



Mindful music: attention, awareness and teamwork skills for greater wellbeing

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How does level of self-control affect our learners?

Imagine you are sitting in a staff meeting vital to the work you are about to do and your colleague is giving a presentation outlining the most important parts. Suddenly, you realise that you haven't heard anything they've been saying, you have zoned out and your attention has been elsewhere. There is not much you can do now but try to pick up what is happening, but this is not easy. This is a regular scenario in lessons for children with low self-control.

The wandering mind is a natural state that we all slip into from time to time, and as Goleman (2013) reminds us, it has its purpose and benefits. Consider the dog that spends his walk merrily following the various scents and calls of nature – this is the purpose of the walk. The freedom to enjoy the scents as they arrive is what makes it more enjoyable; and sniffing out his surroundings is a way of spotting potential danger.

But wandering becomes a problem when the distractions



take over. Say the dog is so engrossed by a sound he rushes off and becomes lost? Becoming lost was not a conscious choice; it was a result of an impulse. Now consider children: for those who struggle with low self-control the wandering mind regularly takes over and becomes a barrier to their learning and wellbeing.

In other words, children with low self-control struggle to direct their attention purposefully. Without the basic emotional intelligence baseline of awareness, they are not able to see or control the relationship between their impulses, choices and consequences. So they

become trapped in cycles of behaviour detrimental to their wellbeing. This affects their learning, it affects the way they build relationships with their peers – and it affects their ability to observe, understand and live with the systems that society creates to maintain communal wellbeing.

Childhood self-control predicts adult wellbeing

It is therefore unsurprising that self-control is an even stronger predictor of adult wellbeing than IQ or economic background. Recently Moffitt et al. (2011: 2693) took a sample of 1,000 children to analyse



and found that “self-control predicts physical health, substance dependence, personal finances, and criminal offending outcomes”. Furthermore, Daly et al. (2015: 1) analysed employment data and found that children with low self-control are in later life 40% more likely to be unemployed than their more disciplined peers. In terms of academic attainment, Vidal Rodeiro, C. et al. (2012) found self-control to be a ‘significant predictor’ of academic attainment in secondary schools.

But the good news is, self-control can be taught. Petrides et al. (2006) reviewed a sample of primary school children and found that higher emotional intelligence was related to prosocial behaviour and reduced disruption, which would improve conditions for learning. Self-control is an element of emotional intelligence; and at the heart of emotional intelligence is awareness. These are the fundamental components for self-control, which allow for the ability to act in line with the wellbeing of others and the world in which we live.

Mindful Music is an approach to teaching self-control for greater wellbeing. Our focus is on developing awareness, attention and teamwork skills, particularly in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mindful Music responds to Hirschi and Gottfredson’s (1990) findings that self-control is malleable during the first 10-12 years of life. More recent studies have shown that meditation and



mindful exercises can improve self-control in both children and adults (Gutman and Schoon, 2013). Our programme has been developed to address this need in society.

The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention

Mindfulness means deliberately paying attention to the present, with open curiosity. The role of music in this context is to help us develop the skills needed to live mindfully. We use music alongside solution-focused reflection tools to support children in their development of self-control for greater individual and communal wellbeing.

Music gives access to mindfulness

We have found that making music allows our learners, and the adults who work with them, to playfully access and experience this mindful approach to being. Through our sessions, we have seen classes reflect on the more difficult emotions we experience in our lives, such as anger, and create remarkable musical compositions together through

listening, taking turns and expressing themselves. Taking best practice from the early years, our sessions develop by taking lead from the learners. For example, a simple starting point using percussion to demonstrate different emotions led to three very contrasting compositions by our year 3 classes. One used call and response samba patterns to demonstrate surprise, another chose chimes and varied dynamics for fear, and another class chose drums and stamping for anger.

Furthermore, working with teachers, teaching assistants and the midday meal supervisors ensures that we can continually support children in their emotional development. Not only during the music session, but throughout the school day. One example which highlights this is the feedback we received from a teaching assistant who had been part of songwriting sessions based around acceptance and expression of emotions; she told me that “instead of moaning about each other, the children now come up to me in the playground asking to talk about their own emotions.”

As educators, we are only too aware of the value research, practice and reflection have in enabling us to develop our understanding of our impact on other people. When considering affecting a change in society, Scharmer (2009) identifies the need for a shared motivation to solve a problem before referring to Lewin and Lippett's (1938) tried and tested action research model. And as Fullan (2002) reminds us, we need to be sharing our findings to create a lasting movement for social change.

As Bar-On (2006) points out, emotional intelligence is not a new idea. It has been considered as a tool for human success since Darwin (1872) referred to it in his study of adaptation and survival. More recently, education research organisations such as The Jubilee Centre (Arthur et al, 2015), SSAT and The Young Foundation (2014) have been doing research and informing educators on the best practice

in teaching of emotional intelligence in schools.

However, there is more work to be done in order for all children to receive the input needed for lasting positive change. We are excited by the outcomes that we have been able to measure, and this will continue to inform and inspire our work with schools.

As we continue to measure what can sometimes appear to be immeasurable, we are developing our programme with expert input from our team of voluntary music therapists, Sencos, neurologists and psychotherapists. You can join or follow our journey at www.mindfulmusic.london.

A view from one of our schools:

"We were very excited to be able to be involved with the Mindful Music project – it was just the initiative we were looking for. While behaviour is managed well at our school, we had identified one year group in

particular that needed a lot of support in building self-control and developing an awareness of team working. The things we were doing – the same old systems and processes – just weren't working with this group of children. The research-based approach to Mindful Music enabled children to engage with approaches to self-awareness and reflection that we could not have done by ourselves. Children who had been difficult to engage in collaborative activities really started to understand how to work well with others. There is still work to be done, but the impact on pupils' understanding and behaviour after just one term was impressive." Dr. J. Lane, Headteacher, St Francis De Sales R C Junior School - July 2016

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