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MINDFULNESS IN SCHOOLS PROGRAMME PAWS B - EXTERNAL EVALUATION

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1.0 TERMS OF REFERENCE

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. As part of their continued commitment to quality assurance, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and reflective practice, an independent review was conducted by Dr Katrina Collins. 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.

This is an interim report on the delivery of Paws b programmes between April 2021 to March 2022.

2.0 BACKGROUND

“Mindfulness can help teachers and pupils better manage their mental health and stress”.¹

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.² 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. Schools are encouraged to provide information to parents/carers about Paws b to promote a home-based practice of mindfulness strategies.

¹ Bethune & Weare (2020). The Mindfulness Initiative.

² www.mindfulnessinschools.org

The components of the Paws b curriculum include:

- Lesson 1: Our Amazing Brain
- Lesson 2: Making Choices
- Lesson 3: Puppy Training
- Lesson 4: Everyday Mindfulness
- Lesson 5: Noticing the Wobble
- Lesson 6: Finding a Steady Place
- Lesson 7: Working with Difficulty
- Lesson 8: Choosing your Path
- Lesson 9: The Storytelling Mind
- Lesson 10: Stepping Back
- Lesson 11: Growing Happiness
- Lesson 12: The Yum Factor

Each of the lessons aims to equip children with a distinct mindfulness skill they can use when feeling stressed, anxious or worried.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A monitoring, evaluation and learning framework was developed in partnership with AWARE to capture implementation learning and pupil/teacher outcomes following participation in the Mindfulness at Schools Project (MISP). Pupil, teacher and trainer feedback of the Paws b programme secured the triangulation of data about the experience and outcomes related to participating in MISP.

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 pupils' 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.

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 for analysis. 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.

Data

Teacher, pupil and trainer feedback has been sorted and analysed to report on the key findings, conclusions and lessons learnt in the delivery of the Paws b programme in Northern Ireland. Additionally, evaluations completed by teachers on the mindfulness training course were included in the analysis to support evidence of sustainability planning for mindfulness in schools. The key findings have informed recommendations regarding project delivery which AWARE might consider in its future plans for MISP.

FINDINGS

This section of the report details the analysis of pupil, teacher and trainer feedback from surveys, reflective process journals and interviews.

Pupils

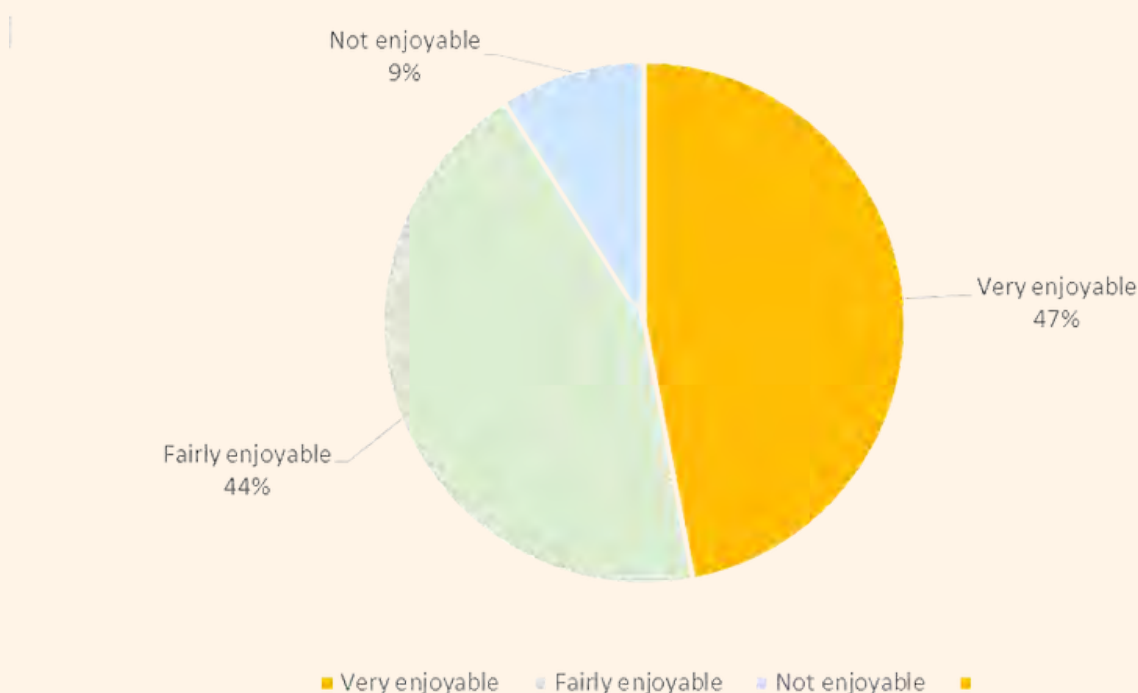
A standardised post-course survey used for Paws b programmes nationally was distributed to pupils and completed with the support of their teacher after the final session was delivered. As recorded on the forms, analysis of pupil feedback provides insights into how Paws b supported areas of emotional wellbeing and cognitive functioning, was most or least useful, which specific skills have helped, and which they would continue to use. These responses were examined further by gender to explore possible delineations in feedback.

It is important to note that the analysis of pupil surveys should be considered by the dosage of the intervention (exposure to the training). The rate of attendance at Paws b indicated that 51% took part in all sessions, 38% in more than half, and 11% in less than half of the programme. COVID absences were noted frequently in trainer journals, meaning not all pupils attended each of the six sessions in which the content was delivered.

Pupil Responsiveness

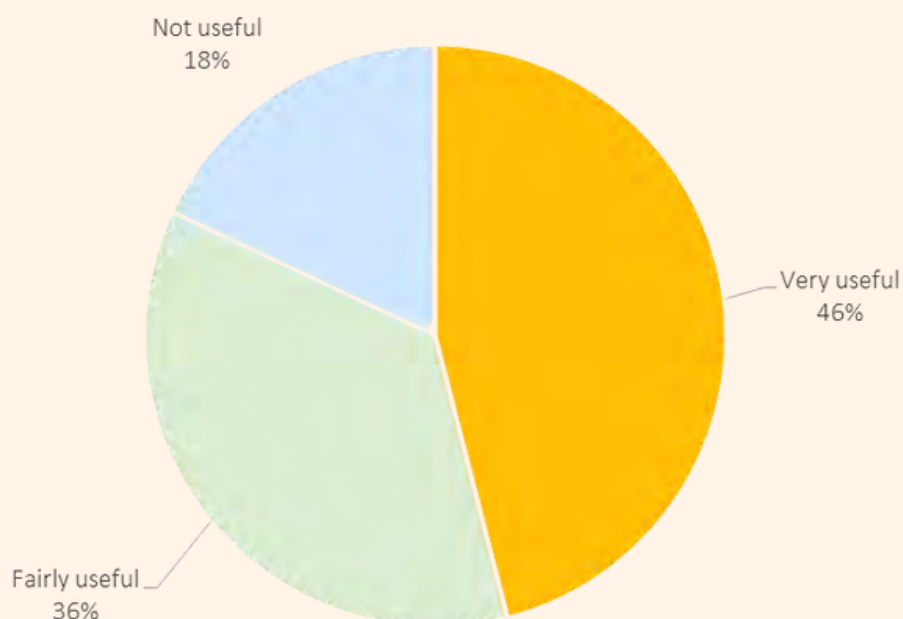
Pupils were asked questions to explore their experience of the programme to indicate how they responded to the material and the application of the learning in day-to-day practice. 91% of pupils enjoyed the course, with 47% stating that they found Paws b 'very enjoyable' and 44% stating that the programme was 'fairly enjoyable'. The smallest percentage of pupils rated their experience as 'not enjoyable' (9%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Pupil enjoyment rating of Paws b



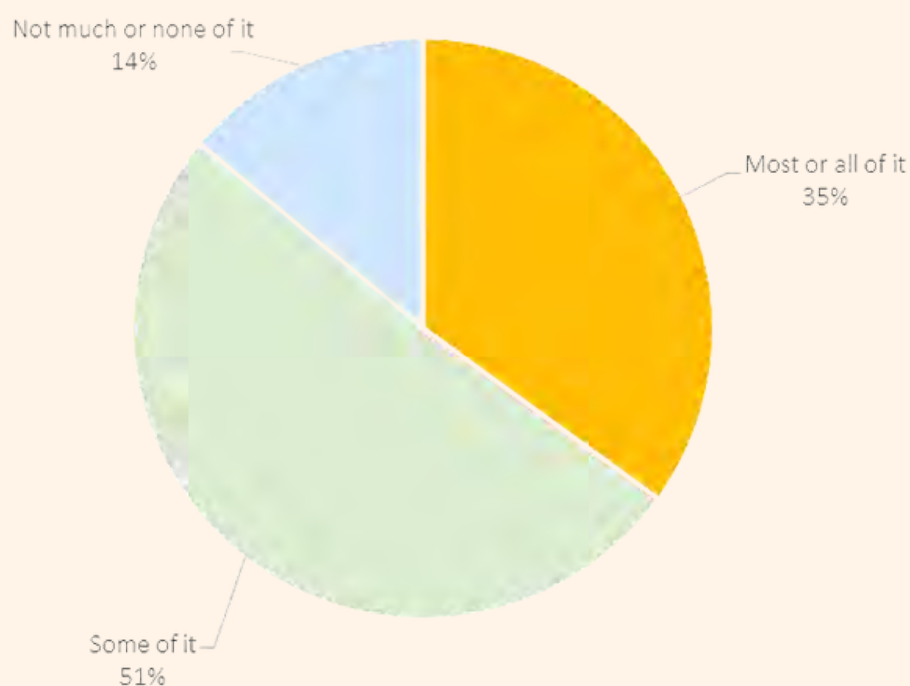
Pupils were asked about their views on how useful the practices and programme were. Using a three point scale, 82% stated it was useful (36% 'fairly useful' and 46% 'very useful') (Figure 2). 18% rated the programme as 'not useful'.

Figure 2: Usefulness of the programme



The application of mindfulness practices outside of the sessions particularly at home was examined in the pupil survey. Figure 3 suggests that home practice took place to some degree in the main. 35% reported doing 'most or all of it' and 51% said 'some' home practice took place. The smallest percentage stated they did 'none or not much of it' when reflecting on home practice of mindfulness tools (14%).

Figure 3: Home practice of Paws b



Pupil Outcomes

Self-reported outcomes of attending the Paws b programme were explored with pupils at the end of the six sessions. Pupils were asked to indicate if Paws b supported them in certain ways. A predefined list of options was provided, which pupils selected from. Table 1 summarises the ranked choices of pupils. The highest ranks indicate where pupils reported Paws b provided the most support, and in contrast, the lowest suggests where the programme was perceived to have the least impact. It is important to note that pupils were commenting on the outcome of the programme at the end of the six sessions. It would be interesting to follow up on the ratings in 3-6 months' time to assess how and in what ways Paws b was supportive.

Pupils ranked 'growing happiness' and 'concentrating' (81% respectively) as being 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%). It is important to note that there were marginal differences in response rates between each of the items listed. These findings were based on aggregated responses across all schools that provided pupil feedback.

Overall, 89% of pupils reported that they would use mindfulness practices again after the programme had ended. 42% stated that they are 'most likely' and 47% that they 'might' use the practices learned during their engagement in Paws b.

When asked which of the practices shared with them during the six-week programme they would apply in their lives, 'finger breathing' (76%), 'counting the breath' (72%) and 'Paws b' (69%) were most frequently cited. In contrast, 'tummy and chest breathing' (51%) was the most unlikely practice to utilise, followed by 'petal practice' and 'FOFBOC'. These findings were supported by the qualitative feedback received in the survey, with the tummy and chest breathing and FOFBOC being recorded as the elements of the programme they liked the least (Table 2).

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 further supports the triangulated finding that the mindfulness in schools programme was positively received by pupils and school staff.

Table 1: New concepts and practices

Concept	Ranking
Growing happiness	1
Concentrating	1
Worrying, feeling sad or angry	3
Knowing what to do when I wobble	3
Getting on better with friends and family	5
Tests and exams	6
Sleeping better	7
Performing (drama, music, sport)	8

Table 2: Mindfulness practices

Concept	Ranking
Finger breathing	1
Counting the breath	2
Paws b	3
FOFBOC	4
Petal practice	5
Tummy and chest breathing	6

Pupil Preferences

The most and least liked part of the programme was shared by pupils at the end of the survey. Pupils often listed more than one thing about Paws b that they liked.

89% of pupils provided an indication of their favourite parts of the programme. The analysis reflected the multiple counts of responses, which resulted in a top 8 of what they most liked about the sessions (Table 3). The 'videos' formed 18% of all responses and proved to be very popular. This was followed by 'finger breathing' (16%) and 'mindful eating' with sweets or chocolate (15%).

Pupils used a number of adjectives to describe the trainers and the way in which they facilitated the programme. The personal approach of the trainers rather than the content was the focus of feedback. This suggests that pupils easily built a rapport with the trainers from AWARE and remarked on looking forward to seeing them each week. Aligned with this feedback was the finding that when asked what they least liked about Paws b, pupils were likely to express sadness at not having the weekly interaction with the trainer which they had enjoyed. Trainers were described routinely as: 'fun', 'helpful', 'positive', 'their kindness and understanding', 'listening to what the pupils say', 'sunny and fun' and 'a different way of teaching compared to teachers'.

There were very small gender differences between what girls and boys preferred about the programme. Girls rated 'petal breathing' higher than boys, and boys indicated they preferred 'finger breathing'. They equally agreed on how calm and relaxed the practices made them feel. Girls were more likely to give positive feedback on the trainers than boys.

In contrast, 26% offered examples of things they did not like about Paws b. There was a high degree of congruence between pupils' quantitative ratings on questions and their qualitative responses. Table 4 lists the key areas agreed on by pupils that were least preferred across all of the schools. It emerged that 'tummy and chest breathing' activities repeatedly featured in pupil feedback about what they least preferred about the programme. FOFBOC, as another Paws b technique, was also often rated by pupils as their least preferred part of the programme.

Interestingly there were a number of comments relating to sensory intolerances, with pupils reflecting on the environmental conditions that are conducive to mindfulness practice. The stillness, the lowering of lights, the heavy breathing of others and sensations associated with practices such as 'tummy and chest breathing'.

Table 3: Most liked about the programme

Concept	Ranking
Videos	1
Finger breathing	2
Mindfulness eating	3
Feeling calm	4
Being relaxed	5
Learning about the brain	6
The trainers	7
FOFBOC	8

Table 4: Least liked about the programme

Concept	Ranking
Tummy and chest breathing	1
Sessions too long	2
FOFBOC	3
Sitting still	4
Having to do the practices	5
Others deep breathing around you	6

Photographic Evidence

Photographs were taken with consent under GDPR guidelines to visually represent classes who participated in Paws b. Some examples are provided in the document.



Teachers

Teachers from each school who participated in Paws b completed a post-programme survey about their experiences and observations of children in their class. Overall, the cumulative responses of teachers suggested that Paws b was emotionally valuable for their pupils and offered mindfulness tools to be implemented as part of their classroom practice. This was evidenced in a 100% rating of Paws b being beneficial for pupils, with 94% stating it was 'very beneficial' and 6% reporting the programme as 'beneficial' (Figure 4, page 14).

Teachers were asked to be more specific about the types of concepts and practice they witnessed children learning. They ranked the top three things they believed pupils had taken on board after the Paws b sessions. Table 5 outlines the ranking of all the programme's key concepts across all schools. It emerged that 'our amazing brains' (38%), 'everyday mindfulness practice' (38%) and 'focusing attention' (27%). These were linked to the curricula content of Paws b. The least ranked concept is 'taking notice' (9%) and 'seeing thoughts clearly' (11%), according to the perceptions of teachers from participating classes.

Table 5: New concepts and practices

Concept	Ranking
Our amazing brains	1
Everyday mindfulness practice	2
Focusing our attention	3
React versus respond	4
Noticing the Wobble	5
Growing our happiness	6
Working with our difficult thoughts/feelings	7
Recognising the power of thoughts	8
Grounding ourselves	9
Aware of our choices	10
Seeing thoughts clearly	11
Taking notice of the good stuff	12

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.

Specific examples offered in the feedback highlighted the shift in pupils practising the learning from Paws b and how this could be seen in the general classroom.

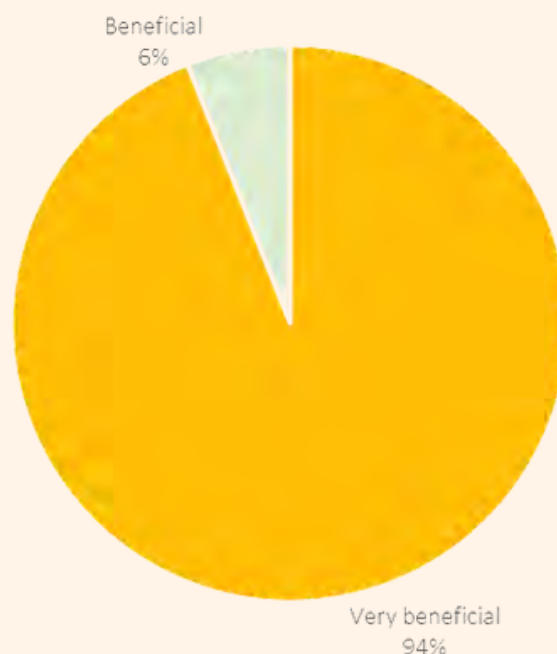
“The class can settle down more quickly and focus their attention using the tools they learned at the programme. This is significant compared to the levels of distraction prior to Paws b.”

“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”.

“Thank you for the wonderful programme. The children and myself gained so much from it and enjoyed all the sessions”.

Figure 4: Benefits of Paws b



Teacher application of mindfulness practices

Although AWARE externally delivered the programme, the engagement and interest of the class teacher and school management were viewed as critical ingredients to positive and sustained implementation. When asked if mindfulness was practiced between sessions (outside the external input), 83% stated they did this.

Furthermore, 92% said they would continue practising mindfulness after completing Paws b. Interestingly, 78% said they would share information about the programme with parents/carers to enable children to practice at home with their families.

Teacher ratings of Paws b

The programme's quality was viewed as entirely positive, with 23% rating it as 'good' and 71% as 'very good' (Figure 5). A small number of teachers reported a less favourable experience, with 6% stating it was 'ok' and 2% 'not good'. The appropriateness of the course content, materials and delivery were considered in teacher feedback. It emerged that 6% described this as 'somewhat appropriate' and 94% as appropriate (Figure 6). 83% of teachers stated that the duration of sessions was correct, with a small proportion suggesting the sessions were too long (17%) for the concentration levels of their pupils.

Figure 5: Teachers' perception of the quality of Paws b

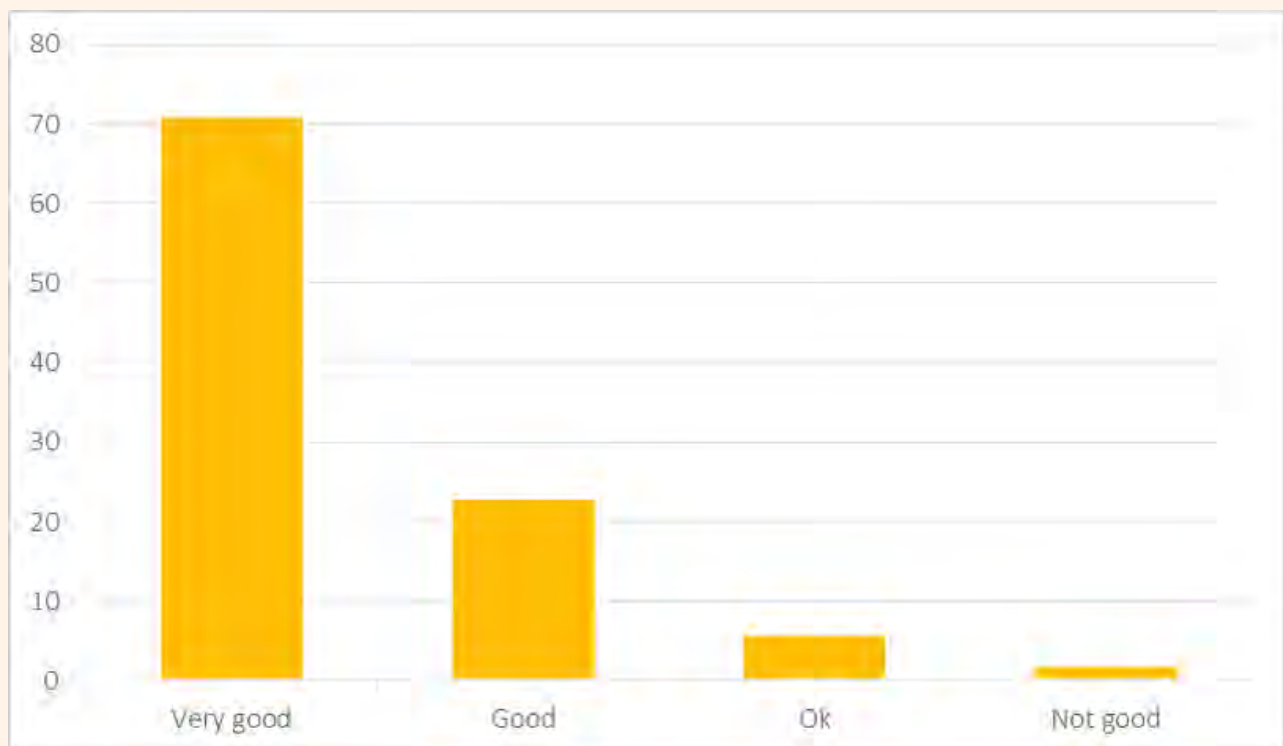
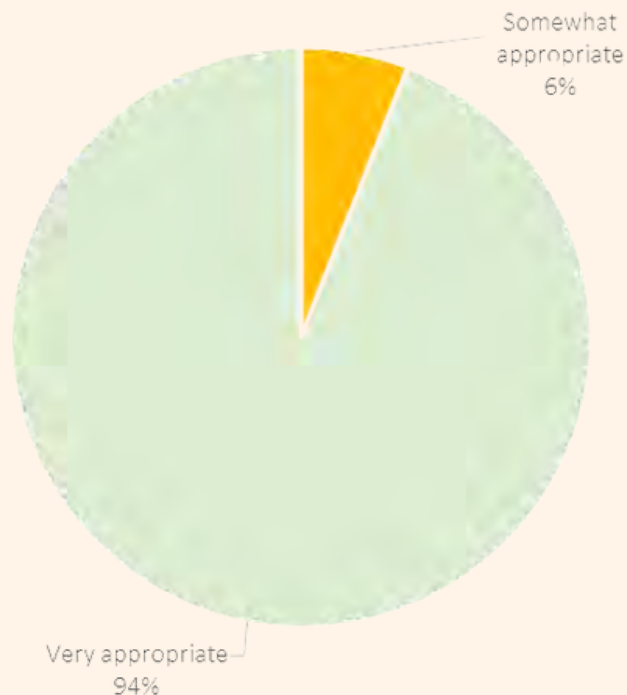


Figure 6: Teacher ratings of Paws b appropriateness



Suggestions for improvement

A small number of teachers put forward recommendations that might improve the content, materials, or delivery of Paws b. This focused on greater movement or 'kinaesthetic learning' as part of the implementation with classes. Teachers also suggested that taking some of the activities outdoors would also include an environmental learning element to the programme. It was proposed that the increase in active learning methods would reduce 'fidgeting and agitation' when young people are asked to stay still for prolonged periods of time.

Information to share with parents/carers was also requested that could support mindfulness practice at home. The lack of suggestions was balanced with positive feedback about teachers' experience of the programme. Compliments were paid to the trainers in terms of their style of engagement, delivery of the practices, and transfer of information about how the brain works.

"The class can settle down more quickly and focus their attention using the tools they learned at the programme. This is significant compared to the levels of distraction prior to Paws b."

"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".

When asked if teachers would be interested in an accredited mindfulness programme for educators, 71% agreed they have an interest. The eight-week programme offered schools additional value by having access to the training after their school's participation in Paws b. Participation in the training is described in the next section.

Additional mindfulness training

An eight-session by two-hour accredited programme – either Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy or Mindfulness for Life is offered to teachers who have engaged in Paws b. AWARE adopts a 'whole school' approach to help ensure that mindfulness concepts are widely used and integrated into school life and will carry on beyond the timeline of Paws b.

Twenty-nine teachers have completed mindfulness training that will equip them with evidence-based skills that complement MISP and contributes to the sustainability of these practices and their accompanying impact on pupils. The feedback received after the training was positive, with all but one of the teachers willing to become mindfulness champions in their schools.

Furthermore, 15 programmes were purchased by schools within their own budget as an outcome of participating in Paws b. The schools reported clearly seeing the value through pupil changes, more settled classrooms and improved engagement by pupils. As a result, this provided them with testimony and evidence to fund further programmes to increase accessibility to other pupils in the school. Feedback gathered from participants on the training highlighted the personal and professional benefits they experienced from the accredited programme. Comments shared pointed to the potential of the application of mindfulness skills in a learning environment and its utility as a contributor to the educational practice of teachers.

"Thank you so much for all your hard work over the last 8 weeks. I definitely feel the benefits in my personal life and work life".

"I have thoroughly loved the course, and I am looking forward to a fresh term in September with my new knowledge to implement in my life and in my pupils' lives".

"Can I thank you for all your hard work with us over the past eight weeks - I have really enjoyed the sessions, and whilst I found them challenging at the start, I came to look forward to each week and definitely found myself using the skills and trying to incorporate the practice into my day".

“As someone who has struggled with a variety of mental health difficulties over the last number of years, I'd recommend your course to others - you have a very calming, encouraging way with you - and I loved the way that you made us comfortable enough to share in a group forum and that each answer was valued and indeed there was no right or wrong. Thank you so much again”.

Trainers

Professional trainers who work for AWARE delivered the Paws b programme to schools across the north of Ireland. As part of the commitment to this role, trainers participated in evaluation activities, including completing a process journal for each school and each of the six delivered sessions. A total of 12 different facilitators reported their weekly observations in a standardised evaluation journal. The number of programmes delivered ranged from 1 per facilitator as a minimum to 7 as a maximum.

The trainers completed a detailed process diary as a data collection method which recorded their observations and reflections session by session. These diaries provided a comprehensive summary of the activity, the trainer's experience in delivering the session and observations about children's engagement with Paws b. It also offered opportunities to record feedback about the engagement level of the class teacher and other factors that would contribute to the implementation of the programme.

A thematic analysis of the diary entries across all sessions by every trainer was carried out. This was conducted on a session-by-session basis (all session 1 together etc.) and then cumulatively across the programme. The emerging themes offer a comprehensive view of Paws b being implemented across the region to over 1000 pupils across 60 programmes. The themes identified are reinforced by the recurring observations recorded by trainers in a variety of primary schools, including Controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated and Special Education.

This process offered insights from the perspectives of the trainer by detailing their observations of children's responsiveness week on week, their level of engagement with the programme content and practices, teacher participation and support, mindfulness implementation beyond the Paws b sessions, and behavioural or emotional changes. While the nuances of each school setting could not be ignored, a pattern emerged in the recordings across the individual trainers. This tended to move from initial curiosity and excitement to questions, learning, practices, and self-reported changes from applying Paws b methods.

The trend in the trainer observations, which were identified through thematic analysis, indicated that there were subtle differences in pupil responsiveness to the sessions. Table 6 outlines these trends.

Table 6: Themes in Trainer Observations

Session	Trend/Themes from Trainer Observations
1	Unknown variables for the first visit could include: • Excitable pupils • Interested/weary of a new visitor • Curious about programme • Difficult to settle, which would depend on the input from the teacher • Challenging with substitute teachers • Disruptions to the class with children attending other commitments within the school • Other activities going on outside or near the classroom.
2	In the second week, trainers had a better grasp of: • The class environment • Teacher's willingness to engage • Teacher's level of interest in the programme • Class profile (number, gender, mix of abilities, neurodiversity) • Learning style of pupils that would dictate responsiveness
3	Direct experience of Paws b practices with pupils highlighted that: • Some students found paying attention to breathing and physical sensations more comfortable than others. Necessary to remind pupils that there is no 'right and wrong' way; instead, it's about curiosity and observation. • Breathing helped pupils settle into the exercises. • Covid-related absences meant disjointed experiences for some pupils. • Recaps required to maintain engagement and understanding
4	As trainers advance in the programme, they noticed that: • Pupils were able to focus better and more quickly as the weeks progress • Pupils were able to provide examples from their own lives where mindfulness practices might help • Classes enjoyed the videos in particular • Evidence of practice at home and at school • Teachers commenting on observed changes in behaviour with pupils more settled after Paws b • Teachers giving specific examples of pupils using mindfulness practices in class

5	In the penultimate session, trainers reported that: • Short mindfulness practices remain the best strategy for the group • Pupils have a better grasp of the concepts and benefits of mindfulness • Some pupils find mindfulness practices more natural than others • Requests for certain practices and activities from previous sessions that they preferred • Generally, the best or one of the best sessions is evidenced by the level of participation, contribution and ability to stay still in their practice
6	The final session provided an opportunity for reflection about the programme as a whole, with trainers recording that: • Pupils were enthused but sometimes sad about the final session and the trainer finishing the programme • Feedback was forthcoming with lots of personal examples of change provided by the pupils • Teachers were appreciative and interested in maintaining mindfulness practices beyond delivery by the Paws b trainer • Pupils requested their favourite practice to be repeated in the final session, which was most often 'mindful eating' • Gratitudes shared by pupils to the trainer and gifts often given

Trainers did distinguish between schools that were actively supporting and promoting the mindfulness in schools programme and those that were not. The trainers agreed that supportive schools could be measured in terms of their involvement during the sessions, the amount of practice outside of the externally delivered sessions, and the promotion of home-based mindfulness practice. The less supportive teachers were reported as disengaged during the sessions, not carrying out any practice from week to week, and not displaying any interest in the positive potential of mindfulness on pupils.

“Staff really supportive and concerned about children's mental health and emotional wellbeing.”

“The class were lively and chatty, so it was a challenge to hear all their thoughts. The teacher was supportive and produced images on a display to celebrate the end of the programme.”

A small number of concerns were raised about the delivery of Paws b which referred more to some of the difficulties that can interrupt a positive experience for pupils. Two trainers commented on the challenges of disruptions due to COVID, with pupils being off and then trying to catch up. The classroom environment also created problems, often due to noise, pupils being taken to other classes such as music, and teacher absences.

Additional feedback from trainers in their programme journals highlighted the changes teachers reported to them at the end of the six weeks. This provided further evidence of positive shifts in pupil behaviour and emotional regulation following their participation in Paws b. Teachers reported 'calmer students', 'more settled pupils', and 'less anxious pupils'.

"A teacher is using some practices across the school with children who have anxiety and does this regularly during the day to help them".

Pupils provided examples of how the mindfulness tools helped them in school and at home. This centred around knowing what to do when stressed, angry or upset. Pupils noted the tools shared during the Paws b programme as helpful, impactful, and useful. In particular, pupils told trainers that they enjoyed learning about the brain and how it works, the different types of breathing strategies, and how much they liked watching the videos.

These observations by trainers were confirmed in pupil survey responses. As noted previously, the most enjoyable parts of the sessions were the 'videos', practices such as 'petal breathing' and finding out about the brain.

Paws b in a special education school

One programme was delivered in a special education school. A small group of P6 pupils (n=11) participated in the six sessions of Paws b. A trainer process diary was completed, which gathered session-by-session reflections, observations and feedback about the implementation of Paws b in this school setting. An amended pupil evaluation form was distributed to pupils who were supported in providing feedback.

82% of pupils selected that Paws b was 'very enjoyable'. Only a small percentage stated they did not enjoy the sessions. This was attributed to the 'different smells and tastes' and 'sitting still'. The majority found it fun and particularly liked the chocolate tasting and the videos they watched.

The overall reflection shared by the trainer was the positive impact of working with a small group of pupils who had extra teacher support in a reduced time frame (45-minute delivery). There was a positive perception of the experience for the trainer, from pupil responsiveness and teachers at the school. Small adaptations were made with a focus on tailoring practices and activities to suit the needs of participating pupils. Learning shared by the trainer included:

- **Very helpful to use SEND PowerPoints and adapt them to fit the group's needs and abilities as the course progresses.**
- **Some pupils are able to focus on the breath and physical sensations for a few moments and observe these.**

- **Short mindfulness practices remain the best strategy with the group**
- **Created a 'mindfulness tool-box' list to remind them of all the practices they have learned.**

"I am noticing a big difference working in SEN schools as compared to mainstream primary schools. There is much more support from teachers and the smaller group size and very nurturing classroom layout makes teaching the course much easier and more pleasurable".

Interviews with trainers

One-to-one discussions took place with the external trainers for AWARE who deliver Paws b to explore their learning and insights from facilitating the programme. It was abundantly evident that the trainers were invested in young people experiencing first-hand the benefits of mindfulness. Each trainer described the value and potential of having mindfulness practices that have been nourished from a young age.

Trainers firmly advocated for the significant contribution of mindfulness to the emotional well-being and resilience of children. Learning the practices in school and in a group setting was viewed as having a multiplicity of effects.

In the interviews, trainers described how classroom-based learning of mindfulness added another layer of utility by offering support for concentration and cognition. In this regard, the practices learned in Paws b could be applied to reduce irritability and distraction while increasing focus and attentiveness.

A consistent factor raised by trainers during interviews and diary entries was the teachers' role in enabling or disabling the sustainability of mindfulness practices. This was evidenced by the observations recorded by trainers, where a comparison of pupil engagement was often mediated by teacher responsiveness and interest in the programme. Classes with teachers who were engaged and interested from the beginning and actively supported practice between Paws b sessions were more likely to implement the mindfulness strategies.

Trainers described the 'role model' influence teachers have on their pupils, which can substantially affect children's behavioural mimicking. In schools where teachers expressed an interest in the sessions, supporting children during the sessions and encouraging practice at home, trainers noted that pupils were more likely to be responsive and benefit from Paws b.

Neurodiversity presentations were recorded as a consideration in the delivery of the programme.

While trainers did not have information on the formal diagnosis of pupils, they noted sensory differences between children and expressions of frustration during mindfulness practice, which required periods of stillness and paying attention to their body's thoughts and emotions. Trainers talked about how best to adapt or the programme's suitability for someone with sensory needs.

Trainers emphasised the importance of trust building in classes given the sessional input of the programme. They expressed how it was necessary to not just focus on programme content but to use their facilitation skills to engage the attention and trust of young people before inviting them to participate in personal mindfulness practice that could be potentially emotive. In this regard, the skill set of trainers should be holistic and child-centred rather than content driven.

"It is a privilege to bring mindfulness to children, and it is a responsibility I don't take lightly".

"We must remember children don't always have the emotional capacity to sit with their emotions, and trauma might be there, which we don't know. We need the school's full support for all pupils".

"There is such a significant power with mindfulness in schools as children have the openness to fully embrace the practices with the support of teachers and family".

"It is incredible to witness some of the changes from the first session to the last where the whole class can settle themselves by doing individual practice and supporting those around them to create a calm environment where everyone can thrive".

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

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.

Pupil Experiences

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.

However, there were fewer commitments to home practice recorded by pupils who were less likely to practice at home. This is linked to the finding that teachers reported not promoting MISF and its strategies to parents. The enthusiasm and reported impact on stress, anger, worry and improved happiness suggest there is a missed opportunity to nurture mindfulness practices within the family system to strengthen practices further.

When asked how Paws b supported them in different aspects of their lives, the effects of mindfulness practices on children were articulated by them. It emerged that the programme specifically helped in 'growing happiness', 'concentrating' and 'getting on better with friends and family'. This indicates that the benefits of MISF are on emotional regulation, cognitive function and relational engagement.

The role of trainers in the experience of children who participated in the Paws b programme was repeatedly affirmed as influential. The manner in which the contents of the curriculum were delivered was a key aspect of the feedback received from pupils. While the programme has a standardised and evidence-based format, the techniques used to encourage, nurture and promote inclusive participation were noted in the evaluation as instrumental to the entire experience.

Content alone did not appear to be solely responsible for the buoyant response from pupils. The style, approach, connectedness and commitment to creating an environment conducive to mindfulness practice was a central feature in all feedback received. This was further augmented by teacher commentary on the way in which Paws b was delivered and the impactful role of the trainers.

Teacher Feedback

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 programme was not viewed solely as a knowledge transfer opportunity. It offered a tripartite outcome of capacity building, understanding the functions of the brain in emotional regulation, and experiencing shifts in behavioural and affective states. The methodology offered through the programme led teachers to comment frequently on the long-term impacts that remained beyond the six-week sessions' delivery timeline.

Furthermore, the Paws b trainers responsible for delivering the six-week programme recorded pupils' and teachers' receptiveness and engagement session by session. Trainer process journals were completed for each individual school across the six weeks. This provided a small case study with detailed accounts of trainer observations about the pupils' response, participation, understanding, and application. The journal also recorded teacher engagement and promotion of Paws b at the trainer session and between sessions, week to week.

Trainer Observations

Review and subsequent thematic analysis of trainer journal entries pinpointed a regular pattern in the flow of engagement where pupils began the programme interested but reserved, which grew into full participation, home, school-based practice, and examples of impact provided by week 6. Cumulatively, 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 wellbeing. 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. Put simply; 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.

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.

“It was difficult to maintain a flow of energy and focus when children in the class were being taken to music classes during Paws b or sent on messages by teachers”.

“It became obvious when pupils evidently had not got enough sleep and had admitted to playing games late at night, it made it very difficult to engage them fully in the activities”.

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.**

These are critical ingredients to the effectiveness of the Paw 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.**

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