

Time to Breathe:
An Investigation of Teachers' Experiences of Mindfulness in the
Classroom

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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.

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Abstract

With the rising presence of mindfulness practices in schools in Ireland, it is important to review and assess the experiences of those implementing the practice. In particular, teachers' understanding of the topic needs to be considered. This research study reports the experience of seven teachers in a school which does not incorporate a particular mindfulness programme or whole school approach to the practice. Findings point to a high level of openness to mindfulness in schools. However, a lack of time to include the practice in the school day was evident, as well as an understanding of mindfulness that in some cases does not align with its fundamental aims. The author concludes that there is a need for mindfulness in schools. It can be particularly beneficial in counteracting the sense of time-deprivation experienced by teachers, and hence teachers should be provided with resources in order to offer a more comprehensive practice to children.

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Introduction

This study concerns the current position of mindfulness practice in the Irish primary school. Specifically, it explores teachers' experiences of mindfulness practice in the classroom. The study aims to gain an insight into teachers' understanding of the practice and to explore their rationale for using it or not using it in the classroom, as the case may be.

Mindfulness can be described as paying attention to the present moment in an open and non-judgemental way (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 1999). This practice has its roots in wisdom and faith traditions, such as that of Buddhism. In recent decades, however, research and applications of the practice have become more prevalent in mainstream areas such as clinical settings, workplaces and schools. Much research has been carried out outlining the benefits of mindfulness and these reported benefits have partly increased its presence in the mainstream (Kabat-Zinn, 1998; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). However, with this move into the mainstream, a more contemporary practice has emerged which seems to undermine the fundamental aims of the traditional practice (Ergas, 2015; Hyland, 2015).

It is worth, therefore, considering the current practices of mindfulness present in school settings. Existing research studies, consisting mainly of quantitative work, have provided an analysis of the effectiveness and benefits of the practice in schools, and some have examined the different methods of implementation of mindfulness in schools. However, there are mixed views on some of these results and, more fundamentally, there are mixed views on the justification for mindfulness practices in schools in the first place (O'Donnell, 2015; Simpson, 2015). Considering the position of mindfulness in schools in Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills provide

clear support for it, with the provision of mindfulness resources from the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST). It is important to note also that mindfulness has been on the primary religion curriculum since the 1990s. However, there is limited literature on the approaches to mindfulness in Irish schools and little attention has been paid to teachers' experiences of mindfulness practices.

The primary objective of this piece of research, therefore, is to create a picture of teachers' experiences of mindfulness in schools and of how mindfulness is understood within the school setting. The method of semi-structured interviews with seven teachers is used in an attempt to uncover, among other things, teachers' attitudes towards mindfulness and their rationale for its use, or lack thereof. The merits and challenges experienced by teachers is a particular focus. By presenting and analysing these teachers' current experiences, it is hoped that a developing beneficial approach to the practice of mindfulness in schools may be unveiled. On the other hand, the study may lead to a consideration of whether it should be included at all.

This dissertation comprises five chapters. The chapter following this introduction reviews the current literature, concerning mindfulness in general as well as its practice in education, including in Ireland. The methodology chapter provides a description of the broad assumptions underlying the research design as well as the practicalities of the method employed. Next, the data analysis chapter discusses the main findings of the research with reference to literature. Finally, the concluding chapter presents the culmination of the findings and provides recommendations for future research into mindfulness in the Irish classroom.

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides a broad exploration of the literature surrounding the practice of mindfulness in education. By developing an overview of the practice in general as well as its position in education, a basis is provided for the relevance of this study. First, the definition of mindfulness and its origin are discussed. The benefits of mindful practice, which have drawn considerable interest in mindfulness in schools, are then explored. Following this, the effectiveness of particular interventions in schools are reported and critically reviewed. The much deliberated justification for mindfulness in education is then examined. Considered next, is the position of mindfulness within the Irish education system. Finally, practical implications of implementing mindfulness in the classroom are reported, including the effects of teacher qualities and the development of a whole school culture of mindfulness.

Defining Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a practice involved in various religious and secular traditions, from Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, and more recent contemporary Western practices. People have been practising mindfulness for thousands of years, whether by itself or as part of a larger tradition. The literature contains many definitions of mindfulness, from the traditional Buddhist notions to more contemporary Western definitions. One frequently used definition is that of Kabat-Zinn (1994). He refers to mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (p. 4). Nhat Hanh (1999), a renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, describes it as involving “attention to the present moment” which is “inclusive and loving” and “which accepts everything without judging or reacting” (p. 64). Mindfulness can be seen in the hermit and monastic traditions of Christianity.

Cynthia Bourgeault is a teacher of the Christian contemplative path, and referring to Christian meditation, she states that it “opens up that place of immediate knowingness . . . where we can directly experience the living Jesus” (2008, p. 19).

Bishop et al. (2004) aimed to move towards a more utilitarian definition of mindfulness. They provide an operational definition which involves two components; the first involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience and the second involves adopting an open and accepting orientation toward present experiences. A review of the literature carried out by Nilsson and Kazemi (2016), extracted 33 definitions of the term. The review yielded 4 core elements common to all definitions consisting of awareness and attention, present-centeredness, external events, and cultivation. A further core element, ethical-mindedness, was identified as being absent in the Western definitions. Gethin (2011) raises an interesting point about the purpose of defining mindfulness. He argues that it is the effect of the practice that is of significance, not the understanding of and theories about it. It could also be argued that the act of attempting to scientifically define the term undermines its non-scientific aims. Nonetheless, the wide variety of definitions of mindfulness found in the literature provide the opportunity for the analysis of the alignment between current practices of mindfulness in schools and these definitions.

Benefits of Mindful Practice

The considerable interest in mindfulness in the mainstream in recent years has been sparked by the introduction of Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme. MBSR is a manualised treatment programme now used widely to reduce psychological morbidity associated with chronic illnesses and as a treatment for emotional and behavioural disorders (Kabat-Zinn, 1998). Research has also shown the benefits for non-clinical samples, as it has been proven to mitigate stress and enhance

emotional well-being (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Another mindfulness-based intervention, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2002), combines training in mindfulness meditation with cognitive therapy to significantly reduce the rate of relapse in recurrent major depression. As a result of the success of these two programmes, mindfulness is being included in treatments of many clinical disorders.

Sharma (2016) discusses the physiological benefits associated with mindfulness. Within mindfulness practice it is not the stressor that changes but our reactions to the stress that slowly change. The benefits of mindfulness according to Sharma include improved coping strategies, treatment of addictive behaviour and eating disorders, and the reduction in stress, anxiety, neuroticism, chronic pain, dementia. The benefits of mindfulness have been widely documented, including Irish studies such as that of O’Leary and Dockray (2015). The effects of gratitude and mindfulness interventions on well-being was investigated and it was found that the mindfulness intervention demonstrated reductions in stress and depression and increases in happiness.

It should be noted how these benefits of mindfulness are purely based on scientific evidence which does not necessarily align with the wisdom traditions of mindfulness. O’Donnell (2015) highlights how the use of scientific evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of mindfulness “may have served to impoverish the rich contribution that practices of mindfulness, situated within a broader ethical framework, can make to human lives” (p. 189). Furthermore, according to a paper investigating the conclusiveness of current research, it is claimed that there are several areas in need of further exploration and clarification before the positive effects of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) can be assumed valid and reliable (Hanley, Abell, Osborn, Roehrig, & Canto, 2016). These critiques of the benefits of mindfulness may suggest

the need for more thorough research in the area before mainstream implementation.

However, as a result of the scientific research, the positive outcomes of the practice of mindfulness are widely recognised and as a result, it is now being used more frequently in the mainstream.

Mindfulness in Schools

Following on from the favourable findings observed with adults, researchers began piloting mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) with children and adolescents in the early 2000s (Renshaw & Cook, 2017). The first published study of the effect of MBIs in a school setting was carried out by Napoli and colleagues in 2005. The research showed improvements on measures of attention, social skills, and test anxiety. Subsequently, many MBIs have been researched in school settings, with a range of effects investigated, some of which will be outlined here.

In 2010 in Australia, the recommendation of mindfulness practice for improving mental health in children was investigated (Joyce, ETTY-Leal, Zazryn, & Hamilton, 2010). The lack of research, specific to children in a school setting, supporting this recommendation was identified. The investigation revealed that meditation practices can be easily learnt and can influence anxiety and depression levels among children in late primary school years. The effect of mindfulness on classroom behaviour has been reported. A five-week mindfulness based intervention showed that teachers reported improved classroom behavior of their students in terms of paying attention, self-control, participation in activities, and caring/respect for others, that lasted up to seven weeks post-intervention (Black & Fernando, 2014). Found also in the literature are investigations into the effect of mindfulness on academic performance. A study in the United States reported that a school based mindfulness intervention significantly enhanced students' quarterly grades in English and Science (Bakosh, Snow, Tobias,

Houlihan, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2016). Finally, the practice of mindfulness has been investigated with children with Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder, and a study reveals that it can achieve improved periods of active engagement (Singh et al., 2016).

With the above results revealing improvements in attention, anxiety, classroom management, academic performance, as well as its benefits in special education, the limitations of these findings need to be considered. The improvement of classroom behaviour lasted only up to seven weeks. The Australian study not did include a control group, but used a pre- and post-programme assessment only, and the limited time over which these studies were carried out need to be accounted for. As mentioned in the previous section, the motives for the implementation of mindfulness is relevant to these studies also. In particular, the idea of using mindfulness practices to obtain improved academic performance certainly proposes a contradiction of the fundamental aims of mindfulness.

The results of the many studies carried out on the effects of mindfulness in schools has led to the popular interest in implementation of mindfulness practices in schools. Many organisations have been established to provide education and training for teachers in mindfulness practice in the classroom. A study of 10 school based programmes being implemented in schools in the US was carried out (Semple, Droutman, & Reid, 2017). Although each programme was quite different in its implementation, it was found that mindfulness programmes in schools do appear quite feasible to implement and acceptable to many school administrators, teachers, and students. However, these positive findings need to be treated with reservation as it was noted that none of the programmes had been evaluated longitudinally to identify either the long-term benefits or their potential risks.

Justification of Mindfulness in Education

The gap between wisdom traditions and contemporary practices is widely documented. Ergas (2015) notes the two significant orientations of mindfulness that support the justification for mindfulness in education; one stemming from wisdom traditions and the other from empirical sciences. Scientific based approaches appear to be the primary reason for the introduction of mindfulness in education. However, he argues that the contemplative practices become diluted as the aims of these practices are directed towards scientific outcomes. Hyland (2015) describes this as a “marginalisation of the original foundational principles and a distortion of the ultimate aims and procedures”. He highlights that the potential of the benefits in the areas of moral, affective and spiritual education, depend on the fundamental link between contemporary practice and the foundations in the wisdom traditions.

By introducing mindfulness practices into schools, there is an unquestioned assumption that the children are in need of these practices to help them overcome particular issues. However, there is little critical investigation of the reasons that bring people to mindfulness (O’Donnell, 2015). Many of the practices today teach people to “surf their uncertainties and anxieties without seeking to understand and become aware of the causes” (p. 192). This type of practice has lost its link with the Buddhist origins which “seek to develop the understanding of the causes of suffering and to cultivate compassion, ethical skillfulness, judgement, right action, and right view” (p. 192). Similarly, Simpson (2015), argues that mindfulness practice in schools teaches children to focus on themselves, without consideration of the Buddhist elements of ethics or interdependence. Schools would be in a position to target the causes, not just the symptoms, if they were to adopt a “compassionate ethical framework” (p. 48).

Mindfulness practices, therefore, while not solving the issues in society, they have the

potential to cultivate a critical viewpoint of society.

Mindfulness in the Irish Classroom

Looking first at the position of mindfulness in Irish society and attitudes towards the concept of mindfulness, a study revealed a high level of openness, and a high level of understanding of the concept of mindfulness (O'Cleirigh & Greaney, 2015). This is reflected in the recent work of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Considering mindfulness as a method of supporting well-being, there is evidence of the promotion of mental health and well-being in Irish schools. The DES, along with other bodies, recently issued a publication 'Well-being in primary schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion'. These guidelines set out the important role primary schools play in well-being and mental health promotion. The well-being of teachers is also supported, with a focus on mindfulness. The PDST provide workbooks for teacher well-being, including mindful practices such as breathing exercises, body scans and mindful movements.

With clear support for well-being and mindfulness from the position of the DES, in a similar manner to the US and UK, it is only in more recent years that more teachers are using mindfulness practices in the classroom. There is little research into the effects of mindfulness in Irish schools. However, there is one study that investigated the effect of mindfulness on the perceived level of stress. The intervention of a five week school-based mindfulness programme revealed, through qualitative measures, improved perceived level of stress of Irish students (Costello & Lawlor, 2014).

There are many courses available for teachers in Ireland – both for their own practice of mindfulness and for its use in the classroom. Such programmes include

‘Mindfulness Matters’ and ‘Bright Sparks’. A UK based programme, namely ‘Paws.b’, developed by ‘Mindfulness in Schools Project’ (MiSP) is also currently in use in Irish primary school classrooms. A study on the effect of the ‘Paws.b’ programme in the UK provided evidence that, for schools, ‘Paws.b’ offers a means of improving the attentional functioning of their pupils (Thomas & Atkinson, 2016). While ‘Paws.b’ is a specific curriculum with outcomes outlined for each lesson and a certificate required for its implementation, the other courses available to teachers in Ireland simply provide tools for applying mindfulness practices in the classroom. There is a gap in the literature of critical reviews of mindfulness programmes currently implemented in Irish schools.

Implementation Factors of Teaching Mindfulness

Critical assessment is lacking in the literature on the details of the implementation of mindfulness in schools. Discussed earlier were the effects of mindfulness practices; however, the methods of implementation involved in these studies was not discussed. Implementation barriers and facilitators were identified by students and teachers undertaking a 16-week school-based mindfulness and yoga programme (Dariotis et al., 2017). The results yielded the following four themes in terms of implementation factors: programme delivery factors, programme buy-in, implementer communication with teachers, and instructor qualities. Instructor qualities is a notable factor found in the literature; a debate exists as to whether mindfulness teachers need to be established mindfulness practitioners in order to teach mindfulness effectively to children. Robust scientific evidence for this is limited. Shonin, Van Gordon and Griffiths (2014) state that mindfulness should be taught from an experiential standpoint and that teachers of mindfulness should be encouraged to practise it ‘on the job’. Shonin and Van Gordon (2015) also advise that teachers of

mindfulness should be practising what they teach as well as when they teach. Furthermore, it is advised that teachers familiarise themselves with the core teachings of mindfulness which will “help them to feel much more confident and to provide a more authentic teaching experience” (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015, p. 954).

A qualitative study carried out on students’ experiences of a programme reports that the success or failure of a mindfulness programme depends on how effectively and seamlessly it is integrated into the school setting (Cheek, Abrams, Lipschitz, Vago, & Nakamura, 2017). It is recommended that its practice is not reduced to a limited timeslot in the week but reflects a whole culture shift. This argument is prevalent in the literature. O’Donnell (2015) is weary of mindfulness that is offered as a discrete intervention focused on the self and wellbeing without integration with school environments and curricula. She reports that the value of the practice is poorly communicated as a consequence of the primary focus on the self.

A study mentioned earlier, which yielded improved school grades involved a very different method of implementation; specifically one which was teacher independent (Bakosh et al., 2016). This consisted of a fully automated audio-based programme played for 10 minutes per day. This method of implementation does not encompass the whole school culture and it does not involve the teaching of mindfulness from an experiential standpoint. In an investigation, through interviews in the US and UK into how wisdom, mindful awareness and compassion are currently cultivated in schools, the following methods of mindful practices were documented: reflection, mindful breathing, humming and meditation, mindfulness in running, and a daily two-minute meditation practice (McClain, Ylimaki, & Ford, 2010). It is clear from these studies that the cultivation of mindfulness in classrooms is carried out in a wide variety of ways and depends on many factors. Further to the critique of the benefits of

mindfulness mentioned earlier, this variety in implementation methods of mindfulness practices, may provide supplementary evidence of the weakness of the benefits.

Conclusion

Studies on the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in schools highlight that mindfulness can provide many benefits to a student. This is recognised in local and national studies on the subject. Hence, there is considerable interest in expanding the practice throughout all schools and this is reflected in recent recommendations from the Department of Education in Ireland.

However, the advancement of the implementation of mindfulness in schools requires careful consideration. The limitations of the studies on the benefits have been reported. It is argued that the justification for mindfulness in education is primarily scientifically based, focussing mainly on the self, which does not align with the traditional aims of mindfulness. It is found that there is a wide variety of approaches to the implementation of mindfulness practices in schools and this provides challenges for both evaluation and future implementation.

In fact, mindfulness may be considered in its infancy in schools in Ireland. There is limited literature on the implementation of mindfulness in Irish schools and little attention has been paid to teachers' experiences of mindfulness practices. This research project is intended as a contribution to the investigation of mindfulness practices of an Irish school setting.

Methodology

Introduction

The intention of this research study is to explore teachers' experiences and attitudes towards the practice of mindfulness in the classroom. From this study the researcher hopes to provide an insight into the current position of mindfulness in Irish schools. In this chapter, the research methodology used in the study is described, including the broad assumptions underlying the methodology as well as the practicalities of the design followed. First, the paradigmatic viewpoints underlying the research study are outlined. Described next is the method employed, i.e. semi-structured one-to-one interviews, as well as the processes of data collection and data analysis. Also addressed are ethical issues pertinent to this study, researcher personality as well as limitations of the methodology.

Research Design

It is important, firstly, to address the knowledge claims, or paradigmatic viewpoints, of the researcher as these have an effect on the entire research study. An inductive strategy of research is employed here as the study is not based on theory although theory may develop (Bryman, 2015; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). As a result of interviewing teachers, theory concerning the practice of mindfulness in schools may emerge. The ontological as well as epistemological positions are considered. The ontological position is one that concerns the nature of social reality. This study takes a constructionist ontological position, in which meaning is constructed through interaction with the world (Bryman, 2015; Creswell, 2003). This position "embodies a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals' creation" rather than regarding it as separate from the individual (Bryman, 2015, p. 36).

In line with this positionality, individuals are at the heart of this study, and are the source from which knowledge can be obtained and theory and conclusions drawn.

The epistemology of research concerns what is regarded as accepted knowledge in the discipline of the social sciences. This study takes an interpretivist epistemological position where humans make sense of the world through examining the interpretation of the world by its participants (Bryman, 2015; Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2003). The social world is experienced differently by all, and knowledge is seen as personal and subjective. The interpretivist position involves interpretation by the researcher, with influence of their own background and experience (Crotty as cited in Creswell, 2003). This position is opposite to that of a positivist epistemology, in which the social world can only be studied using natural sciences, independent of the individual. As the objective of this research study was to gain an insight into individuals' experiences, the positivist epistemology would fail to achieve this deep understanding.

Falling out of the knowledge claims outlined, is a qualitative approach to this research study. According to Bell (2005), qualitative methods are more suitable to studies involving the understanding of individuals' perceptions of the world. In this research study the objective was to gain an understanding of teachers experiences and perceptions of mindfulness in the classroom.

Research Method

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were the chosen instrument in this study. The semi-structured interviews involved a clear set of issues to be addressed, however they allowed a level of flexibility within their conduct (Cohen et al., 2007; Denscombe, 2010). This flexibility, along with open-ended questioning, provided the opportunity for the participants to speak freely and openly on issues of concern. This method allowed

the interviewee's perspectives, understanding and experiences to be uncovered with limited influence from the researcher. This method was chosen in contrast to a structured interview, which allows only limited option responses, and therefore grants a less comprehensive understanding. The semi-structured interviews involved both prompting and probing by the researcher, in order to gain clarification as well as to encourage elaboration on a topic (Cohen et al., 2007). According to Denscombe (2010), semi-structured interviews are "particularly good at allowing the researcher to explore in depth the thoughts, feelings and reasoning" of the participants (p. 142). This choice of instrument thus reflected the researcher's desire to gain a deep understanding of teachers' experiences of mindfulness in the classroom.

The one-to-one aspect of the interview, in contrast to a group interview, made it easy to control, as the research had to guide and question only a single participant. Furthermore, it was easy to trace data to participants, a difficulty that can present in group interviews (Denscombe, 2010).

Data Collection

A sample of seven teachers was obtained from a single school in Ireland. The school was chosen as, from the point of view of mindfulness practice in schools, it was typical of the majority of schools in Ireland; it did not implement a particular mindfulness programme nor did it employ a whole school approach to mindfulness. Researcher convenience was a factor in its selection also. The aim was to produce an exploratory sample, i.e. a sample used "as a way of probing relatively unexplored topics and as a route to the discovery of new ideas or theories" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 24). In terms of the sample selection within the school, the researcher wished to appropriately represent the following characteristics of the school's teacher population relevant to the research; different sexes, varying class levels as well as varying numbers of years

teaching. With this intention, stratified sampling took place. Stratified sampling ensures that the resulting sample appropriately represents the population in terms of the identified characteristics (Bryman, 2015; Cohen et al., 2007). First, the school population was divided into groups, or strata, based on the stratifying criteria of sex, class level taught and years of teaching experience. Second, random sampling took place within each group, and the size of each group was determined by the proportion of the group to the teacher population.

An interview schedule was designed, and a pilot interview was carried out. The pilot interview allowed for the opportunity of waste data to be eliminated, and for the researcher to practise interviewing techniques (Sampson, 2004). Following the pilot interview, the interview schedule was slightly amended to produce a final schedule aimed at gaining the most valuable data with regard to the research objective (see Appendix A). Interview questions were designed in a way that allowed the interviewee's understanding, perspective and experience of mindfulness in the classroom to be unearthed with minimal influence from the researcher. Interviews were carried out over a three-week period and were held within the school building, some within and some outside of school hours. The most challenging aspect of the data collection process was arranging a time that suited the teachers. The interviews were recorded on two devices. Field notes were taken throughout the interviews. The recording of field notes during interviews provide the opportunity to fill in some of the relevant information that the audio recording may fail to communicate (Denscombe, 2010). For example, information pertaining to the location of the interview, the atmosphere or any non-verbal gestures provided by the interviewee were recorded. These field notes were examined later during the data analysis phase.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was an iterative and lengthy process. To begin with, the data gathered, i.e. the seven interviews recorded on devices, were transcribed. This provided the initial stage of the analysis as it not only involved the transcribing of words but also the processing of what was said (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The type of analysis that was then employed was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2015). This involved identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. Throughout this analysis, the focus shifted from what was said by the participants to the exploration of the underlying meaning and patterns found (Rayman as cited in Silverman, 2011).

A method of initial and focused coding was applied to the data (Charmaz, 2006). Each line of data was analysed and a code was assigned where appropriate. A sample of this initial coding is shown in Figure 1.

<p>58 Yeah, I haven't lead any. Now, I know one of the other</p> <p>59 teachers... she has a book of kind of mindfulness stories -</p> <p>60 I don't know if it's mindfulness or meditation stories. She</p> <p>61 has done it with her class before and she found them very</p> <p>62 good. But I just use the GoNoodle just to direct them. But</p> <p>63 I'd like to get the stories off her as well because they're</p> <p>64 nice for them</p>	<p>teacher independent</p> <p>misunderstanding of mindfulness/meditation</p> <p>attitude: wants to do more</p>
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Figure 1: Example of Initial Coding

Following the initial coding, focused coding was employed, which involved testing the initial codes against the large dataset. Links were made between codes and the significance of each code was determined. Some codes were disregarded while others were grouped into themes. The themes were then analysed and those that were most

relevant to the objectives of the study were retained for further analysis. The effect of the researcher's involvement in the coding process should be noted. Codes were subjectively applied to the data and themes that appeared most relevant to the researcher were chosen. Finally, the findings of the study presented in themes were analysed with reference to current literature.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was approved by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee and pertinent ethical concerns were complied with throughout the study. According to Bryman (2015), the main areas of ethical concern relate to invasion of privacy, deception, lack of informed consent and harm to participants. A letter of information was provided to each participant prior to consent, containing relevant details of the research study as well as the role of the participant (Appendix B). Participants were informed, both verbally and through the letter of information, that their information would remain confidential. Participants were made aware, prior to the interview, of their option to withdraw from the study at any time. Consent forms were signed by each participant before interview (Appendix C). To comply with confidentiality principles, the interview audio files were transferred to a password protected laptop. They were subsequently deleted from the recording devices. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names throughout the transcriptions and all transcriptions were also stored on the password protected laptop. All data will be destroyed in line with the data protection policy of Marino Institute of Education.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's positionality in terms of paradigmatic viewpoints has been outlined previously. According to Cohen et al. (2017), "highly reflexive researchers will be acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background and

inductive processes and paradigms shape the research” (p. 172). This section further develops the researcher’s positionality. The method of interviewing employed was subject to the researcher effect. In terms of the analysis of the data, this was carried out in a subjective manner as themes were chosen according to what appeared relevant and interesting to the researcher.

With reference to the researcher’s background, it is important to note that, as a student currently undertaking the Professional Master of Education, the researcher’s experience as a teacher is limited to 20 weeks of school placement. The topic of mindfulness was chosen as the researcher has an interest in it and practises it to a certain degree. Finally, it is the researcher’s view that children in schools should be given the opportunities to practice mindfulness, but not without a thorough preparation and continuous examination of its implementation.

Limitations of the Methodology

The primary limitation of this methodology was the sample size used. It was small and represented experiences of only one school in Ireland. Another limitation concerned the years of teaching experience held by the teachers of this study. Six of the seven teachers disclosed that they had been teaching for less than 10 years; it is not clear whether similar teacher reports would be found for teachers with extended experience. Furthermore, interviewing was the only method employed in this study to investigate teachers’ experiences of mindfulness; classroom observations of mindfulness practices were not included.

Data Analysis

Introduction

There is limited research on the implementation of mindfulness practices in schools in Ireland and on teachers' experiences of the practice in the classroom. With the presence of mindfulness practices in schools increasing, there is the need for research examining the effects of its implementation. This chapter addresses the findings of this research on teachers' experiences of mindfulness in the classroom. The data was obtained from semi-structured interviews with seven teachers within a single school. From analysis of the data many themes emerge. The most pertinent themes will be discussed here with reference to previous literature. First, the teachers' understanding of mindfulness will be reported. The teachers' views on the purpose of mindfulness in schools will be discussed. Implementation factors and practical issues concerning the practice of mindfulness will then be presented. Finally, the teachers' viewpoints on a whole school approach to the practice will be discussed.

Prior to exploring the above themes, a brief outline of the levels of mindfulness practised by the teachers in the classroom will be provided. Five of the seven teachers interviewed revealed that they practised mindfulness in the classroom. The extent to which these teachers practised mindfulness varied widely. The teacher most welcoming of the practice revealed that she practised it discretely at least once every day using teacher led approaches such as breathing exercises and meditation. This teacher appeared to encompass the practice into the whole school day, with use of incense and the creation of an awareness of the present moment. Another teacher, on the other hand, told of her use of a teacher independent video employed once every two weeks.

Understanding of Mindfulness

The participants' understanding of the term was uncovered through analysis of every aspect of the interview. While some teachers' understanding was more obvious than others, all of the participants understood the concept to involve paying attention to the present moment. For example, according to Susan "the whole thing is about paying attention, and being mindful of what you do, that you... you're in a state of being in the present as opposed to going forward or going back". This understanding is in line with aspects of the definitions found in the literature, most of which involve an awareness of the present (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 1999).

In terms of their understanding of the origins of mindfulness, the majority believed it to derive from Buddhism, while prayer in general and Christianity were mentioned by some. An interesting idea was alluded to by Rachel when she suggested that the practice may have emerged as a result of scientific research. This comment reflects the reported and debated move from traditional notions of the practice to the more contemporary and scientific approaches to the practice (O'Donnell, 2015; Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). While John understands mindfulness to contain an awareness of the present, the first thing that came to his mind is achieving a scientific goal: "I think of reducing anxiety and stress and trying to focus on what is happening at present, in the current moment". This scientific element of the practice is evident in the majority of the participants' understanding. The reduction in anxiety and stress, whether a result of the practice or a goal of the practice, was a key aspect of their understanding.

Therefore, while the majority of participant's thoughts on the origins of the practice relate to wisdom traditions and prayer, their understanding of the practice did not align fully with these traditional notions. Their understanding lacked the elements of non-judgementalism and ethics associated with the traditional practice. Furthermore,

it is argued that most mindfulness in schools is based on the self and disregards Buddhist elements of ethics and interdependence (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016; Simpson, 2015). Andrew's understanding contained an element of reflecting on one's interactions with others. This understanding may suggest an element of interdependence, as one is not focussing solely on the self. However, also present within Andrew's explanation was an effort to assess how these interactions with others could have been improved. This effort can be seen as an act of judgement, and therefore not aligning completely with the traditional practice.

Another topic that arose for some participants, and that which provided an insight into their understanding of mindfulness, was practising mindfulness within yoga or pilates. They mentioned practising it either at the beginning of the class or at the end of the class. Rachel refers to "ly[ing] down and clear[ing] your mind" during her yoga class. However, Rachel's understanding of mindfulness was somewhat unclear as she first revealed that meditation comes to mind when she hears the word mindfulness, but later presented conflicting ideas of whether meditation is a form of mindfulness. She failed to initially identify meditation within yoga as a form of mindfulness. When talking about an online video, she stated "I suppose that's more meditation than mindfulness". This confusion raises the issue of the many reported definitions of mindfulness (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). It also perhaps suggests the ambiguity between the concept of mindfulness and that of yoga.

Overall there was a reasonable understanding of mindfulness demonstrated by the participants, although their understanding lacked some elements of the traditional practice. However, it can be deduced that these findings predominantly correspond with O'Cleirigh and Greaney's study (2015) which found that Irish people had high level of pre-existing knowledge of the concept of mindfulness.

Purpose of Mindfulness in Schools

Also aligning with the findings of O’Cleirigh and Greaney’s study (2015), was the fact that all teachers in this study revealed a high level of openness towards mindfulness. Five of the seven participants revealed that they practise it in the classroom and have found it useful. Susan said that she “would feel kind of strongly about it” while John and Andrew both stated that mindfulness definitely has a place in the classroom. Furthermore, those who do not currently practise it expressed views of intending to practise it in the future. Additional training in the area was a desire of most of the participants, with John specifically expressing how he intends to improve his practice next year. Underlying this openness to the practice is the teachers’ rationale for its practice in the classroom.

The justification for mindfulness in the classroom has been deliberated in the literature (Ergas, 2015; Hyland, 2015; Simpson, 2015). Throughout this research, teachers’ views of the rationale for the practice of mindfulness in the classroom were revealed. These views stemmed either from their perceptions of the benefits of the practice or from their understandings of the practice as discussed previously. Andrew identified his reasons for practising mindfulness in the classroom:

“I have seen the benefits of it, particularly for certain students for whom focus was an issue, or students where stress or anxiety was an issue, anger... students who had difficulties with anger or expressing themselves or dealing with their frustrations - that could be something to do with school or outside of school - but you definitely see a difference in them even in the way they communicate with their peers or communicate with myself, [it] was different afterwards.”

While many of the reasons mentioned by Andrew were mentioned by other participants, the most prevalent were those concerned with dealing with stress, anxiety and depression. This is illustrative of the findings of much literature which report the practice of mindfulness resulting in a positive impact on stress and depression (Costello & Lawlor, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 1998; Segal et al., 2002). Sharon noted the growing need for mindfulness practice as she says that “a lot of children are becoming more anxious and worried about everything and I think [mindfulness] would be really beneficial, especially to children in the older classes”. This perception of its usefulness in the senior classes is supported by the study carried out by Joyce et al. (2010) that revealed it can influence anxiety and depression levels among children in late primary years.

Both Andrew and Susan mentioned mindfulness as having a positive impact on children with language issues, such as those with English as an additional language. Susan observed that teaching mindfulness techniques, such as focusing on the breath, to a particular child in her senior infants’ class “helps him to manage his meltdowns”. Erica feels, while no other participant mentioned it, that children with special education needs or behavioural issues would benefit greatly from the practice.

An increase in focus and concentration seemed to emerge as reasons for practising mindfulness in the classroom. Marie claims that as a result of mindfulness, “[the children’s] concentration would definitely improve”. This rationale is in line with that of the UK based mindfulness programme ‘Paws.b’, currently in use in some Irish classrooms, which offers a means of improving the attentional functioning of pupils (Thomas & Atkinson, 2016). While concentration and focus may have an impact on academic performance, along with other benefits mentioned above, no participant revealed that their rationale for practising mindfulness was to improve academic performance. This is a positive reflection on the literature that reveals the argument that

academic performance as an objective of mindfulness practice undermines its aims (Hyland, 2015).

An interesting finding that emerged from the data was that teachers often practised mindfulness on a day when the children did not get to go outside during lunch time, and that mindfulness was used to calm the children:

“It helps reset them I feel, as I said, it helps give them a break from all the noise of the classroom, because the classroom is a very busy environment and they are always going... they always feel like they’re expected to be doing something, so it kind of lets them focus and reset, and just take a minute to be.” (Erica)

This may suggest that mindfulness is used simply as a break from the busy culture of school life. Sharon described how mindfulness is something that needs to be taught to children as “everyone is so busy these days” and “children are going home to a lot of technology and are not able to sit and do nothing”. The rationale for practising it then is to create a relaxation and calmness in the children and an awareness of the present, in response to this busy culture of school and home life.

It became apparent throughout the analysis of the interviews that there was a strong correlation between the teachers’ understanding of mindfulness and their rationale for its practice in the classroom. A striking insight into this was provided by Marie. When examining Marie’s overall understanding of mindfulness, it proved limited, and she noted that she did not practise mindfulness in the classroom or personally. An element of her justification for its use in the classroom was then revealed as she claimed that “it’s a bit of a buzzword at the moment for adults, so if we do it for adults we should definitely do it for children”. Her justification for intending to use in it the classroom is therefore perhaps based on the popularity and heightened

following of the practice, without fundamental knowledge of it. This rationale presents issues associated with the quality of the practice, and provides further evidence of the need for investigation into the reasons that bring teachers to mindfulness (Ergas, 2015; Hyland, 2015).

The interviews revealed a variety of reasons for mindfulness in the classroom, and while some motives of the traditional practices were present, it seems that the primary rationale among these teachers was based on the scientific approaches in line with Ergas (2015). With this scientific rationale to the fore, teachers consequently targeted the symptoms of the suffering and were not concerned with identifying the cause of the suffering as previously identified by Simpson (2015) and O'Donnell (2015).

Implementation Factors

In line with the literature, mindfulness in this school was carried out in a variety of ways (Semple et al., 2017). The role of the teacher within the practice became apparent. Four of the five teachers practising mindfulness used a mixture of teacher led practices as well as teacher independent practices such as online videos on GoNoodle¹ and ClassDojo². One teacher used online videos solely. John commented on his experience of the teacher independent practice:

“I have used the one on GoNoodle as well, there are a few mindfulness videos on it, I don't find them as good, they are very... I don't know... It's very American in the way it is portrayed. I don't think it suits... they don't seem to kind of engage with it as much as just kind of more informal mindfulness.”

¹ GoNoodle is a free online resource that provides short interactive movement activities for children through videos

² ClassDojo is an online behaviour management tool for the classroom

Four of the five teachers practising mindfulness in the classroom claimed that they practised it personally outside of school, to varying degrees. Three of these practised it within yoga or pilates. These findings suggest that this is in line with the literature that claims that teachers should practise what they teach and when they teach (Shonin et al., 2014; Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015). However, to what degree they practise mindfulness is questionable, as explored later.

From analysis of the data, the overall consensus was that mindfulness should be taught both within and outside of the religion lesson. Susan explained how she would light the candle and incense which “happen to be on the sacred space but [the practice is] not always in the context of religion”. Supporting the claim for mindfulness outside of religion, Rachel says that not all children would practice religion at home, but it is important for them to be able to practice mindfulness. This highlights the issue of teachers’ responsibility towards the minority. No other teacher mentioned the fact that some children may not partake in religion class.

Speckled through the data were challenges faced by the teachers when practising mindfulness in the classroom. These included lack of guidance and resources, physical space, noise issues and pupil buy-in. However, the overarching challenge for teachers was the issue of time. Rachel identified this as the main barrier to her bringing the practice to her school day:

“I really wanted to buy the Mindfulness in the Classroom³ programme but I just don't know when we'd have time to do it. I would have to start it in September and timetable it because I feel like it's too packed to do anything.”

³ Mindfulness in the Classroom is a mindfulness programme designed for the Irish primary classroom comprising of a book and audio CDs.

For the teachers who do practise it in the classroom, while the frequencies of their practices varied widely, most wished they had more time to do it. Andrew described how “the constraints of the allotted hours for each subject can make it difficult to fit in because it would have to take away from something”. As reported earlier under the theme of the purpose of mindfulness in schools, many of the teachers used mindfulness as a way of creating a calmness in response to the busy environment of the school. The notion that they cannot find the time may suggest that they are affected by a time-deprived busy school culture. Rachel suggested that “we are probably too, like, wound up ourselves as teachers”. This way of living does not reflect the way of a mindfulness practitioner. In contrast to these teachers, Susan seemed to be the only participant who unquestionably practised it throughout the day; she reported practising it twice a day in the classroom and revealed no struggle in making time for it. Thus, the struggle to find the time to practise mindfulness then raises the question as to what degree the majority of the participants teach mindfulness from an experiential standpoint (Shonin et al., 2014).

Whole School Approach

Literature on this subject suggests that a successful mindfulness programme reflects a whole culture shift and integration into the school setting, as opposed to the practice being limited to a discrete timeslot (Cheek et al., 2017; O’Donnell, 2015). From analysis of the data, it was evident that a whole school approach to the practice of mindfulness was recommended.

Many employed the practice in a discrete way through the mindfulness videos or by simply taking time to focus on the breath at the beginning of the day. However, they also either recommended, or provided examples of where they integrated mindfulness within the school curriculum. Social, Personal and Health Education as

well as Physical Education were common curriculum subjects that were proposed for integration with mindfulness. Susan reported incorporating the present curriculum content into the practice during the Physical Education lesson:

“I do a little bit of visualisation with them. I usually do it on a seasonal perspective. We did it after the summer where they were lying on a beach and feel[ing] the heat and being mindful of that. We did it in autumn... they were out in the middle of all of the leaves, lying down feeling all the leaves on them. And last week we did it in the snow. So, I would use what other things we were doing on the curriculum with them.”

In contrast to the discrete practice, Andrew thinks that “it could be more part of each subject area, not necessarily its own stand-alone thing.” While this is line with curriculum integration, as recommended in the literature, it highlights the issue of the significance of a discrete timeslot. Without the discrete practice it is questionable how children will learn the basic techniques in order to use it within curriculum areas. Thus, it presents the question of whether the discrete timeslot without whole school integration is a wholly unsuccessful practice, as reported by Cheek et al. (2017). Perhaps through the discrete timeslot children would learn the techniques and the practice would then naturally permeate each curriculum subject. John noted that he witnessed a whole school approach to mindfulness in another school, which incorporated a discrete timeslot of mindfulness practice: “At 10 o'clock every day a bell would ring over the intercom and everyone just stopped.” John claimed that this practice was reflected throughout the whole school day. He welcomed the approach but noted that “schools are at different stages of engaging with [mindfulness]”.

Another component of this theme that surfaced throughout the data was the question of whether all teachers should practice mindfulness in the classroom. It was suggested by Sharon and Susan that there were benefits associated with beginning the practice at an early age and continuing it up through the school. According to Sharon, trying to introduce it in a senior class might prove a struggle as children may feel that they are “too cool for that”. While this pedagogical reasoning seems viable, the issue of making it a requirement for all teachers raised concerns for some. Andrew considered the implications on the quality of the practice as a result of forcing teachers to do it (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015). Susan, having doubts about the practicalities of every teacher practising it, compared the practice of mindfulness to a talent such as music, that the children can benefit from in that particular year:

“Every teacher has something that they're kind of into, that is their strength or their talent. So you get children, you know, they mightn't have somebody that is particularly strong in music this year and then the next year they have a fantastic music teacher. And while music is on the curriculum, it doesn't necessarily mean you won't do what's on the curriculum. But you do it with so much more, kind of, energy and that, if it is your talent area or area of knowledge.”

Furthermore, many teachers highlighted the need for more guidance and support in the area. While they wanted to practise mindfulness, some revealed a lack of confidence in the area. Erica, John, Sharon, Rachel and Marie all said that they would be interested in a programme for mindfulness while Andrew specifically indicated a desire to gain more training in the area. Rachel expressed that “it's hard to know where to begin” and Erica found that when “you're trying to take from different places or what you know of it yourself, it can be quite hard”. While Sharon felt confident teaching

mindfulness having done a course in it, she recognised that “teachers would be scared of it and they wouldn't do it if they weren't confident”. These findings are in line with Shonin and Van Gordon (2015) who suggest that teachers should familiarise themselves with the core teachings of mindfulness in order to feel more confident.

Therefore, these issues concerning the quality of the teaching and the teachers' confidence, raises the question of whether it should be an optional or required practice. If it is only offered to children by teachers who are accomplished in it, then there would be no issue of the lack of quality in the practice within the classroom (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015). However, if it is not practised by every teacher, the success of a mindfulness programme may suffer due to the lack of whole school integration as recommended by Cheek et al. (2017) and O'Donnell (2015).

Conclusion

In this chapter, the experiences of teachers practising mindfulness in the classroom were reported and discussed. The teachers' understanding of mindfulness were found to be of a reasonable level, although they aligned with more contemporary understandings of the practice than those of traditional practices. The teachers' views on the purpose of mindfulness in schools were explored and the ideas of overcoming anxiety as well as taking a break emerged as the main justification. Practical implementation factors were also presented, with time appearing to be the main challenge associated with its practice in the classroom. Finally, the teachers' viewpoints on a whole school approach were reported, detailing the issue of whether the practice of mindfulness should be mandatory or an option in schools.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to investigate teachers' experiences of mindfulness in the classroom. The findings reveal a high level of openness to its application in schools, however, challenges concerning its implementation were presented as well as some contradictions to the principles of the traditional practice.

While a reasonable understanding of the concept of mindfulness was demonstrated by the teachers, this understanding reflected more contemporary practices and lacked aspects of the traditional notions. The main justification for implementing the practice in schools was to overcome stress and anxiety and to take a break from the busy school environment. This justification, based mainly on scientific reasoning, as noted by Hyland (2015), undermines the fundamental aims of the practice.

The teachers in this study advocated a whole school approach to the teaching of mindfulness. However, challenges associated with the practicalities of this approach were presented. The lack of quality in the practice emerged, as not all teachers were teaching from an experiential standpoint. Furthermore, teachers revealed their lack of confidence in the teaching of mindfulness due to insufficient guidance and support in the teaching of the practice.

It is apparent that a significant tension exists between mindfulness practice and the busy school culture. The majority of teachers presented a somewhat strained relationship with mindfulness. Teachers frequently referred to the busy school day and their lack of time to cover the curriculum. Attempting to arrange a suitable time to interview the teachers proved a struggle. These experiences are indicative of the dissonance that exists between the time-deprived school culture and the present-centredness of mindfulness. It is important to note, however, that the primary

curriculum does not deliberately create this sense of time-deprivation, and it is not opposed to the practice of mindfulness. The tension, therefore, may be a result of the wider culture in which teachers and schools exist. It raises the question of the effects of living in a fast-paced society; perhaps one such significant effect is a lack of consciousness of the reality of what we are living in.

Kabat-Zinn (2005) describes how, for a successful practitioner of mindfulness, subjective time slows down in everyday life. In this way, if mindfulness was successfully practised in schools, the perception of lack of time may actually be overcome. One way of looking at this is that there is a glaring need for mindfulness in schools. Also evident is the need for the provision of tools and resources in order for teachers to provide a comprehensive mindfulness practice in schools.

Future Research

The limitations of this research were described in the methodology chapter and they present opportunities for further exploration in this area. Similar research should be carried out involving teachers from a variety of schools. Observational research of the practice in classrooms should also be included. As there is a lack of research on the programmes available for Irish teachers, an investigation of the effectiveness of current programmes employed would be valuable. Finally, a comparative study should be carried out investigating the deprivation of time felt across two schools, one incorporating mindfulness into the culture and another without mindfulness practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Questions

1. When you hear the word mindfulness, what do you think of?
 Prompt: Your understanding, what does it mean to you?
2. Do you know anything about where it comes from?
 P: History or traditions, religion
3. Do you have any experience of mindfulness?
 P: Training
4. Do you practise mindfulness yourself? (outside of classroom)
 P: What do you do? Why?
5. Have you ever tried it in the classroom?
 - a. If yes,
 - i. Can you describe what you do?
 P: Lie on floor, breath, religious or scientific
 - ii. How have you found it?
 P: - benefits/downsides

 - short/long-term
 - iii. Do you think it should be practised more widely?
 P: - whole school approach or discrete timeslot?

 - societal effects, DEIS
 - b. If no,
 - i. Would you consider doing it?
 P: - what might you do,

 - religion or scientific

 - benefits/downsides

 - whole school approach or discrete timeslot?

Appendix B: Information Letter

Marino Institute of Education

04/02/2018

Dear Teacher,

My name is Catherine Bree and I am currently a Professional Masters in Education student at the Marino Institute of Education. As part of this programme I am conducting research in the area of mindfulness in the classroom. My research is under the supervision of Dr. Clare Maloney and is entitled *An investigation of teachers' experiences of mindfulness in the classroom*.

This project wishes to investigate the views of teachers on the practice of mindfulness in the classroom, their knowledge of the traditions of mindfulness, as well as the current methods of mindfulness practices in the classroom. The data collection for the project includes a one-to-one interview. It is anticipated that the interviews will last between 30 to 40 minutes. A set of questions will to be asked. However, additional questions may be asked to clarify or expand on certain issues mentioned. It is hoped to complete the interviews on the school premises, outside of class time.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this project. The information gathered will be treated with the appropriate privacy and anonymity. No information about the school or the participants, will be identified in the research. All information will be stored safely with access only available to the research team and examiners. Data will be destroyed after a period of 13 months. The anonymised results will be included in a dissertation, and may be discussed at conferences or published in academic literature. A copy of the results can be made available to you if requested.

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

This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee (MERC). Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact MERC@mie.ie.

If you have further questions regarding this research please feel free to get in touch using the email addresses listed below. Finally, I would like to thank you for taking the time to consider my research. Without your generous participation, conducting such research would be impossible.

Yours faithfully,

Catherine Bree

Email:

Supervisor's Email:

Phone:

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Statement of Consent

I have read and understood the information sheet with this consent form and am willing to participate in the study as described.

YES NO

I agree to have my interview tape recorded.

YES NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

YES NO

Participant's Name (please print) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Name _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____