Can Mindfulness Interventions Promote or Maintain the Well-being of my Year Eight Class in the Context of Whole School Closure?

Emma Fox
Canterbury Christ Church University

Abstract

Based on the observable effects that school closure has had on a school community, this action research project explores the conceptualisation of well-being, and what it is 'to flourish', and seeks to ascertain if an intervention based on 'Mindfulness' practises can promote or even maintain the well-being of pupils amidst such a destabilising climate.

Introduction, Context and Rationale

Based on the observable effects that confirmation of school closure has had on the school community as a whole, I have undertaken an action research project to develop my understanding of this educational context. I have sought to introduce an intervention to promote the well-being of my class amidst this destabilising school climate. This project is an interpretative inquiry using an approach based on grounded theory, and the constant comparative method to analyse my observations and reflections (Thomas, 2009). A second literature review has been added, following the analysis of my data, due to further theory and ideas emerging from my findings.

Following an extensive consultation process, staff and pupils were informed in March 2016 of the final decision to implement whole school closure. All pupils in key stage three face the prospect of having to start at a new school in September, and many staff are being made redundant. This has had a significant impact on the school climate and has perpetuated an already high state of pupil anxiety. This project was undertaken to explore the introduction and practice of a range of Mindfulness techniques and investigate their impact on maintaining or promoting pupil well-being.

Literature Review

Well-being

Societal well-being and happiness has been of concern throughout history, and the notion that an important part of educating children is to promote and cultivate 'flourishing lives' is not a new one (Grant, 2012; Lucas, 2013; Goleman, 1996). Indeed, Grant identifies traditional 'giants' in educational theory, such as Jefferson, Mann and Dewey, all of whom cite educational aims and goals as being linked to well-being and flourishing (2012, p.2). There has been a notable "increased emphasis on whole school and student wellbeing" (Roffey, 2011, p.196), likely borne out of studies which conclude that somehow children's lives are becoming more difficult, or more difficult than they ought to be (Layard & Dunn, 2009). These aligned views and concerns have contributed to the recognised need and import of the cultivation of personal well-being around the world (Hupport & So, 2011).

The conceptualisation of well-being has been, and continues to be, approached from a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives (see Huppert & So, 2011). The assertion that well-being is 'multi-dimensional' (Huppert & So, 2011), or a 'construct' - which has measurable elements each contributing to well-being (Seligman, 2011), is a commonality amongst these approaches.

Citation

Huppert and So describe wellbeing as 'the combination of feeling good and functioning well' (2011, p.839), recognising flourishing as 'the experience of life going well' (2011, p.838). Their extensive review of the longitudinal and experimental studies made of well-being identify a range of positive outcomes associated with well-being which include 'effective learning, productivity and creativity, good relationships, pro-social behaviour and good health and life expectancy' (2011, p.838.) From this, they in turn robustly identify their own ten features of well-being, these being:

Competence	Emotional stability	Engagement	Meaning
Optimism	Positive emotion	Resilience	Self-esteem
Vitality	Positive relationships		

(2011, p.849).

Likewise, Seligman (2011) also seeks to further the common understanding of well-being and he too offers a concept as to what well-being actually is. He identifies five measurable elements of well-being (giving them the acronym PERMA) which, taken together, constitute 'human flourishing'. These being: Positive emotion (of which happiness and life satisfaction are all aspects):

Engagement
Relationships
Meaning
Achievement

(2011, p.24).

As Huppert and So (2011) rightly identify, all five elements proposed by Seligman are represented in their suggested ten features of positive well-being. As such, I have taken Seligman's PERMA as a reliable set of indicators that I will be using and looking for in my own data, in terms of measuring the well-being of my pupils.

Mindfulness
The world is all-abuzz nowadays about mindfulness."
Jon Kabat-Zinn (Williams & Penman, 2011)

Mindfulness has captured the world's attention as being a possible means to alleviating and tackling feelings of anxiety, stress, exhaustion and unhappiness. Mindfulness claims to offer a set of simple practices and meditations based on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, which has been clinically proven to successfully treat depression and prevent normal feelings of anxiety, stress and sadness (Williams & Penman, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; 1994). There is also a growing body of research into the use of Mindfulness with children and young people which shows it to be 'capable of improving mental health and well-being, mood, self-esteem, self-regulation, positive behaviour and academic learning' (Weare, 2013).

Many positive outcomes and benefits have been attributed to the regular practice of Mindfulness techniques and meditations, these include:

- An altering of the physical structure of the brain – the insula, which helps to mediate empathy – meditation not only strengthens it, but helps the insula grow and expand. Empathy and feeling genuine compassion and kindness towards yourself and others is proven to benefit both physical health and personal well-being.
- It boosts positive emotions which in turn develops an increased sense of purpose and fewer feelings of isolation.

(Williams & Penman, 2011).

Additionally, practising Mindfulness has also been found to 'modify habitual mental and behavioural patterns which otherwise create and maintain negative mental states'. In doing so higher levels of happiness and well-being are achieved (Weare, 2013, p.6). Weare similarly asserts that:

> Mindfulness has been shown to have effects on emotional and social qualities in both adults and children such as the ability to feel calm and in control of one's emotions, to make meaningful relationships, to accept experience without denying the facts, to manage difficult feelings, and to be resilient, compassionate and empathic
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> (2013, p. 20).

A comparable link can be made between many of the identified positive outcomes of practising Mindfulness and the set of indicators (PERMA) deemed as constituting well-being and flourishing. As such Mindfulness suggests itself as an appropriate intervention which may successfully enable, maintain or promote the positive well-being of my pupils. If Mindfulness does indeed 'correlate positively with well-being, positive emotion, popularity and friendships, and negatively with negative emotion and anxiety' (Weare, 2013, p. 23), then my introduction of its strategies and techniques, as tools to help my pupils better cope with and manage the experience of whole school closure, is justified.

Methodology

The intention of research is to engender new knowledge. Action research then, can be understood as people taking action to develop their knowledge and understanding and in turn using this knowledge to improve their own practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010; Sharp, 2009). Traditionally research falls under two paradigms: the positivist or scientific method and the anti-positivist or naturalistic approach (Cohen et al, 2007). These are also further referred to in education research as the 'normative' or 'quantitative' research paradigm and the 'interpretive' or 'qualitative' research paradigm. These two research approaches stand in direct contrast to one another and Sharp (2009) offers a useful interpretation of each:

> Research from a normative perspective can be thought of as something which is very often carried out on people, on places and on events by looking in from the outside.
> Research from an interpretive perspective can be thought of as something which is very often carried out with people, in places, creating events from within
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> (Sharp, 2009, p. 5).

Interpretive approaches focus on action, their central aim being to understand 'the subjective world of human experience' and 'individuals' interpretations of the world around them' (Cohen et al., 2007 p 19 & 21). My research falls under the interpretive paradigm in that I am undertaking a research project that actions an intervention, and its impact is being measured in relation to pupil well-being: which sits within this 'subjective world of human experience' given that it is observing pupils' attitudes, behaviours and thinking. I will be observing and interpreting these human experiences.

My primary chosen data collection technique was the keeping of and the examination of a written log/diary detailing my experiences, observations and reflections. Given that my inquiry investigates what Cohen (2007) describes as 'social phenomenon' – that of the environment, people and their relationships, behaviour, action and activities and verbal behaviour; an ethnographic approach; whereby I am rigorously observing and recording the pupils' accounts, as well as recording and examining my own personal accounts of these observations, aligns itself well to the project. Ethnographic data is recognised as a valid data collection style/method in the study of social behaviour (Cohen et al., 2007). My data also included the instigation of two episodes of data collection using

enquiry. The first, prior to the introduction of Mindfulness interventions, was to form a pupil comparative to my own observations of the class over a two week period. The second, following the Mindfulness intervention, again was to enable a pupil-formed evaluation comparative of the impact of the intervention in relation to my own evaluations. Again this aligns with Wollcott's three methods of ethnographic data collection: experiencing, enquiring and examining (cited in Gibson and Brown, 2009).

An obvious strength of this style of data collection is that it provides a first-hand, eye-witness account of the pupils' responses (Sharp, 2009). The observations were also repeated daily for a five week period which ensured a reasonably reliable measure of the impact of the intervention. However, it is important to recognise that observations, and the subsequent reflections of these, can be quite value led and selective; and that any interpretations of these observations will have a degree of subjectivity attached with no finite proof being offered. This is why a final pupil-formed evaluation was undertaken as to the impact of the intervention: in order to maximise the 'validity and reliability' of my own interpretations and evaluations (Sharp, 2009).

Identifying my inquiry as an interpretivist one also consequently informed my analysis methodology, and as such I have used an approach which incorporates the use of the constant comparative method and which is also based on Glaser and Strauss' 'grounded theory' (Thomas, 2009). Continual and repeated reviewing and comparison of my reflections and observations allowed me to identify key themes that captured and summarised the content of my data. It was at this point, as is common with an interpretivist approach, that theory 'grounded' in the data generated from my research began to emerge (Cohen et al., 2007). This prompted further theoretical reading which formed the second literature review.

The constant comparative method also enabled me to 'map' these themes back to Seligman's framework or 'set of indicators' relating to well-being, which made explicit the 'interconnection' between the emergent themes and their relational qualities (Thomas, 2009). This could also be described as a 'haphazard methodology' in that this underlying order was not initially apparent until the constant comparative method was employed, which then facilitated this clarity in the data (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

Ethical considerations remained paramount throughout the inquiry. The action research project was discussed at length with members of the senior leadership team within the school and written permission to undertake the project was obtained. I have also taken care to anonymise all pupil participants referred to in all written observations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Although I recognise I was acting covertly, and undertook the project without the pupils' consent, this was deliberate, in that I did not want to lead the participants or engender bias in terms of their engagement or response. Given that my role is to teach my class new ideas and methods on a daily basis, introducing and teaching them Mindfulness techniques was not significantly straying from that routine purpose. My choice of intervention was also made with the utmost integrity in that systematic reviews of the implementation of Mindfulness practices have found 'no evidence of any adverse effects' (Weare, 2013).

Methods
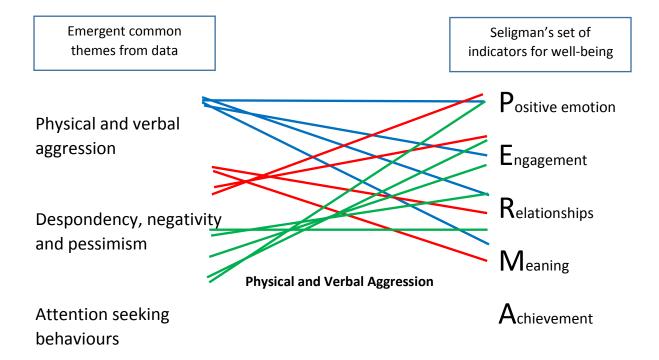The following summarises my research methods:
- Two weeks of general observations of my class' behaviour, attitude, motivation etc – written reflections and observations routinely kept in a weekly log/diary.
- Enquiry – Open question asked to class prior to intervention to form a comparative to my initial two weeks of general observations 'How is the term going?' – verbal responses recorded.

- Introduction of Mindfulness interventions – 5 minutes at the start of each lesson with varying/changing exercises over the 5 week period.
- Pupils' responses to the intervention were recorded in a weekly log/diary.
- Set of indicators/criteria by which to make judgements identified (PERMA).
- Enquiry – Open question asked following the intervention to evaluate 'impact' of the intervention – 'How do you feel about your English lessons this term?' – Written responses from pupils.
- Use of constant comparative method to analyse findings and identify emergent themes.
- Analysis of evidence/data in relation to indicators/criteria.
- Further theoretical reading undertaken informed by evidence and data.
- Conclusion of theory and findings generated from research.

Presentation of Data and Analysis

The log/diary contains all my written recordings, observations, pupil responses and my interpretations/analysis of the experiences and events. It also shows the emergence of common themes and their identification. At the very end of the inquiry pupils were also given a slip of paper and asked to write a written response to the question: 'How do you feel about your English lessons this term?' I have not included these responses due to none of them mentioning or referring to the Mindfulness interventions; this is significant in itself and will be addressed in my analysis.

The subsequent 'mapping' exercise, which highlighted the interconnections and relational qualities between the emergent common themes and Seligman's set of indicators for well-being (PERMA) is shown in the diagram below. The diagram shows how each of the common themes can be linked to a minimum of four of the indicators which constitute well-being. This is not to say that the emergent common themes indicate high levels of wellbeing. Indeed, the data suggest the opposite. The observed themes would suggest a lack of each of the wellbeing indicators that they are linked to. Indeed, the data are indicative of themes being that of counter to flourishing, and as such identify or suggests the notable absence of pupil well-being.

One of the most notable observed differences in pupil behaviour was the increasing physical and verbal aggression present both within the classroom and during unstructured time. Incidents included name calling, meanness or unkindness personally directed at specific individuals, hitting, slapping, pushing, kicking or shoving each other and most upsettingly an incident of head-butting and a physical fight in another lesson. This is so sad; this is not my experience of these boys, this is not what I have come to know of them. I interpret this change in behaviour as pupils experiencing increased feelings of anger and frustration over the prospect of the school closing. Equally they may be experiencing feelings of fear or anxiety about changing schools and finding it difficult to contain or give expression to these emotions other than through acts of aggression. Or is it simply what the pupils term 'banter' – behaviour intended as a joke and in keeping with their age and natural development? The escalation in seriousness and level to which the behaviour is targeted, unkind and mean compared to behaviours at the start of the school year, would suggest otherwise.

Despite the introduction and sustained practice of Mindfulness exercises, which encourage kindness towards self and others, a decrease in physical and verbal aggression was not observed, which would contradict the current research and findings (Williams & Penman, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990;1994; Weare, 2013).   Indeed observations and data showed these incidents remained fairly frequent throughout the inquiry. This would indicate that educational context plays a huge role in relation to the success or impact of any given intervention. I would suggest that physical and verbal aggression can be attributed to negative emotions and that it fosters negative relationships. Could one impact of the impending school closure be that pupils are attributing less meaning to their relationships in school, both with pupils and teachers alike, as some of these relationships will come to an end in July? Pupils may be starting to disengage with these relationships in an attempt to 'soften' the impact these fractured or lost relationships may have on them. These interpretations highlight the links, or what could be described as the 'counter-links', to Seligman's indicators of well-being and corroborate with the current thinking in relation to well-being (Huppert & So, 2011; Seligman, 2011). They also lead or point towards further theoretical reading in relation to loss, grief, attachment, and what 'school' represents.

Despondency, Negativity and Pessimism
Despondency, negativity and pessimism was a very clear theme that emerged from my data, both in relation to many of the pupils' attitudes towards school, their work, lessons, their own behaviour and their level of motivation, and for some, in terms of in their attitude towards the Mindfulness exercises themselves. I observed many examples of pupils making statements such as "What's the point?" and "I don't care/who cares?" as well as one pupil stating he couldn't wait until the school closed. Pupils also began questioning the validity of the Mindfulness interventions which elicited despondency on my part too. Again this negative response or 'state of being' seems far more prevalent in the current school context compared with that at the beginning of the year. It might suggest that school closure has prompted a sense of 'giving up' amongst many pupils. But far from it being just a child problem, it is possible it is being felt amongst staff too; and hence could be seen as a whole school problem.
Again Mindfulness has appeared to do little to alleviate this common theme and it has remained stubbornly consistent throughout the project. Observations have shown high levels of negative responses, and as such negative emotion, towards a number of varying school activities/factors. Disengagement is also evident, as pupils appear to find little purpose or meaning in their efforts and subsequently achievement drops.   Again, my data interpretations identify clear 'counter-links' to Seligman's indicators of wellbeing (2011) – my pupils do not appear to be flourishing.

Attention Seeking Behaviours
This third emergent theme, was very apparent amongst two or three pupils within the class and their behaviours were sustained throughout the inquiry. Deliberate acts to sabotage the Mindfulness practices and distract others were regularly observed. This behaviour showed a complete lack of

engagement in the intervention, perhaps perpetuated by its apparent lack of meaning or purpose to the individuals, or possibly by its inaccessibility and their lack of achievement at being able to master or realise the exercises. Weare does acknowledge Mindfulness can be an 'elusive process' (2013, p.5), which may have been too abstract for some of my pupils. However these behaviours emerged almost immediately, which suggests little effort was given to fostering the practice, and the attention seeking behaviour may have been intended and deliberate. Negative emotions, particularly low self-esteem, are habitually associated with attention seeking behaviours and the very behaviour itself suggests anxiety or an undermining in relationships; with the subsequent behaviours seeking to atone for the perceived inadequacies. Again, my interpretation is that these behaviours may be in response to the destabilising effects of school closure. Once again the 'counter-links' to the wellbeing indicators were easily identifiable and pupil well-being questionable.

Findings and Further Reading
It is important to recognise that my possible 'claims to knowledge' following the analysis of my data are, at this point, entirely my own subjective interpretations and conclusions and are not underpinned by theoretical reading. It is also important to recognise that not **all** observations identified 'counter flourishing and wellbeing', although this did remain the dominant finding.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from my data is that Mindfulness was not effective in promoting pupil well-being in the context of whole school closure. Indeed, when asked for a simple and general evaluation of their English lessons this term Mindfulness was not referred to by a single pupil: indicative of its limited impact and relevance in the current school climate. Indeed, what **is** unsurprisingly having a very forcible impact is the school closure, and the lack of success of what, to date, has been a scientifically proven and medically endorsed intervention to improve people's well-being (Williams & Penman, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990;1994; Weare, 2013) has actually resulted in huge learning on my part.

What this project has shown me is that educational context is of vital import and that from an initial focus on pupil well-being and the impact of Mindfulness intervention, my research and findings have instead led to my increased understanding of the impact the school closure itself is having. As would be expected in an approach based on grounded theory (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) my observations point to the need of a further literature review in relation to loss, attachment and Maslow. Some theoretical understanding of what 'school' represents and epitomises to its pupils and staff is also crucial. Given the nature and breadth of these theories a very limited overview of these theories in relation to this project will be offered.

Literature Review
Payne, Horne & Relf (1999) identify attachment as a 'reciprocal relationship that occurs as a result of long term interactions' and the loss of such attachment is distressing (p69). Similarly John Bowlby (1997) presents an attachment theory which is intrinsically linked to loss and grieving. He asserts that grief is instinctive and is a direct response to separation. He claims that 'a threat of loss creates anxiety, and actual loss sorrow; both, moreover, are likely to arouse anger' (p209). Bowlby also introduces the idea that during 'adolescence and adult life a measure of attachment behaviour is commonly directed…towards groups and institutions other than the family (p207). It would therefore be reasonable to identify the school in this attachment role; one that cares for and promotes its students; and that likewise pupils may also readily identify the school as such, which would explain my likening the pupils' response to school closure to that of loss and grieving. It would also go some way in explaining the negativity, despondency and physical and verbal aggression I have observed if the pupils are indeed feeling angry.

Maslow (1970) proposed that human need could be divided into five categories:

- Physiological
- Safety and Security
- Belongingness and Love
- Esteem
- Self-actualisation

He suggested these needs formed a hierarchy whereby the actualisation of the earlier needs surpassed those of the later needs in the hierarchy. He asserted that psychological health, which I would suggest has strong identifiable links with well-being and flourishing, was only possible when these needs were satisfied, and that 'the more these basic needs were not satisfied, the more psychologically disturbed the individual would be' (Lester et al., 1983). Maslow's theory is widely accepted in many of the social sciences and studies have shown that the higher the level of satisfaction of these needs, the more psychologically healthy a person is (Lester et al., 1983).

Goodman (1968) identified links between Maslow's hierarchy of need with that of an individual's employment. He proposed that in relation to 'employment' (and I would suggest the daily 'employment' of my pupils is that of gaining an education through the attendance of school) individuals not only needed to feel safe within the actual confines of their working environment but that they also needed to feel 'a measure of assurance against layoff' (p 52). Further to this he asserted 'the need to belong to the organisation' (p52). I would similarly suggest that the function and role that 'school' plays in relation to an individual's needs can be located within the second and third category of Maslow's needs, that of safety and security and belongingness and love. School represents community and gives meaning and purpose to many of its pupils' lives, indeed Sen identifies education as one of 'a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being' (in Walker, 2010, p.8), and in removing this from them, essentially two of the critical needs pertaining to flourishing, well-being or psychological health have been undermined.

Conclusion

This project has been a journey, and in concluding it, I find myself somewhere quite different from my starting point. What I feel I can confidently put forward is that the Mindfulness intervention I introduced to my class had relatively little impact and did little to promote or maintain pupil well-being in the context of school closure. What I would further tentatively suggest is that in undertaking this project, it has led me to a better understanding of how momentous the impact of school closure is on the entire school community, and as such I am doubtful of the level of impact **any** micro, individualised or small group intervention would have in relation to the wider ramifications and corollaries of school closure. What this project has taught me is that in situations of this nature, just as the ensuing difficulties and challenges become a whole school problem, a subsequent whole school response or solution is required and necessary. And in the school's efforts to make this extremely challenging situation, and its subsequent transitions, as manageable as possible for both its staff and its pupils, I have sought to involve myself fully in supporting the senior leadership team, my colleagues and the pupils alike in all the initiatives and proceedings which have followed.

I am not just a teacher in a school; I am a member of its community.

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