

Brief Report

Exploring the Effects of Mindfulness-based interventions on children and adolescents in budget private schools and government schools in Hyderabad (2022-23)

Akshata Chonkar

Young people in India face many forms of mental health stressors that can affect many aspects of their life (Chadda, 2018). Of these young people, there are many in India who face mental health concerns as a result of social, economic and environmental factors. These social stressors often impact people who belong to marginalised communities and identities, with young people from these spaces reporting higher levels of stress, lack of attention and emotional dysregulation (Nanisetti, 2022; Biswas, 2021). India has more than 1.5 million schools, of which 20% are private schools. Out of this number however, almost 80% of private schools are low-income budget schools, essentially falling into areas where government schools do not function (Centre for Civil Society, 2018; Nanisetti, 2022). Children studying in these schools are generally faced with multiple marginalisations, and are at a higher risk of experiencing abuse and instability in the form of violence, financial insecurity, substance abuse, gender-based discrimination, academic stressors and bullying by teachers and peers.

Pause for Perspective, in collaboration with Commune, a project working with Teach For India, Hyderabad, has been conducting mindfulness-based psychosocial interventions with children belonging to budget schools and government schools in Hyderabad, since June, 2022. An observational research study was conducted alongside these interventions, to look into the potential of long-term mindfulness activities with regards to the emotional regulation of young people. The study aims to understand the effectiveness of providing free-of-cost, equitable and easily administrable tools, practices and interventions to young children in these schools.

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are becoming adaptable and show great efficacy while working with young people, especially in school and institutional settings. Mindfulness can be defined as the psychological capacity to stay present with one's experiences, with a non-judgemental or accepting attitude, engendering a warm and friendly openness and curiosity (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). MBIs proved to be effective in a wide range of stress related and clinical problems and disorders for various disease groups along with increasing well-being and strengthening immune functions, promoting personal development such as self-compassion,

empathy and perspective taking and increasing attentional capacity and the temporal window of attention (Zenner et al., 2014).

For the purpose of the interventions conducted by Pause for Perspective and Commune, the groups of students were divided age-wise, between 13-15 years, and 16-18 years of age, with tailored activities and discussions to help create awareness among a range of topics, such as addressing emotions, gender, violence, substance use, mental health and academics. The sessions were conducted on a weekly-basis, and the general sessions included discussions around the mentioned topics, activities and tools to identify and regulate emotions, intentional storytelling and narrative practices in developing language around mental health and creating safe and non-judgemental spaces for young people to explore their emotions.

A future hope of this study would be to understand the impact of anti-oppressive practices rooted in mindfulness and their significant effects while working with people belonging to multiple marginalisations. The understanding of mental health as a response to social inequalities enables young people to understand how their environments and experiences shape their lives and behaviours (Adams et al., 2002).

Key Findings

For the purpose of this study, a quantitative checklist was used, both before and after the administration of the interventions and activities, which occurred over a 6-month period. Along with this, semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with the young students, to understand their learnings and the usefulness that they identified in these activities. 70 students participated in the pre- and post-intervention quantitative checklists. 20 students participated in the qualitative group discussions, divided into two groups. Students participating in the research were aged 15-18 years.

Quantitative Results:

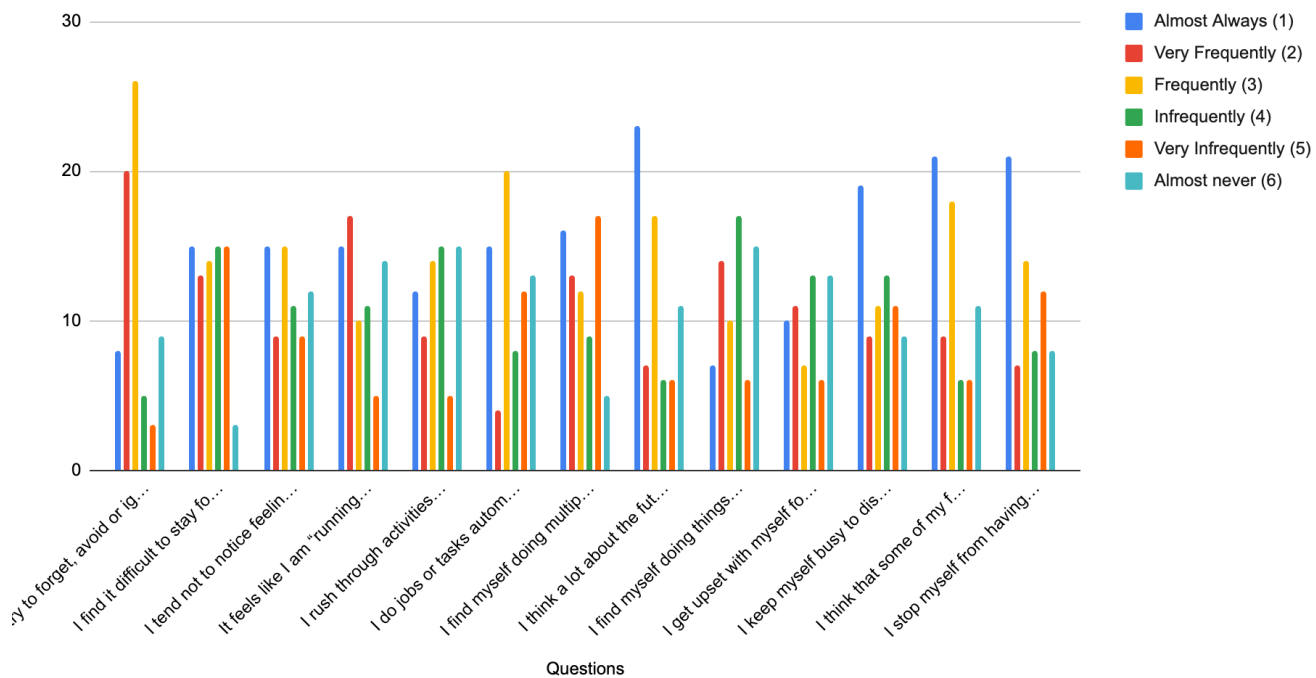
The quantitative checklist used was a variation of the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (Brown et al., 2003) and the Child and Adolescent Mindfulness Measure scales (Zenner et al., 2014). These scales used simple questions related to emotional awareness, focus and attention to understand whether students were able to navigate difficult feelings and situations. The checklist consists of 13 questions which students had to answer using a likert scale having

six ratings, ranging from Almost Always (1) to Almost Never (6). The questions were related to Focus, Emotions, Distractions, Rumination. The more specific questions were surrounding emotional affect, inattention, emotional fatigue, overwhelm, numbness, overthinking, self-criticism. This checklist was administered at two points over a period of six months.

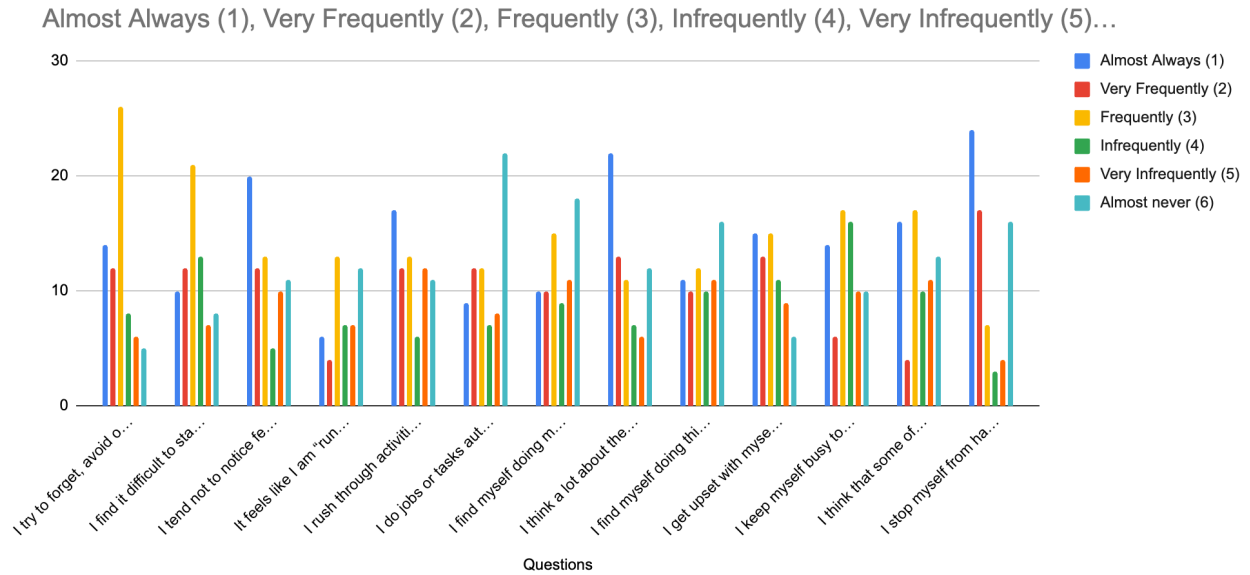
According to the preliminary analysis, there is a marked difference in many of the answers that participants have given, when compared before and after the intervention programme.

1. Focus: Students have reported an increase in the ability to focus without distractions. There is a marked decrease in feelings of “autopilot”, which means that students are able to be present during their tasks by being more mindful of their actions. Fewer students are “doing tasks automatically”, which was not the case before the intervention. Based on the activities done and the psychoeducation provided as a part of the intervention, there is more presence that students are reporting, mentioning the ability to focus on the present task, while prior to the intervention, there was more rumination over thoughts that took them away from the present task to be focused on.
2. Distractions: Doing multiple things at once, without completing any task, has also gone down drastically. Students have paid more attention to focusing on a single task instead. Keeping oneself busy to distract from thoughts has also decreased. Distractions from negative thoughts was initially reported, as students often found themselves in situations and experiences that were difficult to keep away from. There was a decrease in distractions, not just from focusing on tasks that required presence, but more importantly from emotions that were often ignored or avoided. Fewer students reported feeling distracted during their tasks, post the intervention.
3. Emotions: Judgement about feelings and thinking that some feelings are wrong or bad has reduced, showing more acceptance of feelings that may be difficult. There is also lesser resistance towards experiencing feelings that are unpleasant, by allowing for space. The increase in understanding and accepting feelings, while improving the confidence to manage unpleasant feelings has improved.

Almost Always (1), Very Frequently (2), Frequently (3), Infrequently (4), Very Infrequently (5)...



PRE-TEST CHECKLIST (Fig. 1)



POST-TEST CHECKLIST (Fig. 2)

Qualitative Results:

The qualitative group discussions allowed for a variety of interesting answers, which gave space for more reflections to the researchers. According to the discussions, a few preliminary themes have come up.

Research Question	Theme	Sub-theme
What did the participants learn from the sessions?	Identifying and naming emotions	Understanding the function of emotions
	Being able to explore know-hows	Differences between feelings and their uses

		Building relationships with the feelings and emotions
What was the experience of the activities and sessions conducted?	Using activities to regulate emotions (needs follow-up)	Enjoyable activities Simple and easy-to-practice activities Effectiveness in feeling relaxed and regulating emotions
What was their favourite activity?	Creating safe spaces for the self	Drawing feelings (externalisation) Storytelling Individual know-hows Psychoeducation around violence, gender Clapping out the anger Mirror activities Safe space activity Body scan and breathing techniques
How have they been able to support friends and family through their learnings?	Reducing stigma around mental health	Speaking more openly about mental health Teaching regulation exercises to family and friends Building safe spaces for friends, cousins and others to express their emotions without judgement
Why do participants think it important for people to experience and learn about the intervention?	Being able to reach out for support	To emotionally regulate the self To externalise and share difficult emotions Suffering can be a shared experience

Themes

1. Identifying and naming emotions

Students have been able to identify, name and give language to difficult emotions such as loneliness, sadness, anger, anxiousness and confusion. Through various mindfulness-based activities that provide pathways to understanding the body and mind, the participants were able to name emotions related to the feelings experienced in the body, which has already led to a better understanding of them. Almost all the participants from the group discussions have experienced that the knowledge of naming emotions has reduced their confusion, consequently reducing the frustration and fear attached to how their behaviour would otherwise be perceived.

One of the students mentioned that, “I learnt the difference between anger and sadness, and I learnt how to judge myself to understand myself in the best way possible”.

Another participant had a very nuanced understanding about emotions, saying, “Different persons with different genders have different feelings, and people have their own way of feeling things. We end up hurting ourselves in sadness, but I learnt many know-hows to do things that are good for me and remove my sadness.” One student spoke of her brave narrative, going through phases of not feeling understood, until she was able to make sense of her own feelings and find support in her surroundings - “In our first session we learnt about ‘What are emotions’. People used to think I am very rude, like an ice cream cone, soft on top but very hard at the bottom. I felt like nobody understood me, no one knows what I feel, whether I am sad or happy. People always thought I was rude to them. I used to be very disturbed, before I learnt about safe spaces. I used to feel very depressed and stayed alone. I used to hit myself and cry a lot, wondering why I was born. Then after the first session I learnt how to label my emotions. Then I learnt more about what these emotions are and now I feel like people also understand me so much better. I finally feel heard and seen”.

2. Being able to explore know-hows

Learning the knowledge that provides you with being able to identify and name emotions has initiated a process of deeply understanding what these emotions could mean. Students are able to track their emotions, from noticing them, to being more curious and finally interpreting what they could mean. This has occurred by engaging in activities that provide pathways to the body

and the mind simultaneously. Know-hows or known ways in which one navigates something, are things that the students are already doing to emotionally regulate themselves. Through these interventions, it has become easier for students to understand their coping skills, and ways in which they are able to protect, relax and support themselves. Small activities or shifts in behaviour are being noticed by them, indicating their agency in being able to navigate difficult emotions and situations.

One participant said that “I learnt that we all have different feelings and our own know-hows. I understood what my know-hows are and I hope that I can solve my own problems now, at least sometimes”. Another student also spoke about using scales to rate emotions. She said, “I learnt the scale of my emotions, not just whether I am sad or angry, but exactly how angry I am feeling at any point as well. I learnt how to use my toolbox full of tools to help my anger reduce when it is too much.” One student mentioned that he had “learnt how to take decisions in difficult situations, how to control my emotions and manage them”.

3. Reducing stigma around mental health

Consistent conversations and psychoeducation about mental health, and the externalisation of emotions that students can trace to the environment around them, has allowed for freer and frequent conversations around their emotions. Many students from the group discussions have mentioned being able to teach their own families about mental health as well. Importantly, students are able to call out previously held notions about mental health, such as feeling guilty for being angry, or feeling scared about “dark thoughts”. There is reduced shame and feelings of helplessness around feelings of sadness and loss. One student also reported that in the past, she has often felt like nobody has understood her, and this has led to many feelings of anger, frustration, sadness and loneliness. Not being able to talk about her feelings due to the fear of being misjudged or chastised by friends and family has often made her think of unpleasant thoughts. Since the intervention however, she is able to identify feelings better, and has learnt of other students experiencing similar things. She no longer feels confused or scared about her experiences, and has been able to communicate more effectively with understanding and kind classmates. A few students were able to think about distress experienced by adults and other young people in their community as well, displaying their understanding of externalisation and identification of feelings. One student experienced a marked change in her understanding of

emotions, and said, “We don’t need to feel embarrassed when we feel something, because it might be that others also feel the same. We can discuss and come to conclusions together.”

Another student stated a practical takeaway from her experience, saying, “If you are alone and suffering, do not take any big steps. Instead, do things that you like such as listening to music, sleeping and eating, which may help a little.”

4. Being able to reach out for support

Due to the contextual nature of the interventions, students have reported ease in being able to reach out to their own friends, teachers and family members about their experiences. Within their classrooms, they are able to speak to their friends about difficult feelings, and feel more open to supporting each other in times of need. At home, many students reported speaking with siblings, cousins and parents about what they had learnt, creating their own support systems in the process. Having access to counsellors and non-judgemental adults has helped to improve conversations around mental health and reducing distress, as reported by some of these students. One participant succinctly stated, “I learnt that I am not alone in feeling my emotions”.

5. Creating safe spaces for the self

Students were taught ways in which they can build their own spaces of safety and trust, and this has allowed them to become creative and free in many ways. Almost all students have reported the importance of safe spaces in their lives, and the lack of these spaces for many of them. A space does not have to be physical, but it can also be with a person that one can trust. One student noted that not having safe spaces, especially for boys, who are less likely to open up about feelings with others, can lead to violent and aggressive behaviour, as a result of pent-up emotions. The students understood the role of safe spaces to be those where one can be free and trust someone with feelings and emotions. A few students have expressed how they would want to be seen as safe spaces for others and want to advocate for more confidential, non-judgmental conversations around mental health for their friends. Some of the students spoke jointly about, “how to make someone feel like we are a safe space for them, help them solve their problems and share our own problems with people who are their safe spaces”. Another participant shared his takeaway with his family - “I told my cousins and they have learnt what their safe space is, through our conversations”.

6. Using activities to regulate emotions (needs follow-up)

Students were taught a variety of activities such as mindful breathing activities, balloon activities, mirroring activities, body scans. These activities have helped students in understanding the impermanent nature of feelings, and has helped to reduce impulsivity for a few students. Some students have also reported fewer episodes of extreme distress in the form of anger and causing harm to themselves, due to the knowledge of these activities. They have reported that these activities, while being fun and engaging, have helped them to improve on their understanding of the self, and have opened up more curiosity about how they respond or react to different situations.

It is important to note that there needs to be consistency, regularity and support for the students, in order for them to practice these tools and activities, and to see more sustained results. A follow-up study will be able to shed more light on the long-term effects of continuing such activities. Students learnt many activities that they stated themselves, such as “Breathing, balloon, candy, body scan, how to relax”. “I’m having anger issues, I throw things around. Learning these activities has made me feel very relaxed”.

One student demonstrated her learning by saying, “I learnt about mental violence, which is more dangerous than physical violence sometimes... Balloon activity and clapping the balloon in our hands was a great activity because it made me feel light and relaxed, by removing all my anger through blowing the balloon”.

Limitations and Further Recommendations

- Only by creating consistency and sustaining the activities and interventions, can there be a chance to evaluate the validity of this intervention, thereby expanding this among the TFI students and the rest of the school.
- The scope may also be to extend this as a training for teachers, who can then incorporate this into their lives and be equipped to teach this to their own students as well. Studies show that teachers play an integral role of the first responder while working with young people who experience distress.
- Building a culture around mindfulness in the entire community, and working with more stakeholders such as TFI fellows, teachers, other students, parents and family members is

the most effective way of reducing psychosocial distress, often the leading cause of mental health issues among young people. This can be done through long-term continuation of the programme and more students adding to the reduction in stigma and building their own forms of support through individual know-hows.

- Students have more access to mental health professionals and can build more trust to think about emotional regulation in simple ways.

Appendices

1. Quantitative Scale:

Pre-test Scale for Mindfulness

This scale is a variation of the MAAS and CAMM scales (Zenner et al., 2014). The aim of this scale is to identify the baseline levels of understanding that adolescent students have of their levels of emotional regulation. Questions will be asked using the Likert scale method to understand the frequency or intensity of a feeling that the individual describes.

Instructions: Read the questions below, and mark the number that you think best describes how you feel, think or do things, for each question.

(Almost Always) (Very Frequently) (Frequently) (Infrequently) (Very Infrequently) (Almost Never)

1 2 3 4 5 6

	1	2	3	4	5	6
I try to forget, avoid or ignore difficult emotions						
I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.						
I tend not to notice feelings of pain or discomfort until they become very intense						
It feels like I am "running on automatic," without much awareness of what I'm doing.						
I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.						
I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.						

I find myself doing multiple things at the same time, without completing a single task						
I think a lot about the future or the past						
I find myself doing things without paying attention.						
I get upset with myself for having feelings that don't make sense.						
I keep myself busy to distract myself						
I think that some of my feelings are bad and that I shouldn't have them.						
I stop myself from having feelings that I don't like						

2. Qualitative Questions for Focus Group Discussions:

- What do you think of the activities that you do with fellows from Pause? Which one do you like the most and what do you like about it (ask them to describe a favourite activity or session)?
- Can you describe what you have learnt so far from these activities?
- Have you been able to teach these activities to other friends and family around you?
- Why do you think it is important to learn more about your emotions? (Do you think it is helpful?)
- Is there something you wish to learn or talk about when you think of these activities?

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