British Journal of Educational Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rbje20

TEACHING MINDFULNESS IN AN UNMINDFUL SYSTEM

Francis Gilbert

To cite this article: Francis Gilbert (14 Sep 2023): TEACHING MINDFULNESS IN AN UNMINDFUL SYSTEM, British Journal of Educational Studies, DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2023.2254361

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2254361

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 14 Sep 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 126

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rbje20

British Journal of Educational Studies
Vol. 00, No. 00, 2023, pp. 1–20

TEACHING MINDFULNESS IN AN UNMINDFUL SYSTEM

by FRANCIS GILBERT , *Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK*

ABSTRACT: This article explores a case study of a mindfulness teacher, Beth, and her experiences of teaching mindfulness to 11- to 16-year-olds in several English schools. It shows why Beth was drawn to teaching mindfulness, which was both to alleviate the stress amongst her pupils and improve her own mental health. It illustrates how and why she became a confident, successful mindfulness teacher: she learnt about mindfulness at various classes, retreats and teacher-education training sessions, spending thousands of pounds on her own training. It argues that her positioning as a mindfulness teacher in an unmindful school system created an overwhelming demand for her services, but also huge stress upon her. It develops McCaw's conceptions of 'thin' and 'thick' mindfulness (2020), arguing that while Beth began by practising 'thin' mindfulness – seeing it as a way of solving exam stress amongst her pupils – she became increasingly a 'thick' practitioner; her experiences of mindfulness led to profound personal change and, ultimately, to her becoming very disillusioned about teaching mindfulness in an unwelcoming educational, 'unmindful' environment.

Keywords: mindfulness, teaching, thin mindfulness, thick mindfulness, UK schools

1. INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness has grown in popularity in recent years. Many people use its techniques to help deal with stress and anxiety. In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service (NHS) offers mindfulness courses to help people deal with depression and cope with serious illnesses such as cancer, a practice which is now widespread across the world (Smith *et al.*, 2005; Wells *et al.*, 2020). Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist teachings, but is used in many non-religious settings now, stripped of its spiritual trappings (McCaw, 2020, p. 258). The most popular mindfulness practice is known as 'mindfulness of breath' and usually involves a person sitting in a relaxed position and following the sensations of their breathing for a set time. They then learn to return to focusing upon their breathing if they become distracted by their thoughts. This iterative practice of concentrating upon and returning to an 'anchor', such as the breathing or sensations in the body, is central to mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

While much research has shown the success of such techniques in lay settings such as hospitals, the army, schools, and offices (The Mindfulness

ISSN 0007-1005 (print)/ISSN 1467-8527 (online)
© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.
https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2254361
http://www.tandfonline.com

All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2015), this has been achieved by removing mindfulness of its religious elements. Many different faiths use ingredients of what might be termed mindfulness to help spiritual practitioners – people praying, meditating, worshipping – to experience a sense of wonder, the numinous or religious awe. Kabat-Zinn (2004) have sought to take this religious element out of mindfulness, but arguably this denies mindfulness of much of its purpose. Bringing a practice which is so rooted in religion into secular school systems is problematic. Undergirding much of this article is the nagging question: Is the very presence of mindfulness in education an indicator that we need to rethink what our education is for? As we will see, the spirit of mindfulness invites us to question many of the basic assumptions of modern education systems: exams, rote-learning, gaining status through academic success, and the marginalisation and compartmentalisation of ethical, compassionate learning. By tracing the case study of one teacher and her experiences of teaching mindfulness, this article seeks to address some of these questions. Of late, there has been an explosion in scholarship about mindfulness, but this is, in part, in therapeutic and medical fields (Christodoulou and Black, 2017). Academic, peer-reviewed articles on mindfulness and its impact upon and connections with social policy and education are less common but are now increasing (McCaw, 2020). This article aims to link this recent research to the case study and arrive at some new insights by showing how a teacher managed her own training as a mindfulness teacher and sought to implement her training in the schools where she taught. To do this rigorously, the article provides a brief background about mindfulness teacher-education, and then moves on to outlining its research questions and methodology, and its theoretical background. It then discusses its results in the light of its theoretical and methodological framework, and concludes by summing up its key points and making suggestions for further research.

2. Mindfulness Teacher-Education

Lately, the My Resilience in Adolescence (MYRIAD) team group have significantly amplified the quantitative research base regarding the use of mindfulness in education, involving 28,000 children, 650 teachers, 100 schools and 20 million data points (2022). Moreover, mindfulness and mindful practices have been influential amongst educational policy makers and amongst teachers in English schools. The Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (2015) was made up of United Kingdom cross-party Members of Parliament and advocated trialling mindfulness teaching in schools and funding teacher training in mindfulness (Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2015, p. 76).

Since being set up in the United Kingdom in 2009, the Mindfulness in Schools Project (2019), which specialises in training teachers to teach mindfulness, has trained over 5000 teachers (2019, p. 3) with eight out of ten

surveyed trainees finding the teaching they received from MiSP trained teachers both useful and enjoyable (6).

The growth of the teaching of mindfulness must be set against a backdrop of increasing physical and mental ill-health in the general population, and particularly in children. In the United Kingdom, childhood obesity has increased by a third from 2006 to 2017 (DfE, 2018), while in 2017, one in eight children between the ages of 5–19 years old had a mental health disorder. The reasons for these issues occurring are many and complex; some of these causes have already been explored, such as the problem of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). For example, there is a strong correlation between childhood obesity and poverty: in the most deprived areas, 12.8% of children in reception year are obese, compared to 5.7% in the least deprived areas (DfE, 2018). This said, a systematic review of mindfulness-based programs for the prevention of childhood obesity concluded: 'Mindfulness programs applied to improve eating behaviours appear to be an effective alternative to prevent childhood obesity but further studies are needed to draw conclusions' (De Lara Perez and Delgado-Rios, 2022, p. 1).

Mindfulness has been used to attempt to tackle mental health issues amongst children. During the Covid-19 pandemic mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) were used in conjunction with philosophy for children (P4C) lessons and found be 'helpful to reduce mental health difficulties' (Malboeuf-Hurtubise *et al*., 2021).

3. Research Methodology & Questions

There is a gap in our knowledge about the teaching of mindfulness in schools, with insufficient qualitative research on why teachers teach mindfulness in state and private schools; how they are trained to teach mindfulness; and what the outcomes are when they teach mindfulness. As has been mentioned, the MYRIAD study (2022) has produced a great deal of quantitative data, but the rich, contextualised data which qualitative research produces is relatively sparse in comparison. Qualitative and mixed methods research carried out by Brown (2019), Felver and Jennings (2016) and more recently McCaw and Gerrard (2022) shows how teachers use mindfulness in their own practice and as teaching tools, but they all acknowledge the need to build a firmer evidence base. Everyone's experience of mindfulness is unique and personal, and therefore reducing these experiences to quantitative data necessarily produces a limited picture. Qualitative research possibly reveals more meaningful results because it provides into how mindfulness plays out in individual situations, providing nuanced, complex pictures of its practice and impact. So, while the MYRIAD study (and much other research) appears to show how mindfulness can improve learning, qualitative research illustrates how and why this happens in individual cases. The fine-grained details that qualitative research produces

are vital for us to understand properly how and why mindfulness plays out in educational and other contexts.

This article aims to complement and amplify the existing qualitative research in the field; the single case study approach has not, as far as I am aware, been used in the qualitative research into mindfulness teacher-education thus far (Brown, 2019; Felver and Jennings, 2016; McCaw and Gerrard, 2022). The subject of this case study, Beth, trained extensively in the teaching of mindfulness and taught in two very different schools: School A, a fee-paying private school attended by children with largely wealthy parents, and School B, a state-funded school attended by children from economically deprived backgrounds. Beth was an experienced teacher, having taught for 10 years, when she undertook her mindfulness training: she was professional and effective in her job already. Over the course of several years, she attended a number of mindfulness teacher-education courses in her own time, and also participated mindfulness classes and retreats. Much of Beth's learning from these mindfulness activities were brought into her teaching at school: she ran mindfulness classes for her students, and used mindfulness to deal with the stresses of the job. This article explores her experiences and arrives at some findings, which should be of significance to teachers, educational experts and policy makers who work in the fields of mental health and well-being.

This article seeks to explore a few key questions:

- Why did the subject of this case study, Beth, practice mindfulness? Are there any wider lessons that can be drawn reasonably from her case study?
- How did Beth learn to teach mindfulness? What key things did she learn and what wider lessons can be drawn from her example?
- What issues did Beth encounter when she taught mindfulness in different schools? What can the values of mindfulness teach us about the education system?

By focusing upon Beth, I hope that the rich description in my case study will illuminate issues in the field.

4. Theoretical Background

The theoretical approach taken in the article is socio-cultural (Wells and Claxton, 2002); it aims to situate the mindful practices of a teacher, Beth, in a social, cultural context, seeing them very much as the result of the society in which Beth lives and works. My research is qualitative, with my data being generated by six semi-structured interviews of one hour which were conducted in between September 2019 and September 2021, in which I asked the questions listed above to Beth, personalising the questions and adapting them to her

particular situation. In line with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) ethical procedures, I took great care to anonymise her situation and name so that she is not recognisable and nor are the schools in which she worked. I obtained her written consent to publish her words and showed her drafts of the article, giving her the right to ask me not to publish her work. My research was ratified by our university's ethical authorities.

I analysed her responses using a sociocultural approach known as 'Cultural Historical Activity Theory' or CHAT for short (Wells and Claxton, 2002, p. 2) which builds upon the theories of Lev Vygotsky. Advocates of CHAT, Wells & Claxton write:

> In the CHAT view, 'teaching' and 'learning' are not activities that only take place at particular times and in special places. All interactions between people – having meals, bathing the baby, discussing holiday plans – involve using, adapting and mastering cultural tools. Habits of mind are being displayed, conveyed and modified, often without any deliberate intention or conscious awareness. (4)

The article seeks to illuminate issues related to mindfulness through a case study approach, examining the experiences of one teacher. It is not the purpose of case study to make generalisations beyond the specific case; the emphasis is on particularity and 'getting a rich picture and gaining analytical insights from it' (Thomas, 2016, 2nd Edition, p. 23) whilst acknowledging that a case may be relatable in situations of similarity (Bassey, 1981). This is why CHAT has been employed. Wells & Claxton write:

> Instead of the curriculum being planned and handed down from a position of lofty omniscience, CHAT suggests that decision-making has to be responsive to the local needs and concerns of students and the communities to which they belong. CHAT does not – and would not attempt to – provide one uniform answer to the questions about the goals of education and how they should be met. (6)

This point is of particular importance to mindfulness. Much scholarly literature has used so-called 'scientific' methods in an attempt to universalize mindfulness's significance but as Claxton and Wells note: 'it has become increasingly apparent that such universalizing aims are incompatible with the diverse realities of individual schools and classrooms' (6).

In addition, the article also uses and critiques McCaw's conceptualisation of mindfulness as both 'thin' and 'thick'. McCaw's research review of many English-speaking educational mindfulness initiatives across the world draws this methodological distinction to help us better understand what type of mindfulness is being taught in schools. He writes:

> I designate 'thin' mindfulness wherever mindfulness is conceived primarily in psychological, ethically-neutral terms, configured around a teleology of individual self-improvement. (263) … the contents of these definitions of mindfulness are conceptualised in the language of individual psychology – the language of

> attention, mental states and attitudes. Thin uses of mindfulness are, generally, strongly secularised, showing little trace of mindfulness' Buddhist past. (264)

For McCaw, 'thick' mindfulness practices are much richer and deeper. He writes:

> In contrast to 'thin' mindfulness, I designate 'thick' mindfulness where mindfulness is conceived in primarily ontological terms and is configured around an ethically-grounded teleology of transformation. Thick conceptions are often (but not exclusively) embedded within mindfulness' Buddhist past. (265) ... the cultivation of mindfulness, thereby, not only creates the possibility of perceiving and thinking differently, but of enabling the individual to encounter the Other (individual others, the unfamiliar, the new) in ways not wholly circumscribed by existing desires and conceptual categories. (267)

These categories are particularly helpful because they are so relevant to how mindfulness is used in education. As we will see in Beth's case, 'thin' mindful practices were very prevalent, particularly when mindfulness is used as a tool to 'cure' pupil and teacher stresses; it is treated like an aspirin to be taken when chronic anxiety afflicts an institution. However, when a teacher like Beth adopts 'thick' mindfulness practices, a process of transformation happens, as the data presented in the pages that follow illustrate; mindfulness helps Beth see the complexity of her situation.

In this spirit, the article also seeks to take a 'thick' mindful perspective, viewing Beth's practices through a 'thick' mindful lens: highlighting the importance of living in the moment, being compassionate, listening deeply to people, seeing mindfulness as a rich, transformative practice. I am a practitioner of mindfulness and have used mindful practices such as breathing meditations to inform the writing of the article. This means I am empathetic about Beth's practice; this compassion facilitated the interview process, enabling her to connect with me during the extensive interviews. This said, the article aims to be dispassionate and accurate, and, as we will see, I have illustrated some of the shortcomings of teaching mindfulness in schools. During the six hours I interviewed Beth, she exhibited a great deal of stress at times; we both sat together mindfully as she acknowledged and accepted some difficult emotions of anger, sadness, regret, and guilt. I believe sitting with these feelings aided the interview process, and brought out some important findings.

'Thick mindfulness' has much in common with the sorts of 'thick' description which informative qualitative research seeks to impart. Geertz notes that thick description seeks to embrace many different narratives, and describe complex structures, and understand people's intentions. It does not seek to be predictive or generalise beyond the particular (Geertz, 2000). The article seeks to explore the issues with a 'thick' mindful mindset. While this idea of the 'thick mindful mindset' might be a very awkward phrase, it seeks to convey some key links between 'thick' description and 'thick' mindfulness which are:

- An attention to fine-grained detail
- A rich sense of context
- A compassionate but critical stance to the world and its complexities

The article also draws upon certain theories connected with 'masks' and public/private personas. It builds upon the work of Jung (1966), Goffman (1959) and Leitch (2010), drawing in particular from Leitch's theorisation about how teachers develop social 'masks' – performances of themselves – as 'mediators' between their inner and outer worlds, their private and public selves, and that a mask can often offer the opportunity to live 'unlived' aspects of themselves, a concept which is relevant to this study (Leitch, 2010, p. 333). Leitch encouraged her participants of her study, Masters' students who were teachers, to make literal masks and use them to explore their identities. This article builds upon this work by using some of the concepts gathered from it, namely that teachers adopt conceptual masks to develop, protect, motivate and nurture certain aspects of themselves. Beth in this study did not make any masks, but instead I have used Leitch's ideas to consider what kind of mask she adopted in practising and promoting mindfulness. This should become clear as the article unfolds.

5. Results

This section explores the key research questions, illustrating why Beth practiced mindfulness and the wider lessons that be reasonably drawn from her case study. It then proceeds to show how Beth learnt to teach mindfulness, the key things she learnt and the insights that her example provides. The latter part of the results section, which follows this one, investigates the other more philosophical research questions which seek to find out what mindfulness can teach us more generally about the education system.

The reasons Beth learnt about mindfulness are complex. Beth said there were two things that influenced her: the stress of her students, and her own anxiety.

She said:

> During my teaching I was coming across students who were telling me that they weren't very good at exams, because they were panicking. That led me to think this something to do with their thoughts, their state of mind, and I wonder if there is anything I could do to tell them to stay calm, encourage them to do relaxing things. I thought there must be things I could do to help. And in the press, I'd been hearing about mindfulness. And I thought well actually I'll find out what this fuss is about, which was hitting the headlines more and more. And so I decided to take myself off to an evening course, just to experience what mindfulness was like, with the view of taking it back to my school to say I think this can really help kids. We can stop their minds going into panic mode. And then all the hard work that they've done can be realised in their exams calmly. So that's really where it came from.

> So there were two things. That was the obvious one but deep down, I also knew that I tended to over think and worry. And it was something that I had battled with for a long time in my life. Overthinking and this constant worrying. Catastrophizing as well. I think I've always done it. So selfishly, I thought ooh, it could help students and actually it will probably help me as well. And that's what took me to being more mindful, this sort of search for peace and calm within the mind.

While Beth said that there were two things that led her to mindfulness, her account reveals that there are a number of complex, inter-connected factors at play here, which include:

- Students' levels of anxiety
- Teachers' levels of anxiety
- The pressures on students to perform well in exams
- The pressures on teachers to help students manage their anxiety
- The high profile of mindfulness in the media

Pupils in England, in common with others in many different jurisdictions, are now under great pressure to perform well in external examinations for the purposes of future successes (Hutchings, 2015). Many exams children take are high stakes in that children feel their futures are dependent upon doing well in them. In turn, these exams are used to measure teachers' performances (Gilbert, 2022). As Ball points out this leads to a form of 'terror' amongst teachers at being forced to perform (2003) but also leads to what Holloway & Brass note is a form of pleasure amongst teachers who are now experiencing this terror as 'normal'. For Holloway & Brass, teachers are now used to feeling 'marketised', 'managed' and 'performative', and this leads them to constantly seek solutions to improving their own market value as a teacher. They write that there is 'a new kind of teacher, whose value is oriented to markets, management, and numerical performance indicators' (2018, p. 380). McCaw and Gerrard more recently have shown how contemplative practices like mindfulness have been increasingly used by teachers to help them grow personally and deal with the stresses of the job, but have also made them more aware of the ways in which the school system uses and instrumentalises them (2022).

Beth could be seen as one of these 'new kinds' of teacher who uses mindfulness to add value to their own performance and their students: to improve achievement and lower stress. As McCaw notes 'school-based mindfulness activities could be interpreted as a governmental technique, producing docile, self-managing, productive and efficient members of the classroom' (2020, p. 260). Beth's practice needs to be understood as emerging within this cultural, historical context (Wells and Claxton, 2002): her teaching of mindfulness was supported precisely because her fellow teachers and management believed she would help the pupils conform to the school's behaviour policies.

Beth's pursuit of mindfulness then is very much in line with 'thin' mindfulness; her desire to use it was not primarily ethical but instrumental, to stop students' panic causing them to do badly in exams. McCaw writes: 'Without an ethical compass or socially-critical framing, mindfulness may become commodified and repackaged as a mere psychological training programme – 'McMindfulness' (2020, p. 268). As Purser, who first coined the term 'McMindfulness' (2019), points out, mindfulness has been co-opted by neoliberal, capitalist societies as a dubious cure for ills created by the inequalities and unfairness of a society structured around monetary wealth. It is one of many commodities in the fast-food store of therapies, and rather like a McDonald's hamburger, and is erroneously marketed in many contexts as a therapy which can be bought and consumed quickly from a host of providers (author summary of Purser, 2019).

Beth was aware that she used her students' stress as a cover to justify getting training in something she 'really wanted and needed'. She pointed out that training to be a mindfulness teacher makes you look like a 'helper'; it serves a function in a performative school system, it gives you a 'mask' which enables you to not only help students, but also help yourself. The mask that mindfulness provided her with was that of appearing to the outside world to be someone who was helping other people. This mask disguised Beth's own desire to support her own mental wellbeing. She was, in effect, trying to be kind to herself by training in mindfulness, but she perceived this could have been construed as selfish to the outside world, and so she adopted the mask of being a mindful teacher who was there to help her pupils, not herself.

Here we can see how Beth's intention to train as a mindfulness teacher actually has some elements in common with 'thick' mindfulness; she was looking for a form of internal transformation.

Teachers who train to be mindfulness teachers frequently pay for their own training: four out of ten teachers trained by the Mindfulness in Schools Project are from local authority schools, with the remaining sixty per cent being either from private schools, self-employed mindfulness teachers or other (MiSP, 2019, p. 4). Forty per cent of teachers funded themselves (4). Beth is possibly typical of many mindfulness teachers in that she gained some funding from the private school she first taught in to attend a training course, but most of her training in mindfulness was self-funded. Since first becoming 'mindful' she has participated in several mindfulness retreats, numerous workshops and training sessions. She spent over £2000 on her own training, attending courses run by the Mindfulness in Schools Project, the Mindfulness Association, Zen Mindfulness programmes, and retreats run by organisations such as Breathworks.

The sheer cost and extent of her training reveal a complex interplay between her teaching career and her personal 'mindful' journey. As has been discussed, Beth's 'excuse' – or mask – to learn about mindfulness was to help her pupils with their anxiety. This 'public' desire to improve her pupils' well-being also

'masked' – as has been discussed – her own private wish to improve her own well-being. These desires led her to attend various evening classes, which then progressed to many more classes, courses and eventually teacher-training.

Her journey is worth outlining to properly understand the nuances of her journey to teaching. Beth attended a number of courses before teaching mindfulness at her school and then decided to attend some teacher-education about mindfulness. She explained her reason for this:

> Within school, I wanted to do something, and learn the right skills to be able to deliver proper mindfulness lessons: I wanted to find reputable resources, which I felt would work with my pupils. So, I did some research and came across the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP). I applied for the course, got a place and funding from my school, a private school at the time, to do it. By that time, I already had a well-established mindfulness practice. The MiSP course was very useful, and I felt confident at the end of it that I could teach mindfulness effectively.

The course she attended was called '.b', pronounced 'Paws B' (MiSP, 2020), which trained her to teach mindfulness to the 9–14 years age group. The course 'offers an opportunity for both the teacher and students to "dip their toes in mindfulness", exploring the ways in which this might support them through the highs and lows of adolescent life' (MiSP, 2020) and seeks to educate teachers to teach this age group to improve their attention and sleep, and understand their worries. Having done the course, Beth found there was immediate demand:

> I launched straight into it in terms of running it informally. This was because I had students who I was currently teaching, who were saying, 'I'll try anything! I am worried that the exams are coming in the summer, and I am going to do what I always do. I am going to panic, and my results won't be very good. And I'll be willing to give it a go!' There was a massive demand for mindfulness. I did tiny bits for certain people. I used to run something called the quiet room. I just thought there should be a quieter place for the more timid students who enjoy their own company to relax in, away from the hustle and bustle. Whilst they were there, I would mention the fact that I did mindfulness and ask them if they wanted to try it, and more often than not, students there would give it a go. And then every Thursday, they would say, 'Can we do some mindfulness? Can we just do a short practice?' It was done through clubs and it was also put on the curriculum.

Some scholars have pointed out problems in becoming an unqualified therapist in educational settings. Both Brown (2019) and Hayes (2008) have argued that using strategies like mindfulness in education has led to a diminution of critical thinking, educational standards and rigorous debate. In their view, the focus upon making students feel good as opposed to challenging them to learn, which is necessarily uncomfortable, has led to the near-annihilation of education (Hayes, 2008). However, other theorists (Ergas and Hadar, 2021) have argued the opposite: mindfulness can help learners with their cognitive challenges. Certainly, this was Beth's view after her training. The combination of Beth's

enthusiasm and advocacy for mindfulness, her evident expertise and training, the large informal demand for it, and the requirements of the 'Do Better' curriculum (a mindfulness course aimed at helping pupils with their studies) led to her teaching mindfulness for three years at this private school. Beth successfully marketized herself as a unique teacher (Holloway and Brass, 2018, p. 372) amongst her pupils; she generated a 'massive demand for mindfulness'. But this brought an over-supply of pupils, none of whom had any resources to pay for her time:

> So I taught mindfulness for three years within the same school. After the informal 'quiet room' mindfulness, I started off teaching it initially as an after-school club. Then I managed to get the school to put it on the curriculum, And then I taught it for two years to Year 8s (12–13 year olds), to the whole Year 8 cohort, amounting to 120 pupils, which was a good year group to do it in. But once it finished, they were asking for more, but that was it within the school context. That was all we had time for. That was the extent of the resources offered. I guess time constraints and financial constraints meant that at that time, that was what the school felt that it could offer. There was definitely more demand for it if you like.

Beth and the students clearly wanted more time to learn about mindfulness but as Beth observes both time and financial 'constraints' meant that this was not possible. It is also important to note that her advocacy for mindfulness put her at the forefront of hearing about her pupils' – and some cases her colleagues' – anxieties.

There is at play here either a virtuous or a vicious cycle, represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The teaching mindfulness stress cycle

So, teaching mindfulness clearly has its rewards, giving a sense of purpose and meaning for teachers (Trube, 2017, p. 162) like Beth but it is not without its costs to a teacher's own well-being. A complex picture emerges here: the success of her 'thin' mindfulness strategies, which were packaged as a cure for exam anxiety, led to her becoming more stressed herself, which, in turn, led to her pursuing 'thicker' mindfulness, which ultimately caused a personal transformation within her. A primary point to bear in mind throughout this analysis is that she considered her mindful practices as significantly helping her with her day-to-day life as a teacher. She said:

> What I am able to do now which is a big benefit, it almost sounds quite cheesy, but I feel like I've got a little secret superpower, which only works for me (laughs). I can sense the difference in my head, in my brain, if you like. When I am being led by my thoughts, my feelings and my emotions, and when I am in that state. I can actually feel the transition. That's the biggest impact. Having that, has meant that I have been able to stay off anti-depressants. Because there was a period of my life when I was on anti-depressants. For about 18 months. And this has made me think about things differently.
>
> My perspective on life has changed. And I can always fall back on my mindfulness techniques to help me feel grounded, and to feel that I can just stop and compose myself. That to me is probably more beneficial than the anti-depressants I was on.

The fact that Beth's 'perspective on life' changed and that she now feels more 'grounded', and has found mindfulness 'more beneficial' than the anti-depressants she was on, indicates, in her perception, a journey towards 'thick mindfulness': 'profound' transformation was beginning to develop within her (McCaw, 2020, p. 270). There was a 'thick' ethical content to her transformation in that Beth was beginning to see the social, cultural world she worked in quite differently (Wells and Claxton, 2002); she was beginning to see how its instrumental frameworks were creating depressive episodes within her, and that while she perceived mindfulness was a 'superpower' (a somewhat 'thin' conception), it was only 'little'. In other words, Beth was beginning to understand its limitations as a magic pill to cure her. She told me that she understood that 'school was a big part of the problem', making many of her colleagues and students 'depressed', and that meditating had helped her see this in a compassionate, non-judgemental way. This indicates that Beth was taking the first steps to a much thicker form of mindfulness.

As McCaw points out:

> thick and thin mindfulness are not an opposed, dichotomous pair, nor two extremes on a continuum, but exist in a nested structure where thin mindfulness condenses out specific features from the broader and more encompassing thick notion. (270)

This case study bears out McCaw's conceptual framework. It shows how an inter-mingling of Beth's personal desire to practice mindfulness, her keenness to improve her pupils' well-being, and her attendance of various courses led her to eventually teach mindfulness, which caused a profound change within her.

It appears then that a series of factors led to Beth being very pro-active in promoting mindfulness in her school, which is represented in Figure 2. Beth's expertise regarding mindfulness grew to such an extent that she felt confident to deliver mindfulness teaching to hundreds of pupils in her school. That learning developed quickly as the result of Beth's enthusiasm for mindfulness, generated by her own practice and attending various courses. Her knowledge-base regarding her school was strong: she was an established teacher there, had the respect of her colleagues and pupils, and was a trained teacher in her subject. Furthermore, she was not a 'form tutor' which meant she was free during registration times in the early morning and afternoon to travel between different classes and to give assemblies to the whole of Year 8 (12-year-old pupils).

Figure 2 shows how there was a 'tipping of the scales' towards teaching mindfulness which happened because of Beth's growing mindfulness knowledge base, and the local conditions within her own school. The diagram seeks to show how Beth's experiences of mindfulness gave her enough weight on the scales to 'lift' mindfulness into being taught at her school. Her training at the MiSP appears to be pivotal because it gave her important 'pedagogical' knowledge. In this sense, Shulman *et al.*'s (2004) conception of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) is deeply relevant here: Beth could only feel confident to teach mindfulness when she felt she had some 'good resources' and strategies to hand. She not only needed a 'mindful knowledge base' (content) but also needed an understanding of how mindfulness might be taught (pedagogy) in a school context. Furthermore, the concept pedagogical content knowledge becomes even more pertinent when Beth started teaching mindfulness; she was to find that the act of teaching it improved her PCK even further, making her more flexible and creative in the way she taught it.

Beth was a passionate advocate of mindful practices because she believed it benefitted her. She told me that she developed detailed 'subject knowledge' of mindfulness on a daily basis. But how exactly is mindfulness 'subject knowledge'? Mindfulness is interesting in this regard because there is such a heavy emphasis on it being a 'practice'. In this sense, there is not a huge amount of 'content' (facts, concepts, skills) to learn to become mindful, although, if a practitioner chose to do so, they could spend a lifetime researching the history, psychology, science etc. of mindfulness. Mindfulness requires the practitioner to pay close attention to their own thoughts and feelings, and to take a kind, inquiring interest into them, learning from them and learning to 'let go' of them (Kabat-Zinn, 2004, p. 53)

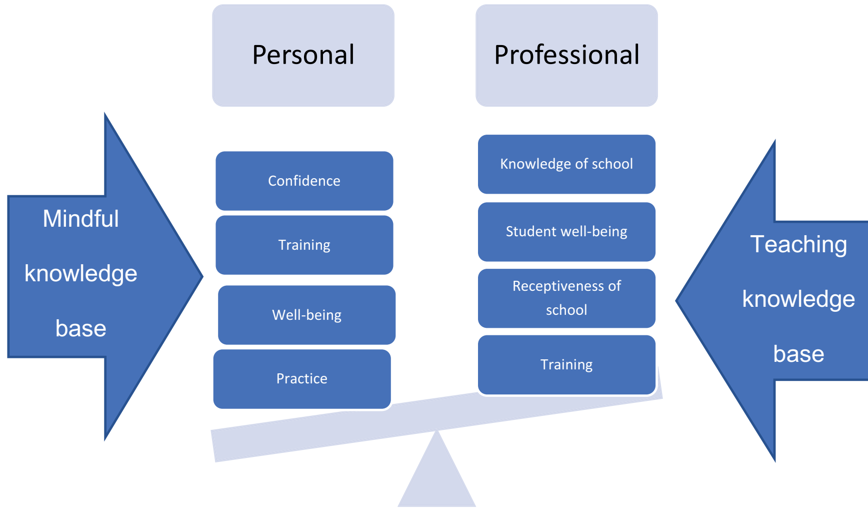

Figure 2. Tipping the scales towards teaching mindfulness

A key tenet of mindfulness is an open-ended notion of learning (Langer, 1998). One study which focuses upon how students learned about mindfulness, discusses what 'attitudinal qualities' the subjects of the study acquired:

> The attentional (i.e. present moment awareness) and attitudinal process elements (i.e. acceptance, equanimity, non-striving, non-reactivity, non-judging) of mindfulness were given equal attention. Thus, a comprehensive understanding was associated with the clear intention to attend to experience with this particular set of attitudes; however, developing and maintaining these attitudinal qualities still was depicted as an ongoing process of learning from moment to moment. (Solhaug *et al.*, 2016, p. 846)

This idea of 'learning from moment to moment' was certainly one that Beth repeatedly talked about. It is a different conception of learning from the 'exam-factory' approach which research shows is prevalent in many schools which operate in a high-stakes accountability school systems such as that in England in the early twenty-first century, the system Beth taught in. While examining the education of children in England and Wales, Hutchings writes in her report 'Exam factories? The impact of accountability measures on children and young people':

> Pupils of every age are increasingly being required to learn things for which they are not ready, and this leads to shallow learning for the test, rather than in-depth understanding which could form a sound basis for future learning. (2015, p. 5)

Hutchings's point is relevant because a mindful approach to learning is inherently different from an 'exam factory' approach. The irony is though, at least in Beth's case and possibly many other schools, that mindfulness is being used to help children deal with the anxieties induced by this 'exam factory' approach. The adoption of mindfulness by teachers to help learners do unmindful activities such as taking robotic tests is inherently problematic, and could potentially be quite alienating. As Beth pursued her mindfulness teaching in different schools, she began to notice this:

> In one school, I really put my heart and soul into teaching mindfulness, and the school was, by and large, supportive. I was not a form tutor, and I was free during registration times and assemblies to promote mindfulness. I also ran a lunch-time club. Some of the staff were supportive too. But when the school was converted into academy because it had had a run of bad results, everything changed. I was made a form tutor, the lunch times were cut in length so there was no time to run lunch-time clubs, and the only after-school clubs that could be run were focused upon teaching English and Maths, in order to improve the exam results. The school paid lip-service to mindfulness, and used the fact that I was teaching it in their advertising and parents' evenings, but I had very little opportunity to actually teach it. The fact was that the senior management didn't understand what it was.

Here we can see that Beth's teaching of mindfulness suffered when the school structures changed. Her school became an academy; academies in England and Wales which are 'state-funded schools but they're independent from local authorities meaning they aren't run by councils. They can decide on their own curriculums, term dates, school hours and much more' (Media Officer, Department of Education, 2021). The focus of such schools is often the 'exam factory' approach (Hutchings, 2015). Beth had found teaching mindfulness rewarding until this point, but stressful: she became the 'go-to' person if a child was anxious or suffering from more serious mental health issues. But somewhat ironically, Beth's growing disillusionment with being this person and the system in general indicates significant development as a person and mindful learner. As Ergas and Hadar (2021) note mindfulness has largely been used for instrumental purposes to solve things like exam anxiety, but it can, when taught properly, contribute to the development of 'critical thinking, identity-formation, self-knowledge, life meaning, and moral development' (4), in other words, thick mindfulness. Her mindful practices provided her with the strength of mind to trust her own instincts and question the system that produced the need for mindfulness in the first place. Her practice indicates that there could be a fundamental incompatibility of thick approaches to mindfulness in the contemporary ideological and practice contexts of schooling.

The flexibility of her school before it became an academy, a form of state-sponsored privatization (Gilbert, 2022), meant that she was able to juggle her teaching of mindfulness and her other teaching commitments, but after the school was academized this became impossible for two reasons. First, there wasn't the time or resources for teaching mindfulness with the shortening of the

lunch hours and the exclusive focus upon academic after-school lessons. Second, because of the ramping up of the pressure on the children in the academy, many more of them were showing signs of stress, and the ones that were already anxious were even more so. Beth said:

> Trying to teach mindfulness in this environment was like putting a sticking plaster on an emergency bleed. It was just a box-ticking exercise. There was a very unmindful environment, and I realised for my own good I had to ease off with doing the mindfulness. I've done bits and pieces, nothing systematic.
>
> It was a religious school so I was also asked to do a session after school. I did a session at Sixth Form Open Evening with the parents and potential Sixth Formers, and that went down well. I also did one twilight session for staff, which was just one option for them among several. Even though that was just a one-off, it was a nice moment, with the staff just having the time and space to be together, to breathe together, to share their thoughts and feelings. It really was a situation of a stressed out staff teaching stressed out kids. The staff and kids who had had mindfulness wished that they could do it more often, but I realised they couldn't. There was no time given.

Here we can see that Beth was forced to deliver 'thin mindfulness' sessions to the children and the staff, even though she herself had become a 'thick mindfulness' practitioner (McCaw, 2020). As a marketized and managed teacher, she performed the role of the mindfulness teacher to satisfy the school's marketing strategy of pretending to be a mindful institution (Holloway and Brass, 2018), but Beth was aware that her mindfulness lessons were no more than a 'sticking plaster on an emergency bleed'. Beth's transformation into a 'thick mindfulness' practitioner ironically meant that she was disillusioned with teaching mindfulness in such a context.

6. Conclusion

Beth's journey as a mindfulness teacher reveals several important findings. First, it illustrates how mindfulness can become an important way in which teachers are able to significantly add value to themselves in a marketized, managed and performative system (Holloway and Brass, 2018). The advantages here are that mindful teachers like Beth can gain status within educational settings: Beth's mindfulness classes contributed, in part, to her being a popular and well-liked teacher, particularly amongst her pupils. The drawbacks are that Beth was not remunerated for her elevated status and nor was she given any more time within the timetable to teach mindfulness. Indeed, this case study indicates she was exploited: her considerable financial investment in mindfulness training and setting up as a mindfulness teacher in school meant she became the 'go-to' person for mental health concerns. This new role contributed to her workload increasing very significantly: she was perceived as the compassionate and ethical teacher within the schools she worked in, and

fulfilled a role similar to that of the school counsellor, therapist or chaplain/ Iman etc.

Furthermore, her case study endorses Holloway and Brass's findings (2018) that performativity is now so internalised in teachers that accountability measures which were once questioned by teachers are now not interrogated. Beth's initial steps into mindfulness clearly illustrate this: she wanted to teach mindfulness ostensibly because it would improve her students' exam results by reducing their stress levels. This was her primary 'public' reason for pursuing mindfulness. The article shows that when she was supported by her school – given sufficient time, training and resources to teach mindfulness – she was successful and created huge demand for what McCaw calls 'thin mindfulness' (2020). This case study illustrates how Beth's practice, knowledge and training in mindfulness 'tipped the scales' towards teaching it confidently. She became a knowledgeable teacher of mindfulness. However, this created a raft of new problems: an oversupply of penniless customers demanding a resource in short supply. The school system with its creaky, unresponsive business model was not able to accommodate the increase in demand and Beth was stretched very thin. This, in turn, led to her practising more mindfulness to alleviate her own stress.

However, the case study reveals another story about Beth's own personal journey with mindfulness; the more she trained, practised and taught it, the more disillusioned she became with the education system, seeing just how incongruous 'thick mindfulness' is with a school system which is so performative. She underwent a personal transformation which enabled her to socially critique the schools she was in; to see just how superficial the commitment to mindfulness and the wellbeing of students in schools can be. To a certain extent, she benefitted from this deeper social awareness because it meant that she took steps to look after herself. However, it also meant that she stopped teaching mindfulness to her pupils.

The fact that Beth's deepening experience of 'thick' mindfulness led her to give up teaching mindfulness should provoke much questioning of our unmindful education system. Possibly, Beth's case study and much of the mindfulness research cited in this article (Ergas and Hadar, 2021; Felver and Jennings, 2016; Gilbert, 2022; Holloway and Brass, 2018; Hutchings, 2015; Langer, 1998; Malboeuf-Hurtubise *et al*., 2021; McCaw and Gerrard, 2022; Myriad Project, 2022) can inspire a broad conversation about what our education system is for. If a vigorous discussion about educational purposes were really pursued, then the impacts of 'thicker' forms of mindfulness in schools might have space to emerge and become known. Mindfulness could be so much more than a dubious sticking plaster for exam-stress amongst pupils.

7. Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

8. Orcid

Francis Gilbert http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8975-5391

9. References

Ball, S. J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (2), 215–228. doi:10.1080/0268093022000043065.

Bassey, M. (1981) Pedagogic research: on the relative merits of search for generalisation and study of single events', *Oxford Review of Education*, 7 (1), 73–94. doi:10.1080/0305498810070108.

BERA. (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online (accessed 24 November 2022).

Brown, C. (2019) *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools* (North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press). doi:10.5149/northcarolina/9781469648484.001.0001.

Christodoulou, G. and Black, D. S. (2017) Mindfulness-based interventions and sleep among cancer survivors: a critical analysis of randomized controlled trials, *Current Oncology Reports*, 19 (9), 1–8. doi:10.1007/s11912-017-0621-6.

De Lara Perez, B. and Delgado-Rios, M. (2022) Mindfulness-based programs for the prevention of childhood obesity: a systematic review, *Appetite*, 168, 105725. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2021.105725.

Department for Education. (2018) *Mental Health and Well-Being Provision in Schools*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-and-wellbeing-provision-in-schools (accessed 26 July 2019).

Ergas, O. and Hadar, L. (2021) Does mindfulness belong in higher education? – an eight year research of students' experiences, *Pedagogy Culture & Society*, 31 (3), 359–377. doi:10.1080/14681366.2021.1906307.

Felver, J. C. and Jennings, P. A. (2016) Applications of mindfulness-based interventions in school settings: an introduction, *Mindfulness*, 7 (1), 1–4. doi:10.1007/s12671-015-0478-4.

Geertz, C. (2000) *Local Knowledge Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (3rd edn) (New York, Basic Books).

Gilbert, F. (2022) The reciprocal rebellion: promoting discussion in authoritarian schools, *Changing English*, 29 (3), 232–250. doi:10.1080/1358684X.2022.2069547.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, Doubleday).

Hayes, D. (2008) *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (London, Routledge).

Holloway, J. and Brass, J. (2018) Making accountable teachers: the terrors and pleasures of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 33 (3), 361–382. doi:10.1080/02680939.2017.1372636.

Hutchings, M. (2015) *Exam Factories? The Impact of Accountability Measures on Children and Young People* (London, The National Union of Teachers (NUT)). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309771525_Exam_Factories_The_impact_of_accountability_measures_on_children_and_young_people (accessed 23 April 2020).

Jung, C. G. (1966) The relations between the ego and the unconscious. In C. G. Jung (Ed.) *Collected Works* (vol. 7) (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press) (Original work published in 1928), 166.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2004) *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life* (New York, Piatkus).

Langer, E. J. (1998) *The Power of Mindful Learning* (London, Perseus Books).

Leitch, R. (2010) Masks as self-study. Challenging and sustaining teachers' personal and professional personae in early–mid career life phases, *Teachers & Teaching*, 16 (3), 329–352. doi:10.1080/13540601003634420.

Malboeuf-Hurtubise, C., Léger-Goodes, T., Mageau, G. A., Joussemet, M., Herba, C., Chadi, N., Lefrançois, D., Camden, C., Bussières, È.-L., Taylor, G., Éthier, M.-A., and Gagnon, M. (2021) Philosophy for children and mindfulness during COVID-19: results from a randomized cluster trial and impact on mental health in elementary school students, *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology & Biological Psychiatry*, 107, 110260. doi:10.1016/j.pnpbp.2021.110260.

McCaw, C. T. (2020) Mindfulness 'thick' and 'thin' – a critical review of the uses of mindfulness in education, *Oxford Review of Education*, 46 (2), 257–278. doi:10.1080/03054985.2019.1667759.

McCaw, C. T. and Gerrard, J. (2022) Post-secular affective labours of teaching: contemplative practices and the 'belaboured self', *Critical Studies in Education*, 64 (2), 134–150. doi:10.1080/17508487.2022.2043404.

Media Officer, Department of Education. (Posted on:14 October 2021) *What is an Academy and What are the Benefits?* Available at: https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2021/10/14/what-is-an-academy-and-what-are-the-benefits/ (accessed 31 July 2023).

Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group. (2015) *Mindful Nation UK Report*, 82. The Mindfulness Initiative. Available at: https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org/mindful-nation-report (accessed 31 January 2022).

Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP). (2019) *Impact Report 2018/19*. Available at: https://mindfulnessinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/MiSP-Impact-Report-2019-crop.pdf (accessed 20 April 2020).

Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP). (2020) Breathe Curriculum (9–14). Available at: https://mindfulnessinschools.org/breathe/breathe-curriculum/ (accessed 23 April 2020).

MYRIAD Team Group: Kuyken, W., Ball, S., Crane, C., Ganguli, P., Jones, B., Montero-Marin, J., Nuthall, E., Raja, A., Taylor, L., Tudor, K., Viner, R. M., Allwood, M., Aukland, L., Dunning, D., Casey, T., Dalrymple, N., De Wilde, K., Farley, E. R., Harper, J., Kappelmann, N., Kempnich, M., Lord, L., Medlicott, E., Palmer, L., Petit, A., Philips, A., Pryor-Nitsch, I., Radley, L., Sonley, A., Shackleford, J., Tickell, A., MYRIAD team, Blakemore, S. J., Ukoumunne, O. C., Greenberg, M. T., Ford, T., Dalgleish, T., and Byford, S. (2022) Effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of universal school-based mindfulness training compared with normal school provision in reducing risk of mental health problems and promoting well-being in adolescence: the MYRIAD cluster randomised controlled trial, *BMJ Evidence-Based Mental Health*. doi:10.1136/ebmental-2022-300457.

Purser, R. E. (2019) *McMindfulness* (London, Repeater Books).

Shulman, L., Wilson, S. and Hutchings, P. (2004) *The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).

Smith, J. E., Richardson, J., Hoffman, C. and Pilkington, K. (2005) Mindfulness-based stress reduction as supportive therapy in cancer care: systematic review, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 52 (3), 315–327. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03592.x.

Solhaug, I., Eriksen, T., De Vibe, E., Haavind, M., Friborg, H., Sørlie, O. and Rosenvinge, T. (2016) Medical and psychology student's experiences in learning mindfulness: benefits, paradoxes, and pitfalls, *Mindfulness*, 7 (4), 838–850. doi:10.1007/s12671-016-0521-0.

Thomas, G. (2016) *How to Do Your Case Study* (2nd edn) (London, Sage).

Trube, B. (2017) Mindfulness practices in mentoring and teaching, *Childhood Education*, 93 (2), 159–167. doi:10.1080/00094056.2017.1300495.

Wells, G. and Claxton, G. (2002) *Learning for Life in the 21st Century Sociocultural Perspectives on the Future of Education* (Oxford, Blackwell). doi:10.1002/9780470753545.

Wells, C., Malins, S., Clarke, S., Skorodzien, I., Biswas, S., Sweeney, T., Moghaddam, N. and Levene, J. (2020) Using smart-messaging to enhance mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for cancer patients: a mixed methods proof of concept evaluation, *Psycho-Oncology (Chichester, England)*, 29 (1), 212–219. doi:10.1002/pon.5256.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London, Allen Lane).

Correspondence
Francis Gilbert
Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths,
University of London, Lewisham Way, London SE12 6NW, UK
Email: f.gilbert@gold.ac.uk
Twitter: @wonderfrancis