



MINDFULNESS IN SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

PAWS B - EXTERNAL EVALUATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Background

AWARE, the Depression Charity for Northern Ireland, commissioned an external evaluation of their Mindfulness in Schools Project with a focus on the delivery of the Paws b programme. Paws b [pause be] is a leading mindfulness curriculum for children aged 7 -11 in schools and was initially developed in collaboration with experienced primary school teachers, senior mindfulness teachers, and researchers. The programme is evidence-based and contributes to the research on the role of mindfulness in schools on children's emotional health and wellbeing.

AWARE has partnered with the Mindfulness in Schools Project to deliver its Paws b programme for 7-11-year-olds in primary schools across the North of Ireland. The twelve components of the Paws b curriculum are delivered in pairs across a six-week timetable lasting 60 minutes. The programme is structured to facilitate knowledge transfer, awareness-building, personal development and application of practice. The intention is that with the support of the school and class teacher, the practices would become embedded in daily routines.

This is an interim report on the delivery of Paws b programmes between April 2021 to March 2022. The report provides AWARE with findings based on triangulated data from pupils, teachers and trainers, which will offer evidence-informed decisions when bringing Paws b to scale across the North of Ireland.

Sample

All schools (teachers and pupils) who participated in the Paws b programme

and provided summative data at the end of each full programme were included. 1500 pupils participated in Paws b across 60 programmes. After a data cleaning exercise, a full dataset of 1039 pupils and 61 teachers across 51 primary schools (2021-2022) in all of the Education Authority areas was available for analysis. A further 10 programmes were purchased by schools directly, and 6 additional programmes were funded through AWARE.

Methods

Post-programme surveys were completed by pupils and teachers when the six-week programme ended. These were standardised with the same questions asked to pupils across all schools and the same survey provided to teachers in all participating schools. Questions about their experience preferred components, suggestions for improvement and indications of the impact of mindfulness practices were explored in the surveys.

Teacher observation of pupil behavioural changes was assessed alongside any influences on teaching practice as a result of engaging in the Paws b programme. Opportunities for further professional development in this area were offered to all teachers and pursued by those who expressed an interest. This was in the form of mindfulness training, completed separately by 29 teachers who had supported the delivery of the Paws b programme in their schools.

Trainers delivering the course completed a process evaluation form that tracked their observations session by session. These were also included in the analysis to provide a triangulated view of the findings.

Key Findings

Teachers

Overall, the cumulative responses of 61 primary school teachers suggested that the Paws b mindfulness programme was emotionally valuable for their pupils. It offered mindfulness tools that could be implemented as part of their daily classroom practice.

This was evidenced in terms of a 100% rating of Paws b being beneficial for pupils.

Observed behavioural changes following the programme were explored with teachers. 76% reported positive behavioural change in their pupils. There was a pattern in the responses that pointed to the following changes being observed:

- **Calmer and more relaxed**
- **Talking about emotions**
- **Class more settled**
- **Better concentration and focus in class**
- **Taking a breath before reacting or responding**

Teachers highlighted the shift in pupils practising the learning from Paws b and how this could be seen in the general classroom environment.

“The class can settle down more quickly and focus their attention using the tools they learned at the programme.”

“They have a language to use now, which has made them more aware of their emotions and how to regulate stress, anger and anxiety”.

“For children to have the tools and skills to help them relax and feel calmer is really valuable not just for school but also at home when things are difficult”.

Pupils

91% of 1039 children said they enjoyed the Paws b course, and 89% said they would use the mindfulness practices again after the programme had ended. 82% of children reported they would recommend Paws b to their friends after taking part in the programme. This is a very high proportion of pupils, which supports the triangulated finding that pupils and school staff positively received the mindfulness programme.

When asked how Paws b supported them in different aspects of their lives, pupils ranked ‘growing happiness’ and ‘concentrating’ (81% respectively) as most supportive to them from their learning of mindfulness practices and Paws b knowledge.

This was followed by support when ‘worrying, feeling sad or angry’ and ‘knowing what to do when I wobble’ (76% each). The findings suggest that pupils were least likely to find the programme supportive in terms of ‘sleeping better’ (70%) and performing’ (drama, music, sport) (69%).

This indicates that the benefits of mindfulness are emotional regulation, cognitive function and relational engagement.

Pupils were asked about their views on how useful the practices and programme were. Using a three-point scale, 82% stated it was useful (36% ‘fairly useful’ and 46% ‘very useful’). 18% rated the programme as ‘not useful’.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Consideration of all evaluation information gathered about the delivery of Paws b clearly indicates a high level of responsiveness from pupils, teachers, and schools. This was supported by consistent and repetitive positive findings across participating schools.

Pupils expressed a shared positivity about their experience of Paws b. This was captured in their post-programme survey responses, through teacher reports and in trainer observations. There was a recurring theme about their willingness to engage, expression of interest in mindfulness practices, and self-reported changes in their capacity to self-regulate and apply their learning to different contexts.

The legacy of Paws b was a consistent feature of the feedback from teachers. They highlighted the sustainability of the skills learned in equipping children with an emotionally positive armour they could apply in stressful situations or where there was sensory overload.

The observations reported by trainers across all schools pointed to the individual impact on children's anxiety, stress, and cognitive function levels. This was evidenced by the pupil, teacher, and trainer reports of increased calmness, improvements in regulation, and better and longer levels of concentration.

It was evident from trainer interviews and journals that contextual factors can improve or impede the impact of Paws b on children's emotional well-being. These could be home or school-based, or both. The experience and outcomes of mindfulness on children were viewed as being mediated by the level and type of support provided by teachers and parents/carers.

Additionally, the readiness of pupils physically and emotionally was seen as critical to the positive experience of pupils. The preparedness of the classroom itself also featured in trainer feedback about how children can best experience mindfulness. Interruptions, noise, children with sensory or intellectual additional needs, and a room that was either too warm or too cold were identified as disruptors to a conducive environment for mindfulness.

Implementation Considerations

Taking together the feedback from all contributors to the evaluation, there were common patterns in responses that suggested there were factors that enabled or impeded the implementation of MISp.

These were:

Enablers of Paws b delivery:

- Receptive school.
- Committed teachers.
- Ongoing practice led by teachers.
- A supportive environment for mindfulness practice.
- Awareness of individual needs.

Barriers to Paws b delivery:

- Tired children who have reported poor sleep.
- Lack of genuine interest or engagement from teachers.
- Ongoing classroom disruptions during the session.
- Communication difficulties where English is not the first language.
- Lack of understanding of the role and influence of mindfulness on children.
- Absence of encouragement for children trying to practice mindfulness.

Additionally, trainers repeatedly noted that children who were permitted to use digital devices at night appeared to have poorer levels of concentration and expressed lower rates of interest in Paws b.

These are critical ingredients to the effectiveness of the Paws b programme and core considerations for AWARE as it plans further scaling of MISP. They have a direct influence on the recommendations set out below.

Recommendations

A review of the findings for Paws b participating schools up to the end of March 2022 have informed suggestions below that could strengthen the impact of mindfulness practice on children's emotional health and wellbeing:

- **A deliberate plan is co-created with schools to support family-based practice through family information sessions and ongoing engagement.**
- **Follow-up visits to schools take place 3 to 6 months after the completion of Paws b to examine the longer-term impacts of mindfulness practice on children.**
- **A shared learning community is formed to support teachers who have participated in additional mindfulness training beyond their observation of Paws b.**
- **Devise a research study to contribute to MISP's evidence base about the role of mindfulness on the emotional intelligence and regulation of pupils in schools.**

- **Create a reflective practice group for trainers to come together to share learning and insights from their delivery of Paws b and inform AWARE's continued delivery of MISP.**

As part of AWARE's continued commitment to quality assurance, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and reflective practice, we commissioned Dr Katrina Collins to conduct this independent review.

If you would like more information on AWARE, the services we offer, or the Paws b mindfulness programme, don't hesitate to get in touch with our training team by emailing training@aware-ni.org



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