced, online, multi-tasking world that we live in gives rise to high levels of stress and anxiety. These feelings can stem from within themselves, from high levels of expectation, their home life, teachers, friends, the wider community and social media. While stress is a natural and inevitable part of human life, it needs to be managed effectively in order to eliminate negative outcomes. High levels of stress can interfere negatively with children’s functioning and happiness. It is apparent from the literature that more needs to be done to assist children in dealing with the external and internal pressures they face. Tatlow-Golden & McElvaney (2015) found that mental health services in Ireland are inadequate. Longitudinal evidence indicates that young children who experience a mental disorder are at risk of future mental ill health. The mental health of young people needs to be promoted, supported and nurtured. Costello & Lawlor (2014) shed light on the need for effective interventions to be put in place in order to help young children to recognise, understand and deal with daily stressors. It is evident that a profound emphasis needs to be placed on student wellbeing in schools throughout Ireland. Gott (2003) believes that school settings play a key role in nurturing and supporting the mental health of young children. Research indicates that mental health promotion is most effective when it occurs early in a person’s life (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2012). It is therefore imperative that preventative measures are put in place and that children are provided with the necessary coping mechanisms to assist them in dealing with these challenges. The

introduction of primary preventative measures would enable children deal with their mental health issues at an infancy stage.

The value of mindfulness as a skill in dealing with stress is widely recognised in literature. Studies on the effects of mindfulness-based interventions in school settings have highlighted the link between mindfulness and reduced levels of stress among children (Costello & Lawlor, 2014; Koch, 2016; Napoli, Krech & Holley, 2005; Semple, Reid & Miller, 2005). A study carried out in Australia, in 2010, investigated the use of mindfulness practice for improving children's mental health and wellbeing (Joyce, ETTY-Leal, Zazryn & Hamilton, 2010). The study suggested that mindfulness education could make a valuable contribution to mental health and wellbeing promotion programmes in schools. The number of primary school children presenting with anxious behaviours in the classroom is on the increase. Anxiety can occur as a reaction to high levels of stress. A study carried out in 2005 by Semple, Reid, and Miller observed how the use of mindfulness practices can relieve childhood anxiety and increase children's self-coping skills. Due to the increasing presence of stress and anxiety among school aged children, it is important to examine the role that mindfulness-based practices can play in alleviating symptoms of anxiety.

The education system is most definitely “key to equipping children and young people with the knowledge, skills and competencies to deal with challenges that impact on their wellbeing” (DES, 2018, p. 5). It is important to be mindful that children spend a large proportion of their day in a classroom environment, so undoubtedly a teacher's positive influence can make a real difference to a child. Caulfield (2016) noted that in order for schools to promote themselves as developing the holistic needs of their students, they need to place a strong emphasis on positive mental health practices such as mindfulness. The promotion of mindfulness in schools merits priority, as it relates to everything we do and can help children to flourish in all areas of their lives, both inside and outside of the school.

Mindfulness in Education

As a result of the positive feedback on the impact that mindfulness practices have had on adults, researchers began to implement mindfulness-based interventions with children in educational settings. There is an expanding body of scientific research and evidence demonstrating that mindfulness is a crucial life skill for children (Shapiro et al., 2014). In recent years, the promotion of mindfulness has occurred in classrooms around the world and there are a significant number of studies documenting its positive impact on school populations (Albrecht, 2014; Burke, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2014). Albrecht (2015) noted that there are over thirty different mindfulness programmes for children worldwide. In 2005, Napoli et al. carried out the first published study examining the effects of mindfulness-based practices in an elementary school setting. As part of the research, children participated in a twelve-week programme known as the Attention Academy Programme intervention. This programme aimed to enhance students' school life through engagement with mindfulness practices. The results of the study were positive and indicated improvements socially and also with regard to attention and test anxiety. Since then, an expanding amount of research on mindfulness has been carried out in school settings.

It is clear from literature that studies on the effect of mindfulness on children's academic performance are being carried out. Koch (2016) noted that many studies have noticed a link between mindfulness and academic success. Similarly, Albrecht, Albrecht & Cohen (2012) found that mindfulness in the classroom can enhance children's academic performance. Crescentini, Capurso, Furlan and Fabbro (2016) found that an eight-week mindfulness programme had a positive effect on children's attentional control. Hornich-Lisciandro (2013) noticed a change in the way students approached their work, which consequently had a positive impact on the quality of their work. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that the MindUP programme enhanced children's mathematic achievements by 15%. The literature suggests that

mindfulness can improve children's concentration skills by helping them to focus on tasks for longer periods of time and in turn has a positive effect on their academic performance.

The positive effect of mindfulness on classroom behaviour is also established in the literature. Byrne (2017), found that many teachers who have implemented mindfulness-based activities into their teaching noticed a substantial decrease in negative student behaviour. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found a 24% decrease in aggressive behaviours among students upon completion of the MindUP programme. Rix & Bernay (2014) also found that improvements in behaviour were evident amongst children in primary schools in New Zealand upon completion of the Inner Kids mindfulness programme. Similarly, Black & Fernando (2014) noted that a five-week programme among elementary students in California resulted in improved classroom behaviour. During mindfulness, students are taught how to respond rather than react to situations, which allows them to pause and create a space between their thoughts and actions. Caulfield (2016) stated that self-regulation of one's feelings and emotions are at the core of mindfulness practice. Even though the literature acknowledges the benefits of mindfulness practice, it also acknowledges that there are some limitations to the studies mentioned. As these studies are relatively new, there is no evidence to support the lasting effects on the students. This highlights the need for a long-term study, but generally what is coming out of the literature is quite positive.

The literature suggests that the positive role mindfulness can play in student wellbeing is universally recognised. A study carried out by Ager, Albrecht & Cohen (2015) into students' perspectives of mindfulness practices highlighted the value of integrating mindfulness practices in schools. Meiklejohn, et al. (2012) noted that since 2005 studies on mindfulness-based interventions in school settings have "demonstrated a range of cognitive, social, and psychological benefits" that occur when students engage in the practice (p. 292). Mindful breathing is the most simplistic form of meditation. Harris (2017) highlighted that it is an easy

yet very beneficial exercise to do in the classroom, as “children’s breathing is the swinging door between their inner and outer worlds” (p. 124). Teaching children to stop, focus, and breathe could be one of the most valuable gifts that a teacher could give them. Mindful breathing exercises will benefit them throughout their lives. It promotes self-awareness, reduces stress and has a positive effect on children’s academic performance. Many schools encourage teachers to engage their students in ‘brain breaks’ throughout the school day, as it is widely acknowledged that taking a few moments to relax their minds has a positive effect on their learning and development. Harris (2017) believes that teaching mindfulness in schools “is deeply gratifying and has the potential to make a positive impact on society” (p. 125).

The recognition of the benefits that mindfulness can provide students is highlighted in local and national studies. Research has shown that mindfulness practice in the classroom benefits children’s emotional, social and academic growth. It provides teachers with the tools to create a stimulating and positive learning environment that enables children to build self-esteem and self-confidence. Caulfield (2016) believes that mindfulness has an important place in the curriculum as a way of providing children with “coping skills and strategies that promote resilience, healthy relationships and reflection” (p. 122). Weare (2015) suggested that mindfulness should be explicitly taught to children in schools, as it is a vital social and emotional skill.

Mindfulness in the Irish Education System

Positive mental health is an important “societal issue” in Ireland today and research in this area has grown tremendously in the last decade (Caulfield, 2016, p. 112). Student wellbeing is a prominent feature of present-day educational discourse in Ireland. In some Irish schools, the integration of mindfulness practice as a means of promoting awareness of mental health and wellbeing is becoming popular. The Department of Education and Skills has recognised the

value of wellbeing in education and has developed a wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice entitled 'Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion'. The guidelines discuss the role that primary schools play in raising mental health awareness. A growing range of academic research supports and promotes the benefits of mindfulness practice for mental health, emotional wellbeing, physical health, cognition, learning and more.

Napoli et al. (2005) highlighted the possibility for the integration of mindfulness practice into religious education due to the fact that the simple act of meditation and focusing attention on breathing plays a role in most religious traditions. This idea was recently acknowledged in Ireland by the Council for Catechetic of Irish Episcopal Conference as they published guidelines for Mindfulness and Meditation in Catholic Schools. The guidelines were published for teachers to help and assist with the "practice of Christian mindfulness as expressed in silent prayer and meditation a school/classroom" (2018, p. 18). It is evident that the patron bodies are responding "to the shifting cultural and educational context in which primary Religious Education is carried out today" (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2018, p. 12). Christian Meditation Ireland also offers free in-service training on mindfulness for teachers which usually takes place during Croke Park hours. Secular education in Ireland also provides the opportunity for mindfulness to be embraced and incorporated into their teaching. This is evident in the Learn Together curriculum of Educate Together schools. The Educate Together Ethical Education Curriculum Framework states that it aims to enable students "to develop strategies to promote their spiritual wellbeing, through regular opportunities for reflection, meditation and mindfulness techniques" (2004, p. 14). Evidently, mindfulness practice is being integrated into both religious and non-religious curriculum teaching in Ireland. The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum provides teachers with the opportunity to promote students' wellbeing. Mindfulness practice could be linked into this subject area and utilised to enhance the lessons. Mindfulness courses in MBSR and MCBT are widely available and

accessible to teachers in Ireland – for the practice of mindfulness personally in addition to its implementation in the classroom. Some programmes that are available to teachers in Ireland include ‘Bright Spark’, ‘Mindfulness Matters’, ‘Paws.b’ and ‘MindUp’. While there is evidence of the implementation of these programmes in Irish classrooms, studies on their effects remain limited.

Conclusion

To encapsulate, it has to be acknowledged that even though there are many positive and meaningful benefits to including mindfulness in education, it is still only in its infancy stage in Ireland. As a result of this, there is limited literature available relating to the investigation of mindfulness practices in Irish primary schools. It is evident that further research is required and comprehensive studies need to be undertaken over a long period of time to establish the long-term benefits and verify the important role mindfulness can play in our world today. There is evidence to support that the basic simple practice of learning to be mindful can reap many benefits in today’s modern fast-paced world. It may take time for mindfulness practice to become fully recognised and established, but studies so far would suggest that there are many positive benefits for society as a whole.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The overall purpose of this research is primarily to gain an insight into primary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of mindfulness-based practice in the classroom. It is hoped that this research will explore the current place of mindfulness within Irish primary schools and contribute to its promotion by raising awareness of its benefits. This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used in the study and the reasoning behind its choice. The research design, including the paradigmatic viewpoints of the study, are described. This is followed by the method employed, including the means of data collection and data analysis. The researcher's positionality, ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also addressed in this chapter.

Research Design

Guba (1990) describes a paradigm as a "basic set of beliefs that guides actions" (p. 17). This is the theoretical lens the researcher uses to examine the methodological aspects of the study in order to decide on the instrument that will be used to gather the data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This research intends to examine the experiences and perceptions of Irish primary teachers in relation to the practice of mindfulness in the classroom. In order to effectively answer the research question, the researcher must first consider the ontological and epistemological positions. The ontological position is concerned with the nature of social reality. It is concerned with the researcher's "underlying belief system" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 27). The epistemological position arises from this and is concerned with the inquiry and interpretation of accepted knowledge in the area of social science (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This research study takes a constructivist/interpretative paradigmatic approach. According to Guba & Lincoln (1989), constructivist/interpretative paradigms are concerned with understanding the subjective and personal world of the human experience. Constructivist/interpretative

approaches to research suggest that “reality is socially constructed” and based on human experience (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). Within this approach the researcher focuses on the “participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8).

A qualitative approach was selected as being the most appropriate method of data collection for this study. Silverman (2013) believes that “an interest in subjectivity and the authenticity of human experience” is at the heart of qualitative research (p. 6). The primary aim of this research study was to gain an insight into primary school teachers’ perceptions and experiences of mindfulness practice in schools.

Research Method

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were the chosen method of data collection for this study. The semi-structured interviews facilitated the approach of addressing important issues while still providing the participant with a level of flexibility and freedom when answering questions (Bryman, 2001; Denscombe, 2010). This method of interviewing allowed the interviewer to gather in-depth information on the participants’ perspectives and experiences of the chosen topic. Bryman (2001) noted that in qualitative interviews there is a “greater interest in the interviewer’s point of view” (p. 131). Kvale (2006) highlighted the benefits of semi-structured interviews, noting that they encourage “a close personal interaction between the researcher and the participant” (p. 481). According to Denscombe (2010), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to explore the participants’ views and feelings in relation to a particular topic in greater detail. The use of open-ended questions enabled the researcher to adjust certain questions, depending on the responses elicited from each interviewee. The qualitative semi-structured interview approach enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth insight into primary school teachers’ perceptions of mindfulness practice in a much richer and deeper manner than if structured interviews were utilised. The choice to use the semi-structured interview approach

as the instrument of data collection highlighted the researcher's desire to gather an in-depth understanding into primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of mindfulness practice in the classroom.

Data Collection

For this research project, a sample of eleven teachers was gathered from three schools in Ireland. The first school chosen was reflective of the majority of primary schools in Ireland as it did not implement a whole school approach to mindfulness, the onus was on the individual teachers in the school. In contrast, the other two schools did implement a whole school approach to mindfulness. The researcher made sure the sample selection from the schools included a variety of teachers, both male and female, from differing class levels within the schools and with varying years of teaching experience. Gathering data from a broad range of teachers provided the opportunity for the comparison of different experiences and perspectives.

After the interview schedule was completed, a pilot interview was carried out. Sampson (2004) notes that pilot interviews enable the researcher to analyse and reflect on the interview design. The pilot interview enabled the researcher to get familiar with her role as interviewer and to practice the techniques involved when taking on this role. Upon completion of the pilot interview, the researcher altered certain interviewing techniques in order to obtain the richest data possible. The interview questions were planned in a way that provided the researcher with a clear insight into the interviewees' understanding of the concept of mindfulness, their perspectives towards it and their experience, to date, with it in the classroom. The interviews were carried out on the school premises outside of school hours. Each interview was audio recorded using two digital recording devices. Field notes were taken during each interview. Denscombe (2010) notes how field notes enable the researcher to document data that the digital

recording may be unsuccessful in communicating across. For example, non-verbal gestures and pauses during the interviews were recorded in the researcher's field notes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a lengthy process that involves searching for themes or commonalities in the data collected, to create meaning and understanding and to explain why they exist (Bernard, 2006). This study aimed to explore a range of reoccurring themes based on the experiences and perceptions of primary school teachers in relation to mindfulness practice. The data was initially analysed by means of coding. The most significant codes were then grouped into three main themes, with a series of sub-themes arising from them. Denscombe (2010) observes that during the process of coding the researcher can sometimes unintentionally misinterpret the data. The frequent revisiting of the data by the researcher limited the possibility of this occurring.

Positionality of the Researcher

The researcher's positionality with regards to paradigmatic viewpoints has been discussed previously in this chapter. With regards to the researcher's position, it is also necessary to state that, as a final year student undertaking the Professional Master of Education, the researcher has not received any specific training in the area of mindfulness practice. The rationale for this study comes from the researcher's personal motivation and interest in this topic. While on teaching practice, the researcher gained an insight into and an understanding of the benefits and value that a school can offer when mindfulness is embodied in its ethos. This experience was a contributing factor that inspired the researcher to explore this topic in more depth.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a fundamental aspect of the initial planning of research. Ethical approval was sought and approved by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee. Brinkmann

& Kvale (2018) note that “ethical issues permeate interview research” (p. 10). As interviews were the main focus of this research, it was essential that all ethical guidelines were considered to ensure that the participants were protected. The rights, privacy and anonymity of the participants were safeguarded at all times during this research study (Flick, 2014). Robson (2002) highlights the importance of informed consent in ensuring the purpose of the research is made clear to all participants. A letter of information was provided to all potential participants outlining the details of the study (Appendix A). Consent forms were signed by each participant prior to the commencement of the interview (Appendix B). Prior to the interview, participants were clearly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the process without prejudice. The privacy of the participants was of the utmost importance to the researcher. A pseudonym was generated for each participant and any identifying details of the participant or the school were excluded to ensure anonymity. The interview audio files were labelled with the participants’ pseudonym and stored on an encrypted laptop. All data will be destroyed within 13 months upon submission of the research study, in compliance with the research data protection policy of Marino Institute of Education.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study must be acknowledged, despite the care taken to ensure reliable, valid data and findings. Due to time constraints, the primary limitation of this research was the sample size obtained. The sample was confined to the experiences of eleven primary school teachers in Ireland. As a consequence, this study provides a limited insight into the teachers’ experiences and perceptions of mindfulness. In addition to this, within qualitative research the interviewer effect can have an influence on the data received. Kreuter (2008) found that this can result in interviewers unintentionally affecting participants’ answers when administering interviews. The researcher’s personal interest in the topic during the interview process can present bias, however all appropriate measures were undertaken by the researcher to ensure

that the data gathered is valid and reliable. Finally, one-off interviews were the sole method of gathering data for this study. Bricher (1999) noted that one-off interviews can result in limiting data, and lead to different findings than would appear if follow-up interviews were carried out. This can be a challenge when conducting qualitative research, however it can be limited by thorough planning and true reflection.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

This chapter discusses the findings of this research study on Irish primary teachers' perceptions and experiences of mindfulness practice in the classroom. Thematic analysis of the data gathered during the interview process established the eventual findings of the study. Analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of many themes and sub-themes arising from common experiences shared by the teachers. The most significant themes and sub-themes will be discussed, with reference to prior studies and literature. In this chapter, the findings of the qualitative analysis are presented under three main themes. Firstly, the incentives behind the inclusion of mindfulness practices in the classroom will be discussed. Secondly, the benefits experienced by the teachers after incorporating mindfulness into the classroom will be explored. Finally, the challenges confronting teachers when incorporating mindfulness into the classroom will be discussed.

Incentives behind the Inclusion of Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom

Modern Day Pressures

This theme is concerned with the reasoning behind teachers' implementation of mindfulness practices in the classroom. Many teachers referred to mindfulness as the new concept that has permeated schools in recent years. Young children today are becoming increasingly exposed to stress, pressure and emotional difficulties. Schools are expected to have measures in place to help tackle these issues. One issue that surfaced throughout the data was the underlying feeling of concern from participants surrounding the mental health and wellbeing of young children in Ireland. Most participants referred to the busy lives that children lead in the present digital age and the complexities associated with it. When referring to the reasoning behind incorporating mindfulness into daily teaching, participant I stated "I think teaching children to be resilient is so important. Especially in this day and age when there are so many issues

surrounding mental health in this country.” This is reflected in the work of McElvaney, Judge & Gordon (2017) who highlighted the complex mental health issues among children in Irish primary schools. Participant C noted how digital devices are “polluting children’s minds.” Similarly, participant B reported on the constant negative stimulation being filtered into the minds of young children from video games, “there is so much constant stimulation from like video games and all that, it’s just constant there is just no let-up in it at all.” Many teachers noted that schools are becoming more aware of the importance of promoting mental health and wellbeing. When discussing the reasoning behind incorporating mindfulness into the classroom routine, participant C stated “we are just becoming more aware...of the need for it.” This supports the assertion of Costello & Lawlor (2014) who shed light on the important role mindfulness can play in alleviating daily stressors. It was apparent that while not all teachers were currently implementing mindfulness in the classroom, they were all open to it and appreciated the value it can bring to the classroom. Participant F highlighted the need for mindfulness practices in the classroom in order to provide children with a time to be still and quiet:

When I get feedback from them over and over again it’s positive. There is almost a craving for it actually. Their feedback is always...this is the only time when we are quiet. Children’s lives are very very busy...children don’t actually get rest and quiet time.

Similarly, when discussing the reasoning behind incorporating mindfulness in the classroom, Participant G observed that “the feedback over and over again from children is that they don’t have silence in their lives except at this one time in their day.” The findings suggest that the constant stream of digital stimuli leave children with limited time to be still. Evidently, digital distraction is an ingrained societal issue affecting young people across the globe. These findings are reflective of much literature which report on the universal concerns surrounding

the mental health and wellbeing of children in the present day (Cannon et al., 2013; World Mental Health Organisation, 2003).

Stresses, pressures and demands are now part of everyday challenges facing teachers and young children in schools. The negative impact of the modern day fast-paced, online, multi-tasking world that we live in is giving rise to higher levels of pressure and stress. Conclusively, participants clearly understood the importance of embracing practices, such as mindfulness, as they can play a key role in counteracting modern day pressures experienced by children in Irish primary schools. Participant B stressed “I think you can’t underestimate the effect that it can have. Even if only 3 children out of the class use it and find a benefit for it for their mental health...then it’s been worthwhile.” This view is supported by Goff (2003) who suggests that the school plays a key role in supporting and nurturing the mental health of its pupils. It is apparent from the interviews that all the participants share the belief that mindfulness merits a place in Irish primary schools.

How are Teachers Incorporating Mindfulness Practices into their Classrooms?

During the analysis of the data, it became apparent that the majority of the teachers are not teaching mindfulness as a standalone lesson but are instead incorporating it into the curriculum during SPHE lessons and Religion lessons and also as a means of transition between lessons. These mini-mindfulness lessons are designed to provide the children with time for reflection and to calm and clear their minds. The activities the teachers referred to tended to be based around mindful breathing exercises, body scans, mindful music and visual stimuli.

The vast majority of the teachers described how they linked mindfulness practices to their SPHE lessons. Participant H stated “I would usually do it leading into an SPHE or after an SPHE lesson, so it’s kind of helping with the lesson itself as well as a transition.” Similarly, participant E noted “It’s promoting kindness for themselves and kindness for others, so it fits

in with the SPHE curriculum.” Participant B used mindful breathing techniques to start off her ‘Friends for Life’ programme during SPHE lessons. Incorporating mindfulness into SPHE lessons suggests that teachers view mindfulness as a practice that promotes children’s mental health and wellbeing. This is supported in the literature by a study carried out in Australia suggesting mindfulness can make a valuable contribution to health and wellbeing programmes in schools (Joyce, ETTY-Leal, Zazryn & Hamilton, 2010). When discussing how they incorporate mindfulness into Religion lessons, many of the participants referred to relaxation music which is part of the Grow in Love curriculum. Participants C and E used it as a time for the children to reflect on the important things in their lives, such as their friends and families. A study carried out by Napoli et al. (2005) supports the integration of mindfulness into the Religious education curriculum.

For several of the teachers, mindfulness seemed to work best after an active lesson, such as Physical Education. They found it had the ability to restore calm to the class after high tempo lessons. Participant D noted “I’ll do it if I find we have had a noisy lesson and they need to be brought back down. After PE sometimes it can be a great time because they are so busy running around that it can just calm them down.” Similarly, participant C observed “I find what works best is if you do it after a high tempo lesson like PE.” This was echoed by participant J “I like to do it after PE because they might be after losing a game or they might be a bit hyper, so it’s a nice way to calm them down.” Restoring calm to the classroom during the transitional period between lessons emerged as one of the main reasons teachers implemented mindfulness practices into the classroom. It is important to note that the limiting of the practice to transitional periods between lessons raises questions about the true value that is placed on it.

For many teachers, mindfulness became a valuable tool that they used in order to combat and attempt to resolve any social issues that became apparent in the classroom. Participant B

referred to the prevalence of disagreements among the girls in the class and noted how this led to the implementation of mindfulness into the classroom after yard time.

Well the class that I had last year, there were a lot of social issues, especially between the girls in the class. There would have been a lot of arguments and disagreements...and my class was then chosen for this Friends For Life Programme...because it was a way of repairing those relationships and trying to get them to be more aware of their impact on others and because of that mindfulness just seemed to fit well with that programme.

The participant found that children were less likely to have disagreements about incidents on yard time after engaging in a few moments of mindfulness practice. This highlights the role that the practice can play in relation to conflict resolution in schools. Participant I used a technique called the ‘zone of regulations’ when working with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. This participant found mindful breathing techniques very beneficial in helping the children to reach their targets “I can use it as a technique to move the children from each zone, so from an anger zone to a happy or a calm zone.” This correlates with the findings of Ager, Albrecht & Cohen’s (2015) research that found mindful breathing enables students to form a deeper connection with their inner selves, thus creating experiences of calm and relaxation. Harris (2017) stressed the importance of incorporating mindful breathing techniques into the classroom, stating that it could be one of the most valuable gifts a teacher could give their students.

Benefits Teachers Found after Incorporating Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom

Findings in the domain of benefits will be discussed under the sub-themes of behaviour and concentration, emotional regulation, anxiety and mindfulness as a life skill.

Behaviour and Concentration

It was observed by a number of teachers that engagement in mindfulness can have a notable impact on students' behaviour and concentration. This was discussed by the teachers in terms of the social and academic outcomes resulting from engagement with the practice. While discussing the benefits of mindfulness practice, participant A alluded to the fact that it can have a positive impact on children's behaviour and their interactions with others "I think the children were almost nicer after doing it...even on yard and things like that, that they went out calmer and...it did have a positive impact on them." Participant D echoed this positivity "their behaviour is a little bit better and they are able to word what they are feeling." Similarly, participant C highlighted how mindfulness can make children more aware of the impact their behaviour can have on others "I feel like they think about their own actions." These findings are supported by a number of studies in the literature that found a link between mindfulness and improved behaviour. The advantages found in the literature include a decrease in negative behaviour (Byrne, 2017) and the adoption of a more caring and respectful attitude towards other pupils and teachers (Black & Fernando, 2014). Ager, Albrecht, & Cohen (2015) found that the heightened state of awareness resulting from engagement with the practice naturally extends beyond themselves resulting in a more compassionate connection with friends, family and the environment around them.

From an academic point of view, participant C spoke of the ability of mindfulness practices to restore calm to the classroom and in turn improve the concentration levels of the children in the class. When describing how mindfulness was beneficial for the class, the participant noted "I think clearing their minds and getting them ready to focus on their next lesson. You can see that after a bit of mindfulness that their engagement for the coming lesson is that bit better you know." This assertion was supported by participant I, who found it also improved the concentration levels amongst the children in her classroom "I find that it really...helps them to

concentrate on their work that they do after it...and I think that in turn definitely must have an impact on their standard of work.” This finding is supported by Hornich-Lisciandro (2013) who found that mindfulness practice had a positive impact on the quality of the work that children produced. While discussing the possible impact that mindfulness can have on children’s concentration levels, participant K revealed that it can be used in order to gain the children’s focus before beginning a difficult lesson. These findings are in line with the work of Napoli et al. (2005), Costello & Lawlor (2014) and Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) who have all linked mindfulness to improved levels of concentration and focus within the classroom.

Emotional Regulation

The positive emotional benefits that children can gain through engagement with mindfulness practices were widely acknowledged by several of the participants. Many teachers found that it provided children with an avenue to explore their feelings. Participant G noted “there is no point in telling them [the children] to relax unless you can show them what the feeling is like.” Mindfulness practices were most definitely applauded for helping children to understand the various feelings and emotions that they face on a daily basis. Participant D observed that after engagement with mindfulness-based practices children “can register thoughts a lot more... a lot of them have to be taught conflict resolution and how to deal with big problems.” A common factor that teachers appraised was the important role that mindfulness practices play in helping children to regulate their emotions. As participant D highlights:

Every year you will have one or two children who can’t manage their feelings and can’t physically put words on what they are feeling. I do think meditation from any age will just calm down any situation. I think even things on the yard or things that can explode in the room, if you just remind them to breath or remind them to clench their fists a few

times or kind of be mindful of what's around them, their smells, their sensations, it can kind of calm a situation quickly.

Similarly, participant K observed that it also helped children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to regulate their emotions:

The children that I take out are children that react quickly to a situation and that can be their downside, because in certain situations, instead of pausing and reflecting and being conscious of their actions, their first reaction is usually anger...they can use mindfulness as a way of controlling their emotions and self-regulating.

Participant E echoed this positivity:

I think it gives them the opportunity to learn how to self-sooth, how to self-calm and how to realise that their emotions pass and they might be upset or angry with somebody for taking something belonging to them or pushing them and that that is only an emotion and that that passes.

Weare (2012) applauds mindfulness for providing children with the tools to self-regulate their emotions. Comparable discussions and findings arose in other interviews regarding the impact of mindfulness on children's ability to self-regulate. Participant J expressed that:

It can make them think before they make a decision. I think that sometimes children can jump to a conclusion or can be too quick to react, it forces them to think in the present moment...before they do an action.

These finding are supported in the work of Meiklejohn et al. (2012) who found that mindfulness enables children to become aware of their emotions and feelings. It became apparent that the inclusion of mindfulness practices in the classroom created a safe environment where children felt comfortable to talk about how they were feeling. Previous studies on the benefits of

mindfulness in schools have referred to the positive impact that it can have on children's abilities to self-regulate their emotions. According to Caulfield (2016), self-regulation of one's feelings and emotions are at the core of mindfulness practice.

Anxiety

The power of mindfulness in helping to combat the presence of anxiety amongst certain children was also observed by several teachers. Participant H observed "I have some really anxious kids in my class and you can see it working with them." This point of view was supported by participant J "I would have had children in previous classes who did suffer with anxiety and I found that practising mindfulness really did help them." These findings are supported in the study by Semple, Reid & Miller (2005) who found improvements in children's post-test anxiety scores upon completion of the six-week trial. Joyce, ETTY-Leal, Zazryn & Hamilton (2010) also asserted that mindfulness provided relief to those suffering with childhood anxiety. An interesting finding emerged regarding the perceived long-term benefits of mindfulness. Participant G observed how a past pupil continued to use mindfulness throughout secondary school. The participant noted:

I met a mother whose child is in secondary school, she said she is still practising mindfulness and it was the one thing that worked for her when she was in third class. She suffered from a lot of anxiety issues throughout school and...literally a few weeks ago I met her mother and she said she is still doing it all the time and it's the one thing that has worked for her.

This raises an interesting question regarding the perceived long-term benefits of mindfulness practice. In the literature, previous studies focus mainly on the benefits of mindfulness over a short-term period which highlights the need for a study into the long-term benefit of mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness as a Life Skill

Several teachers acknowledged the role that mindfulness can play outside of the walls of the school. Participant H referred to mindfulness as a tool that can support children in their home lives:

I just think it helps them...reflect on their own actions and helps them with things that are going on in their own lives. Particularly in a DEIS school, there's a lot going on at home...it teaches them a strategy that they might be able to use at home.

This is reflective of the findings in the study by Costello & Lawlor (2014) that found children utilised mindfulness when faced with home-related stressors. Similarly, participant G mentioned "One or two children have said that they use it at home if there is fighting or if people aren't getting on." Participant I also noted:

They would often say well if I am really really cross with my brother or sister if something happened, instead of screaming and roaring, I can go and just try and use my breathing exercises to calm myself down if somebody is annoying me.

This mirrors the findings of Ager, Albrecht & Cohen (2015), who found that mindfulness can teach children to use their 'pause button' before reacting to a situation. Evidently, initiating classroom discussions about when one can use mindfulness both inside and outside of the classroom proves to be of key importance. It is apparent that the majority of teachers viewed mindfulness as a life skill that can have a positive impact on children's lives. Participant E expressed "it's giving them skills that they can use independently...mindfulness is something that they can carry with them." Participant G stated "I firmly believe that it is a life skill that will actually help them." This is supported in the research conducted by Costello & Lawlor (2014) where children indicated that they would continue to use mindfulness for stress prevention in the future.

Challenges Teachers Found when Incorporating Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom

Findings in the area of challenges will be discussed under the sub-themes of time constraints, distractions, children with ASD and ADHD and Teacher Training and Continued Professional Development.

Time Constraints

Across every interview the overriding feeling that emerged was the lack of time available to incorporate mindfulness into an already overcrowded school day. All participants seemed to identify time, or a perceived lack of time, as one of the main challenges when trying to incorporate mindfulness practices into the classroom. The pressures associated with an overcrowded school day were highlighted by all teachers. Participant D noted “I find that I don’t do as much of it as I would like, but this is as I said just because the curriculum is so overcrowded and we are trying to cram so much into a day.” Similarly, participant B stated “I suppose the other big challenge would be time, fitting it into the curriculum... even though it’s really important, it’s difficult to prioritise it over all the other massively overloaded curriculum that you have to deal with.” While discussing the pressures of her overloaded timetable, participant C noted how mindfulness would be the first thing to be eliminated from the daily plan, as the core subjects on the curriculum take precedence:

Just looking there I had.... 8 things to get through today and I got through 6 of them and that was going well. You never get through your day and if I was to have mindfulness on that, probably mindfulness would have been the first thing to go because I have to get through my English, Irish, Maths and that has to be on my cutas at the end of the month.

It is evident that a lack of time available in the school day was identified as an impediment, as it interfered with teachers’ ability to incorporate mindfulness into their daily practice.

Distractions

One of the most frequently addressed challenges, when implementing mindfulness with children in the classroom, was the prevalence of distractions. For several of the participants, strategies to get children to come on board, or those that get distracted easily, proved to be difficult in the beginning. While discussing the challenges encountered by teachers, participant B noted “I suppose distraction would be a big one...if there was any kind of distraction at all, like if there was a noise or somebody coughed there would be children that just couldn’t focus.” Similarly, Participant E emphasised that her “biggest challenge is the interrupters.” Participant C noted that, if there are a lot of children in the class that are likely to cause disruption, this can impact on a teacher’s willingness to do mindfulness regularly in the classroom “It makes it that bit more difficult when you have the fear of that happening” and went on further to say that “I guess if you have a lot of children like that in your class you are less likely to do it.” While many teachers found distractions challenging, the majority found this only proved to be a challenge in the beginning. Participant B observed that “I think a huge part of it as well in overcoming the challenges is just doing it regularly because it’s not going to work perfectly the first time you do it.” Similarly participant K expressed that:

It takes a while, you have to have patience yourself but eventually they persevere and they can focus and your hope is that if they can focus in that mindfulness session, that they can do the same in the classroom, which would increase their attention.

This supports the work of Crescentini et al. (2016) who found mindfulness practice to have a positive impact on children’s attentional control. Many teachers acknowledged that doing mindfulness regularly and building it up over time is key to successfully implementing it in the classroom. This is in line with the findings in a study carried out by Rix & Bernay (2014) which

found after the first few sessions distractions were minimal, as the children began to actively engage in the process.

Children with ASD/ADHD

Two participants highlighted the added challenge of incorporating mindfulness into a classroom that has children with ASD or ADHD. Participant H highlighted “I have two children in my class with severe ASD so they find it really difficult.” A similar point of view was expressed by participant C:

I suppose last year it would have been my little kiddies with ADHD. They just find it that bit harder to relax and...the minute one child goes off task...then that rebounds off everyone else and you have lost them all.

While these findings emerged in this particular study, they do not necessarily correlate with findings in recent studies of a bigger scale. A study carried out by Keenan-Mount, Albrecht & Waters (2016) found mindfulness to be beneficial with children with ADHD. Similar findings also emerged in a study carried out by Byrne (2017) with children with ASD. It may be the case that because of time restraints, the perceived benefits of mindfulness were not achieved because it did not have the opportunity to become part of a regular routine in the classroom.

Teacher Training and Continued Professional Development

A common trend which emerged from the interviews was the apparent lack of teacher training in mindfulness. Six out of eleven teachers noted how they had not received any training in the area of mindfulness. When discussing how the school or the education system could further support mindfulness initiatives in the classroom, participant C noted:

I suppose teacher training. I did none of it in college. I have had no formal training on mindfulness, I don't know if I am doing mindfulness, like I think I am doing mindfulness but you know it would be nice to be reassured.

This was echoed by participant I who observed "I think teacher training colleges need to teach future teachers how to practice mindfulness...there should be a lecture, like a module in college that everyone has to take because I really think it's the future." Similarly, participant K highlighted teacher training as being key to help further support mindfulness initiatives within schools.

When describing a mindfulness course that was organised in the school, participant A noted how CPD played a key role in her introduction of mindfulness into her classroom. She went on further to say "I suppose, like that lady coming out to speak to us...maybe if she never came I wouldn't...have ever done it." Similarly, participant J observed "In doing these courses you part take in mindfulness as well so you are nearly being converted into it...seeing first-hand the benefits yourself can really carry on into the class and what you are teaching." These findings highlight the essential role that CPD plays in supporting mindfulness initiatives within schools. Participant K noted how the school encouraged the staff to implement and learn more about mindfulness during a Croke Park hour. The participant discussed how mindfulness was built into their DEIS plan and that each teacher received a mindfulness pack with ideas and resources relating to the implementation of the practice within the classroom. It was suggested by many teachers that utilising a Croke Park hour for a mindfulness course would make it more accessible. These findings are in line with Weare (2015) who describes the importance of prioritising staff development when adopting a universal focus on wellbeing within the school community. While it is apparent that courses on mindfulness are available in Ireland, more needs to be done to highlight and promote them. Evidently, additional teacher training and participation in CPD is key to the successful implementation of the practice.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This research study investigated the perceptions and experiences of Irish primary school teachers on the implementation of mindfulness-based practices in the classroom. It is hoped that the findings from this study will contribute positively to the expanding areas of research relating to mindfulness practice in Irish classrooms. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven primary school teachers and was analysed on a thematic basis. The thematic analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of three main themes as discussed in the data analysis chapter of this study.

The main justification for implementing mindfulness was to help ease stress and emotional difficulties associated with modern day society. Young children face an array of stressors, yet are provided with few tools with which to alleviate them. Teachers believe that mindfulness will provide children with a life skill to alleviate daily stressors in the modern age. Furthermore, teachers revealed how engagement with the practice played a key role in helping children understand and regulate their emotions.

Mindfulness was used most frequently as a means of transitioning between lessons. Teachers found it restored calm to the busy classroom environment and provided a smooth means of transition, especially after a high tempo lesson like Physical Education. Benefits relating to behaviour and concentration were also identified. Teachers found that mindfulness played a key role in conflict resolution, heightening children's awareness of their impact on others. Mindfulness enabled children to access their pause button, creating a space between their thoughts and actions. The findings also revealed that engagement with the practice improved children's attentional control.

Real-world implementation factors were also addressed, with time emerging as the biggest challenge associated with practicing mindfulness in the classroom. The majority of the teachers

discussed the pressures of the busy school culture and overloaded curriculum. Incorporating mindfulness into the school day proved challenging for some, as the core subjects took precedence. The teachers in this study identified teacher training and CPD as being key to the successful implementation of the practice. While some teachers had received formal training, others had not and expressed the desire to upskill in this area. Evidently there is need for the provision of tools, time and resources to enable teachers incorporate a comprehensive mindfulness programme into the school curriculum. Overall, the teachers presented an openness and willingness to engage in the practice and clearly understood the value it can bring to modern day society.

To encapsulate, the promotion of mindfulness practices should be central to Irish primary schools' whole school policies. Evidently, the incorporation of mindfulness into school policies, twinned with the provision of time and resources for practice, would enable teachers to implement a comprehensive mindfulness programme into the school curriculum.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the increase in the implementation of mindfulness-based practices in schools throughout Ireland, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research. The limitations of this study, as addressed in the methodology chapter, related to the sample size obtained. Future research should incorporate data gathered from a much larger sample size of teachers. While this was not possible for this study, clearly the enhancement of the sample size would further increase the value of the generated data. Studies carried out to date lack evidence to support the lasting effects on the students. Future research should include the benefits of mindfulness over a longer period of time in order to shed light on the potential long-term benefits associated with the practice.

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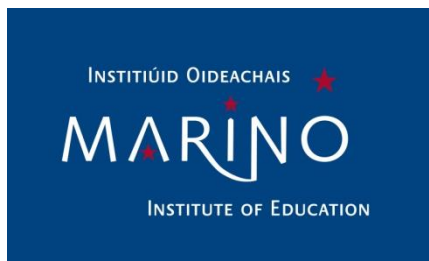
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Information



Participant Information Sheet

Dear Teacher,

My name is Orla Danaher and I am a final year Professional Masters of Education student in Marino Institute of Education. As part of this course I am carrying out research in the area of mindfulness. My research is entitled '*An Investigation into Irish Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Mindfulness*'.

This dissertation will investigate the views and experiences of primary school teachers on the practice of mindfulness-based activities. The method of data collection for this dissertation will include a one-to-one interview. It is anticipated that the interview will last between 25-30 minutes. A list of questions will be asked and additional questions may also be asked to clarify or expand on certain points mentioned. It is hoped to complete the interview on the school premises, outside of class time.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this dissertation. The data collected will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity and will be destroyed after a period of 13

months. No information about the participant or the school will be mentioned or identified in the dissertation. All information will be stored safely on a password protected device and access thereto will only be available to my supervisor and the external examiner. The findings from the anonymised interviews will be included in my dissertation.

Please note that you are under no obligation to participate in this study. If at any time you wish to withdraw from this study, you may do so without having to give a reason and without prejudice.

If you have any questions regarding this research or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me using the email or phone number provided below.

Yours sincerely,

Orla Danaher

Appendix B: Consent Form

Form of Consent

I have read and understood the information letter and I am willing to participate in this study.

YES NO

I consent to have my interview recorded on a digital recording device.

YES NO

I consent to the use of anonymised quotations in this dissertation.

YES NO

Participant's Name (block capitals): _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Questions

1. What is your understanding of mindfulness?
2. Do you practice mindfulness yourself? (outside of the classroom).
3. Have you ever implemented it in the classroom?

If yes,

4. Can you describe what you do? (Resources you use?).
5. What do find most helpful/works best?
6. Have you tried it with different class groups? Is there an age group you think it works best with?
7. What benefits have you seen in your classroom using mindfulness?
8. Why did you decide to incorporate mindfulness into your classroom?
9. How often do you feel you implement mindfulness in the classroom?
10. Have you encountered any challenges while teaching mindfulness to your students?

If no,

11. Would you consider implementing it in the classroom?
12. What would make you more likely to implement mindfulness in the classroom?
13. Have you seen it implemented in your school?
14. What strategies might you try?
15. What benefits/challenges do you think you might encounter?

16. What time of the day do you think mindfulness practice should occur?
17. In your opinion what affects do you think mindfulness can have on children's mental health?
18. How do you think the education system or the school may be able to further support mindfulness initiatives within classrooms?