

It Just Takes a Sprinkle of Mindfulness: Exploring Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education in Ireland.

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A thesis submitted to Dublin City University in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration page

Student Declaration

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List of Acronyms

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
AMRA	American Mindfulness Research Association
APPG	All Party Parliamentary Group
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DCDEIY	Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DESR	Deficient Emotional Self-Regulation
DkIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
DoE	Department of Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Education and Care (free preschool scheme in Ireland)
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EEG	Electroencephalogram
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
GoI	Government of Ireland
HSE	Health Service Executive
INCO	Inclusion Coordinator
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion
MBHSC	Mindfulness-based Health and Social Care Programme
MBI	Mindfulness-based Intervention
MBP	Mindfulness-based Pedagogy
MBSR	Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction Programme
MISP	Mindfulness in Schools Project
MP	Mindfulness Practice
MPs	Mindfulness Practices
MP's	Members of Parliament
MPA	Mindfulness Pedagogical Approach
MRI	Magnetic Resonance Imagery
MRP	Mindfulness Reflexive Pause
MYRIAD	My Resilience in Adolescence
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NHS	National Health Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEMI	Professional Educators and Managers Ireland
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIPTU	Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union
STEAM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths
UN	United Nations

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List of Publications and Dissemination

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Abstract

"It Just Takes a Sprinkle of Mindfulness: Exploring Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education in Ireland

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This thesis explored if, how and why mindfulness practice (MP) is being implemented in early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland. This study adopted a mixed-methods design, with a predominantly qualitative orientation, to gain insight into current practices and perspectives of those in the sector. This study was conducted in three phases. Phase One mapped the landscape of MP in ECE using an online national questionnaire (*n*=744). Phase Two provided a deeper exploration of educator's MP with young children (*n*=27), regarding their conceptualisation, experiences, perceived benefits and barriers through semi-structured interviews. Phase Three involved a focus group with five thought leaders in ECE to contextualise the findings within a broader research, educational and policy framework. Quantitative data was analysed through SPSS using descriptive and inferential statistics while the qualitative data underwent reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) within a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm. Findings from Phase One indicate that MP is being implemented by educators across the sector, although in diverse ways. The educators in Phase Two shared a range of perceived benefits of MP for themselves and young children. Nevertheless, issues emerged including definitional clarity, lack of training opportunities and broader systemic support for sustained implementation of MP. By centring educators' voices and engaging in broader discussion in Phase Three, this study offers important insights into an emerging yet often under-researched area. It argues for clearer definitions and understanding of MP, sustained professional development and coordinated systemic support to enable thoughtful integration of MP in ECE. This study contributes new empirical evidence and insight into the role of MP in ECE.

Chapter One: The Beginning

"My advice is to simply begin" (Ita-Educator)

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces my PhD research thesis, *"It Just Takes a Sprinkle of Mindfulness: Exploring Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education in Ireland*". Positioned within a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, my PhD research sought to understand the lived experiences of early childhood educators through a lens that values subjective meaning-making. Although a traditional theoretical framework was not adopted, it was informed by Shapiro et al.'s (2006) model of mindfulness, which emphasises intention, attention and attitude which served as the conceptual lens and aligned with my research paradigms which focused on individual perception and meaning.

A predominantly qualitative, three-phase mixed-methods design was employed to support this exploration. Phase One involved a mixed-methods questionnaire with early childhood educators to understand the landscape of mindfulness practice (MP) in early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland. Phase Two comprised of in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected educators who used MP with young children to deepen my understanding of their individual perspectives. Finally, Phase Three engaged a panel of leaders from policy, education and research for a collective discussion of the findings from Phase Two. This design allowed for breadth and depth in data collection and aligned with the study's aim to understand the lived and evolving experiences of MP within ECE context. A detailed rationale for the philosophical and methodological choices is outlined in Chapter Three.

This chapter presents the background to the study, positioning it within the broader context of ECE in Ireland and outlining the rationale for conducting this study. I

explore my personal biography and positionality, acknowledging how my interest in MP shaped the research process, before introducing the conceptual lens that guided this study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the thesis and the focus of each chapter.

1.2 Background to Study

Over the last decade, mindfulness has grown in popularity across multiple domains including psychology, occupational and educational settings. Although a variety of definitions of mindfulness exist (Amora and Singh 2021), one that is commonly referred to describes mindfulness as '*Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally*" (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 4). The benefits of MP for adults and adolescents have been recognized, with research suggesting it can enhance well-being (Zheng et al. 2020; Jazaieri and Shapiro 2017), develop coping skills (DeVibe et al. 2012), relieve stress and anxiety (Shankland et al. 2021) and lead to better self-regulation (Creswell 2017).

Within educational contexts MP and mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) have gained momentum as a method to enhance child outcomes, most notably emotional regulation, behaviour, cognition and overall health (Maloney et al. 2016). Despite this growing interest, research exploring mindfulness programmes for ECE is limited. Research has revealed that many MP studies in ECE have focused on measuring outcomes of MBI programmes (Holt and Atkinson 2022; Bockman and Yu 2021) typically finding positive improvements in emotional regulation and executive function (Crooks et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2019). However, these outcomes-driven approaches have resulted in a notable gap; with far less attention been given to the lived experiences of the educators who are implementing such practices with young children.

Some studies have begun to address this gap by including educators' experiences following their engagement with an MBI (Lyndon et al. 2025; O'Hara-Gregan 2023; Holt and Atkinson 2022; King et al. 2021). These studies underscored the potential benefits of MP in ECE and provided rich insights into the importance of educators' self-practice. There is a growing call to move beyond evaluative studies, and to explore how educators understand and experience MP in education (Pascal and Markieke 2022). While studies from Holt et al. (2021) demonstrated the transformative benefit of mindfulness for young children and unexpected positive impact on the educators, they also called for more qualitative studies to add to the growing body of literature. This present study addresses this gap by centring the voices and experiences of early childhood educators who use MPs in ECE.

1.3 The Landscape of Early Childhood Education in Ireland

Since the enactment of the Child Care Act (1991), ECE in Ireland has transformed. Regulations introduced in 2006 and 2016 provided a legislative framework for quality and compliance. Despite this, Ireland's ECE landscape remains a predominantly privately delivered model, which generates tensions around equity, quality and affordability. The introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme in 2010, which initially offered one free preschool year and later expanded to two, marked a shift towards greater public investment in ECE. The launch of the Together for Better funding model in 2022 (DCEDIY 2021b), which offers core funding to services that sign up, signalled the intent to move to a more publicly funded sustainable system.

Ireland has also invested in quality enhancement frameworks and initiatives for ECE. These include Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) 2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for

Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009; Government of Ireland (GoI) 2024) to support young children's learning and development. Further support mechanisms exist such as the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter (DCYA 2016b) which promotes inclusive practices and cultural responsiveness, and the Access and Inclusion Model (DCYA 2016a) which enables children with additional needs to participate fully in preschool. More recently, Equal Start (DCDE 2024) promotes equitable access and participation for children in ECE, particularly those facing disadvantage. The publication of Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare 2022-2028 (DCEDIY 2021a) set out a coherent plan to professionalise the sector. Within Ireland, early childhood educator qualifications are provided by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland Framework (QQI), with Levels 5 and 6 functioning as entry awards to working in ECE, and Levels 7 and 8 representing degree qualifications. The Workforce Development Plan prioritises the workforce upskilling and progression. While these developments signalled a strong commitment to inclusive high-quality ECE experiences, systemic challenges remain. The sector continues to grapple with issues of professional recognition, low pay, and a continuous lack of parity with primary and secondary school educators. The term 'childcare' is often used in both policy and society, often undermining the value of ECE. While some progress has been made, Ireland invests 0.16% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in ECEC (Moloney and Nulty 2025), a figure well below the 1.5% that countries such as Norway and Sweden invest annually. Professional and advocacy groups such as Professional Educators and Managers Ireland (PEMI) continue to call for increased funding of 1% of GDP, recognition of ECE educators as professionals deserving of equal status, pay and working conditions to their counterparts and call for a renewed

commitment from the government for high-quality equitable ECE for young children (Moloney and Nulty 2025).

1.4 Rationale for Present Study

The focus of this PhD was to gain a deeper understanding of MP in ECE in Ireland, an area that has received limited attention, with only one peer-reviewed published study in Ireland to date (Flanagan et al. 2025). There is a paucity in both international and Irish research that explores educators' understanding, experiences and implementation of MP with young children in ECE.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the *if, how* and *why* MP is being implemented in ECE in Ireland. Given the growing interest in mindfulness and MP and with the recent update of Aistear (GoI 2024), the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland, this research study is timely and significant. Rather than evaluating a predefined mindfulness programme, this study sought to explore how educators understand and enact MP in ECE and what possibilities or tensions arise in doing so. The findings have the potential to inform future policy, guide training and professional development, and lay the groundwork for future research.

The research aim was addressed through the following objectives:

- To explore how educators construct and personally engage with MP.
- To capture the multiple perspectives and experiences of educators using MP with young children.
- To explore how MP is being implemented in ECE settings, including the methods, tools and training undertaken by educators to engage young children in MP.
- To explore educators' perceptions of the impact of MP on young children.
- To identify educators' perceived barriers to implementing MP and potential solutions to overcome such barriers.

Phase One involved an online questionnaire distributed to educators to map the current landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland. Participation was encouraged from all educators, irrespective of use of MP. The main research questions in this phase included:

- Is MP being implemented in ECE in Ireland?
- In what ways is MP being implemented in ECE?
- What are the reasons for sharing/ not sharing MP with young children?
- Do educators engage in personal MP and if so, in what ways?
- What are educators' understanding of mindfulness?

Phase Two consisted of semi-structured interviews with educators who use MPs with young children. This phase aimed to gain deeper contextual insight into how MPs are understood, implemented and perceived. The main research questions for this phase were:

- How do educators construct and personally engage with MP?
- What are the multiple perspectives and experiences of educators using MP with young children?
- How is MP implemented in ECE settings, including the methods, tools and training undertaken by educators to engage young children in MP?
- What are educators' perceptions of the impact of MP on young children?
- What are educators identified/ perceived barriers to implementing MP and are there potential solutions to overcome such barriers?

Phase Three brought together a focus group of thought leaders− those who have influence and expertise in policy, education and research in ECE in Ireland.

This final phase offered a broader multidisciplinary perspective on the findings from Phase Two. The main research questions in this phase included:

- What are the panel's perspectives on the role of MP in ECE?
- What is the panel's view that MP could support children's present moment experiences in early childhood while also serving as a life skill?
- What are their opinions on MP as a slow pedagogical approach?
- How could MP be included in pre-service educator third level training and what might this look like in practice?
- Is there potential for a leadership role for MP in ECE?
- What are their perspectives on a top-down or whole systems approach to MP in ECE?

1.5 Personal Biography and Positionality

I was often met with varied responses when I described that my PhD research focused on MP in ECE. These responses may have been shaped by different levels of familiarity with mindfulness. I usually asked, "*What comes to your mind when you hear the word mindfulness?"* Some have described a serene yogi in the corner or a Buddhist monk meditating. These images, while not entirely inaccurate, reduce mindfulness to something distant and external, even somewhat esoteric. However, mindfulness for me is a practice that is deeply personal and a lived experience.

I describe mindfulness as the intentional practice of bringing awareness to the present moment, meeting both ourselves and our experiences with openness, curiosity and self-compassion (Flanagan 2025). It offers me the gift of time that allows me to embrace each moment without self-judgment, while extending kindness and compassion to myself and others.

My MP includes meditating, journalling, mindful walking and breathing, it reminds me to soften how I speak to myself when difficulties arise in life. Though my personal interpretation may not be found in textbooks, it feels authentic and meaningful to me, shaped from many years of personal practice and extensive reading.

Working as an educator for 20 years in ECE profoundly influenced my worldview one that was shaped by my interactions and relationships with young children, families and fellow colleagues. This experience has attuned me to the importance of the broader systems around the child, including families, communities and early childhood policy. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological perspective that recognised the important roles of the multiple and interconnected systems of a child's life. My commitment to ECE is rooted in a deep grá (the Irish word for love) for the first five years of a child's life as a pivotal and sacred stage of development. I believe these first years lay the foundation for learning and nurturing the wellbeing of all children.

Alongside this, I have been a mindfulness practitioner for the past 13 years. I view MP as a relational, compassionate and inclusive practice, one with the potential to enhance the wellbeing of all people, once approached with intentionality. These dual roles as an educator and mindfulness practitioner deeply intersect and have shaped my researcher identity, my interactions and the values I bring to the process (Lemon 2025). My lived experience provides a unique and grounded stance in engaging with the research study. Since 2021, I have facilitated mindfulness workshops for educators - in response to the wellbeing needs that presented during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also contributed to a development group for the updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for ECE in Ireland, an experience that reaffirmed my commitment to ECE.

I have included these experiences here to offer transparency and context for the perspective I bring to this research study. I position myself as a qualitative and interpretivist scholar, recognising that who I am has shaped how I engaged with and interpreted this study. I do not view my subjectivity as bias to be minimised, but as a meaningful, transparent and generative part of the process. Through a reflexive approach I acknowledge that my background in ECE, my engagement with MP and my personal values have shaped how I interpreted the data. For example, my experience in ECE heightened my understanding of sectorial demands, while MP supported my attentive stance throughout the analysis. I used reflexivity and explored how my perspectives and experiences shaped my decisions. Rather than viewing these as limitations, I positioned these influences as honest contributions to knowledge generation.

Given my background, I began this research with a belief that participants would feel comfortable sharing their stories with someone who may have shared a similar path. I acknowledge that assumptions come with that belief, therefore, I endeavoured to remain present and open and allowed myself to be challenged by the educators' stories and experiences. I understood myself to have a dual positionality of both an emic (insider) due to my experience as an educator and mindfulness practitioner and etic (outsider) researcher due to not having had direct involvement in their settings and experiences. While there may be commonalities, I maintained critical distance so as not to align with the educators but to create space for sharing multiple truths and perspectives. My positionality was dynamic and fluid, I shifted between insider and outsider roles throughout (Mason-Bish 2018), which supported Markee's (2012) stance that emic and etic positions are not fixed but alternated in order to capture the dynamic nature of the research study.

I reflected on Haapanen and Manninen's (2023) systematic review of journalistic work practices that highlighted the value of combining both emic and etic stances, to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the research, an approach I intentionally adopted.

Throughout the research journey, I maintained a reflexive journal capturing positional shifts, thoughts, responses and reflections. I also incorporated what I termed mindful reflexive pauses (MRP) throughout the thesis, which created intentional space for self-reflection and presence. Moreover, I included direct participant quotes across all three research phases to ensure multiple voices were captured and respected.

My own MP significantly shaped me as a person and my interactions. Initially, I first parachuted mindfulness into my life during a period of significant stress, as a coping mechanism to support my wellbeing when my child became ill. However, over time my practice transformed into an intentional, transformational and sustained practice. Through patience and time, my MP shifted beyond a response strategy and became a way of being. My practice allowed me space to reconnect to my heart, body and mind, especially at times when these felt broken. My daily practice cultivated my capacity to be present, to meet life as it is each day, with intention, compassion and without resistance. What was once a practice I turned to when I was in difficulty, is now the foundation of how I live, relate to others and grow.

1.6 My Conceptual Lens of Intention Attention Attitude (IAA)

Although this study was not designed to test a specific theory, it was guided by the conceptual framework of Shapiro et al. (2006), that emphasises intention, attention and attitude (IAA) as the foundations of MP. I adopted this model of mindfulness to

serve as a values-based lens through which I engaged with all stages of the research process from design, data collection, to analysis and interpretation.

I view MP as a personal, subjective and experiential process aligned with my ontological stance that knowledge is constructed through lived experiences and situated within specific social and personal constructs. Shapiro et al.'s framework (2006) supports this stance, offering an embodied understanding of MP. While IAA has been used in previous studies to frame research through structure of questions and interpretation of themes (Spadaro and Hunker 2016; Shonin et al. 2014), my engagement extended beyond this. In this study, I used the IAA model to help me understand educators' experiences of MP and shaped some of the interview questions. Beyond shaping my data collection tools, IAA supported my methodological approach by encouraging an embodied and ethically attuned research stance. It served as a reflexive compass during interviews, the focus group and data analysis and supported my own mindful awareness and presence. In this context I was prompted to reflect on my intentions as a researcher and through pauses and reflective practice I was able to maintain an open, non-judgmental and curious attitude to the participants narratives. In this way, IAA supported the epistemological and ethical dimensions and deepened my understanding of educators' lived experiences, while grounding my mindful presence throughout the research journey. This was important as it allowed me to meet the participants' experiences with openness, curiosity, and responsiveness to their contextual accounts and to generate findings that authentically echoed their perspectives. I created an image of the IAA model to illustrate the bi-directional and interconnected relationship between intention, attention and attitude, and showed their equal importance. The heart at the centre of the illustration represents my own mindful presence and how these three elements are embodied within me as a researcher.

How I embraced each pillar, intention, attention and attitude will be described in more detail below.

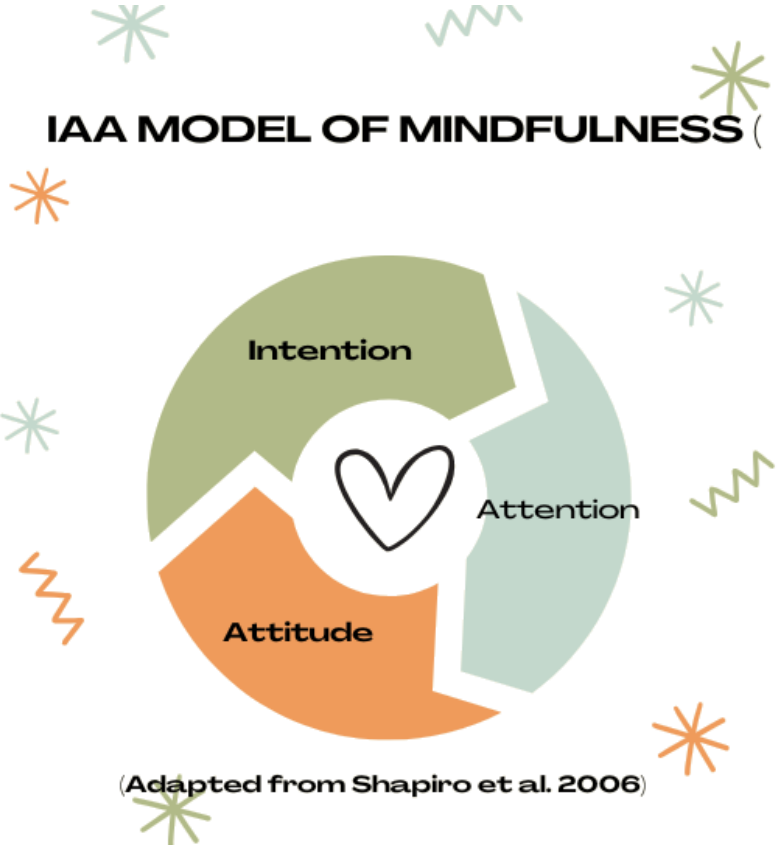


Figure 1.1 IAA Model of Mindfulness

Intention

Shapiro et al. (2006, 2024) described intention as the first pillar of MP, as the purpose behind why we pay attention. Bringing awareness to this intention anchors mindfulness with our values, motivation and aspirations. The authors further explained the importance of intention, one that is not vague or static in nature but rather acts as a signal from the brain to the nervous system that what you are about to do is meaningful and worth paying attention to. In this study, intention served as a grounding force for me. I spent time reflecting and considering the compass of this study, and ask myself, "*What direction did I want it to take*?" Bringing awareness to my intention, it acted as an anchor to my values and beliefs about MP and ECE.

By embracing intentionality and reflexivity, I was able to ask myself, "*Why does this research matter to me*?" and "*What do I hope to learn and contribute from this research*?". This intentionality shaped the creation of the interview questions and prompts in Phase Two; it allowed me to explore the reasons why educators implement MP with young children and their motivations behind doing so. Embracing an intentional approach distinguished this study from previous outcome-driven research, my focus was on the educators' perspectives and experiences of MP.

Attention

The second pillar of attention involves having present-moment awareness of both internal and external experiences. While this may be simple in theory, the authors noted this attention requires training and practice, as it is natural for our minds to drift and for our natural "*monkey mind*" to wander from one thought to the next. However, MP acts as a gentle reminder to return to the present moment and to whatever is present (Shapiro et al. 2006).

Throughout this research study, I reflected on my capacity to focus on the present moment and how I could be truly attentive to each stage of the research. I adopted mindful attention by engaging in grounding MP before interviews, the focus group, data analysis and in moments of researcher overwhelm. These practices allowed me to set intentions and centre my presence. During the qualitative phases most notably the interviews and the focus group, I utilised MPs by paying attention to the present moment experience by mindfully listening which reduced the risk of an autopilot status (Lemon 2025). I intentionally held space without trying to anticipate responses and engaged in minimal notetaking. Taking such an approach, I believe supported the participants engagement with me. I demonstrated mindful presence which also served as a gentle invitation for them to be present in our conversations.

Taking this relational approach mirrored Warin's (2011) view that mindfulness is a relational act of presence with others.

At times, I experienced moments of overwhelm due to the amount of data which led to feelings of self-doubt. When these arose, I reverted to my MP and used a visual meditation to support me to overcome the negative narrative and return to the task with a clearer mind. Engaging in MP and holding presence throughout each stage of the research allowed me to tend to my own wellbeing. Moreover, it enhanced my openness to each component and experience as it unfolded and allowed me to move beyond my pre-existing knowledge and experience (Lemon 2025).

Attitude

Attitude as the third pillar of MP refers to how we pay attention and one element that can sometimes be overlooked. How we pay attention is central to MP by approaching our experiences with kindness and curiosity. Shapiro et al. (2006, p.18) denote that "*What we practice grows stronger*," by meeting our negative feelings or experiences with kindness rather than criticism, we become our inner ally rather than forming negative self-judgement.

Throughout the research study, I constantly reflected on whether I was bringing a non-judgmental and open and curious attitude, especially with my dual position as an emic and etic researcher. I asked myself whether I was approaching this study with an open mind to what may unfold - that may be different to my own perspective. During data analysis, I reminded myself to have that beginner's mind, to approach my data with fresh eyes and free from limitations. At times, during the analysis process, I noticed my attitude changing to one of frustration or self-doubt. I took mindful pauses, rest breaks, and lent into my mindfulness meditations to step back and offer myself some self-compassion.

In Phase Two, I was curious to explore the particular attitudes educators brought to their MP and if they felt there were specific dispositions required to implement MP with young children. Gaining insight into their attitudes offered deeper insight into how MP is enacted with young children. Throughout the interviews and focus group, I intentionally embodied an attitude of patience and non-judgment, especially when participants voiced alternative opinions to my own. In ongoing discussions with my supervisors, I cultivated an attitude of humility particularly when plans needed to change or when I overlooked something important. These experiences became powerful reminders of the pillar of attitude in both my own MP and how I approached the research.

Rather than applying each pillar of IAA in isolation, each was woven throughout the fabric of this research study. Intention guided its purpose and allowed me to stay aligned with my values and beliefs pertaining to MP and ECE. Attention informed how I remained present at each phase of the study and allowed me to tend to new learning and patterns. Attitude shaped how I paid attention throughout the research process with openness, kindness, patience, curiosity and humility. The IAA model (IAA) provided a meaningful conceptual lens that mirrored my values and beliefs as a mindfulness practitioner and supported my epistemological and ontological stance as a qualitative interpretivist researcher.

1.7 Embracing Mindful Reflexivity and the Use of Mindful Reflexive Pauses

MP is an embodied way of being for me, deeply rooted in my values, beliefs and worldview where mindfulness informs personal wellbeing but also ethical presence and relationality within research. I was mindful of how I tended to this research process. My values and beliefs around ECE and the potential of MP shaped my

research questions, my interactions with the participants, and kept me intentionally present throughout the process.

Reflexivity was embedded throughout this research study. Bryman et al. (2021) and Hennink et al. (2020) purported that researchers must critically examine any of their assumptions, positions and presences that may impact the research study. I adhered to this through reflexive journalling and by engaging in rich dialogue with my supervisors to critically explore my positioning and my dual identity as an educator and mindfulness practitioner. These reflexive practices strengthened the credibility and transparency of the research study.

I explored the intersection between reflexivity and MP, and while MP can enhance self-reflexivity, MP in itself is very different from self-reflexivity. Rather, MP invites the researcher to be open to the present moment experience and to deeply listen to what the participants say without trying to alter it in anyway. This present moment awareness is aligned with my conceptual lens and Shapiro et al.'s (2006) model of IAA. These three interrelated components guided the research design, how I engaged with the participants and the interpretive processes.

Inspired by Lemon's (2025) suggestion of mindful memos to document mind shifts following a MP, I developed what I call *mindful reflexive pauses* (MRP). In these intentional moments I took time to pause, reflect, and connect to myself and the study. Throughout the research process these pauses offered me time and space to engage and document my thoughts, ideas, and reflections while keeping me grounded in the present moment. Throughout the thesis, these MRPs have been included to illustrate how MP supported my research journey and my way of being within it.

1.8 Thesis Structure

Chapter One: “The Beginning” introduced the present study, by outlining its background, situating the research within the landscape of early childhood education in Ireland and presenting the rationale for the study. It also explored my personal biography and positionality and introduced Shapiro et al.’s (2006) Intention- Attention- Attitude (IAA) model as the guiding lens for the research.

Chapter Two: “*Exploring the Literature*” provides a narrative thematic review of the literature of mindfulness organised around four key themes, understanding what mindfulness and mindfulness practice is, the relationship between mindfulness and wellbeing, the evidence base of mindfulness practice with children, and the role of mindfulness in and as education.

Chapter Three: “*My Methodological Journey*” presents an overview of my chosen methodology for this study. My philosophical stance is presented alongside the study design and processes of data analysis.

Chapter Four introduces Phase One of the study, “*Exploring the Landscape of Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education in Ireland*”. This phase employed a mixed-methods approach via questionnaire with 744 educators. This chapter is divided into three sections; outlining the methodology used, presenting the findings of the questionnaire and initial discussion.

Chapter Five: presents Phase Two of this study, “*How is Mindfulness Practice Taking Root in Early Childhood Education in Ireland?”.* This phase used a qualitative approach via semi-structured interviews with 27 educators. This chapter details the methodology used and presents the findings of the interviews.

Chapter Six: presents Phase Three of this study, “*How Can Mindfulness Practice Grow Wings? Considering the Voices of Policy, Research, and Education in Early*

Childhood Education in Ireland". This phase adopted a qualitative approach via a singular focus group with five thought leaders. This chapter presents the methodology used and the findings in two sections.

Chapter Seven: "*Arriving Home*" presents an in-depth reflective discussion of the findings from Phase One, Two and Three of the study.

Chapter Eight: "*From Insight to Action*" summarises the key findings of the three-phase study, and recommendations for policy, practice and research.

Chapter Two: Exploring the Literature

> **"***Mindfulness isn't a quick fix, but a way of being present with what you are doing, one moment at a time"* (Zara-Educator)

2.1 Introduction

While mindfulness studies appear to be increasing at a rapid pace, there remains a notable lack of studies conducted in early childhood education (ECE). Scholars have noted that mindfulness could be integrated into public health and educational contexts, however, such efforts may be hindered by the lack of agreement of what mindfulness practice (MP) is, and the inconsistency of measurements used to assess mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) (Oman 2023; Sedlmeier 2023).

The potential impacts of MP in ECE include enhanced social-emotional skills (Duff 2024), social behaviours, empathy and reduced aggression (Erten and Gunes 2024). However, there is shared agreement that significant research gaps remain, specifically those focused on the use of MP for children in early childhood (Maclid 2023; Bockmann and Yu 2022; Lyons and Delange 2016). There is a more notable gap in studies exploring educators' experiences with MP.

2.1.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken in October−December 2022, updated in September−November 2023, October 2024 and again in June−July 2025 to maximise the inclusion of relevant and new published articles. The majority of studies included are dated from 2012 to 2025, however some older books and articles that encompass key ideas were also included. The literature search was conducted using a combination of keywords across multiple databases including Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed and PsycINFO. Initial searches were carried out using the terms *early childhood* AND *mindfulness practice* AND *preschool*, however,

the use of narrow terminology yielded few results. The search was broadened to include additional keywords, including *education, children, young children, educators* and *mindfulness*. Alternative combinations were used such as *mindfulness* AND *education* AND *children*. Alternative combinations included *mindfulness* AND *young children* AND educators. Further refinements included *mindfulness-based practice* AND *early years education* AND *young children* to ensure a comprehensive review of the literature. From my review, I discovered there were minimal qualitative publications conducted with educators regarding their use of MP. As of January 2026, only one published peer- reviewed study conducted in Ireland has explored MP and ECE, this publication arose from the questionnaire component of the present study. (Flanagan et al.2025).

A thematic approach was adopted for the literature review to align with the exploratory nature of this study and its constructivist and interpretivist stance. Thematic approaches are well-suited to mapping existing knowledge, identifying patterns of meaning and highlighting gaps in the literature while allowing the development of flexible and interpretive themes (Snyder 2019). As the aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of educators' perspectives and experiences of MP in ECE, rather than to measure specific outcomes of MP, a systematic review was not deemed suitable. Systematic reviews are typically associated with the structured synthesis of evidence, often involving specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Snyder 2019), whereas this study aimed to explore meanings, interpretations and nuances, which also informed the development of the data collection process.

The literature review was structured thematically to reflect the conceptual development of mindfulness and mindfulness practices across different contexts. This enabled a broad exploration of the origins and meanings of mindfulness, followed by its adaptation and application into health, society, and educational settings, including early childhood education. A thematic approach allowed a broad yet focused engagement with the literature, supporting the development of key patterns, themes, and gaps relevant to the study.

2.2 Chapter Structure

The literature review is organised around four key themes that were generated from the process described above.

Theme One: “What is Mindfulness? Origins, Meanings and Practice”

Theme Two: “The intersection of Mindfulness and Wellbeing”

Theme Three: “Exploring the Evidence- What does the Research tell us?”

Theme Four: “The role of Mindfulness *in* and *as* Education”.

This chapter concludes with some final thoughts and situates my present study.

2.3 Theme One: What is Mindfulness? Origins, Meanings and Practice.

This first theme explores the etymology of mindfulness, beginning with the history of the word, defining mindfulness, differentiating between mindfulness and MP and describing some formal and informal approaches, while also exploring the trajectory of mindfulness from east to west and the popularisation of mindfulness. This theme is illustrated in Figure 2.1

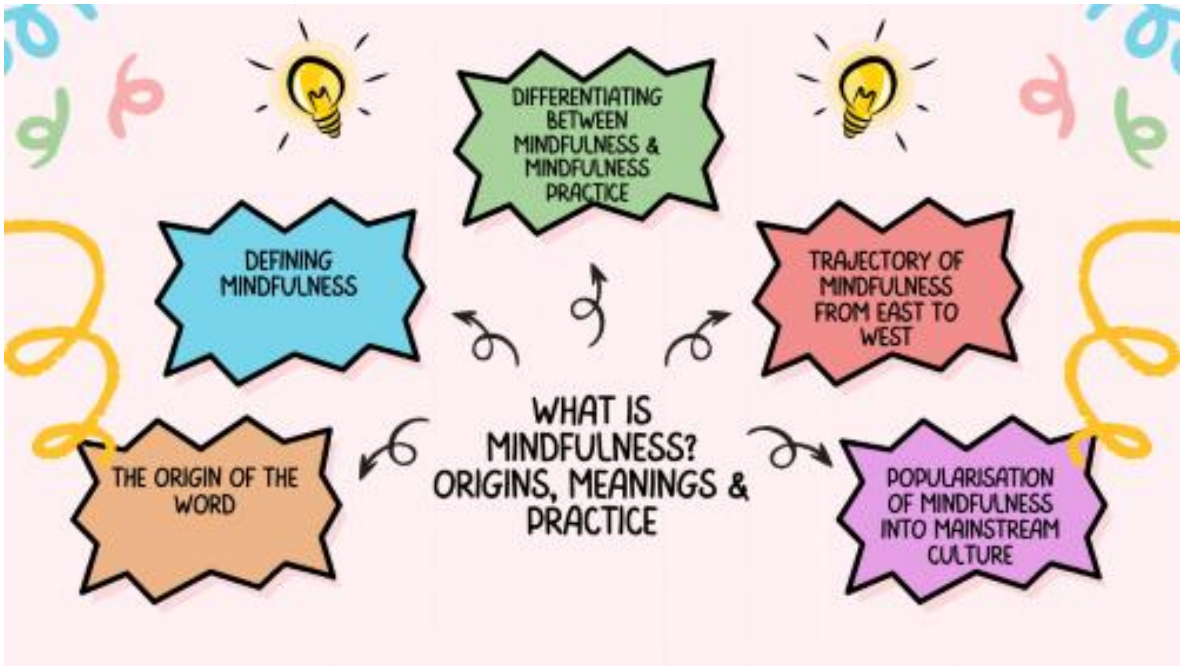


Figure 2.1 Overview of Theme One: What is Mindfulness, Origins Meanings and Practice

2.3.1 Mindfulness- The Origin of the Word

The etymology of the term mindfulness has had varying definitions, origins, and interpretations (Dreyfus 2011; Baer 2003; Kabat-Zinn 2003). Mindfulness has been linked to religious traditions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity with multicultural secular applications globally (Kirmayer 2015; Trousellard et al. 2014; Schmidt 2011). Nevertheless, there is a widely held view that mindfulness is deeply rooted in Buddhist traditions with mindfulness remaining at the heart of Buddhist teaching (Thera 2014; Nhat Hanh 1999; Thera 1962). The term mindfulness was reportedly coined by English scholar Thomas Rhys Davids in 1881 (Gethin 2011) based on his interpretations of the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* and *Satipatthana Sutta*, two celebrated discourses in Theravada Buddhism. Rhys Davids' (1921) translated the Pali word '*sati'* from these writings, which convey two central ideas of calling to mind or remembering and cultivating attention (Goldberg et al. 2022; Amora and Singh 2021). Empirical debate on the appropriate suitability of his interpretation of mindfulness continues (Gethin 2011; Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2011), nevertheless, David's translation is widely referred to. Some authors (Gibson

2019; Bodhi 2011) suggest the western application of "*sati*" fails to capture the essence of the word. While MP and meditations hold historical origins in Buddhism, mindfulness has been adapted in the western world to support psychological health and wellbeing (Creswell 2017; Frisk 2012; Meiklejohn et al. 2012).

2.3.2 Defining Mindfulness

Constructions and descriptions of the term mindfulness have included connotations of awareness, attention and attitude (Shapiro et al. 2024; Bishop et al. 2004; Brown and Ryan 2003) shifting somewhat from its original roots. Mindfulness has been viewed by some as a way of being (Shapiro et al. 2024), a means to connect with one's life, moreover, a state of consciousness (Naik et al. 2013; Brown and Ryan 2003). Although there is no universally accepted definition of '*mindfulness*' (Gibson 2019), one of the most ubiquitous definitions was constructed by Dr Jon Kabat- Zinn wherein, "*mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non−judgementally"* (1994, p.4). In practical terms, mindfulness could be described as bringing awareness to the present moment, with feelings of acceptance, kindness, and non- judgement. Virmani et al. (2020, pg. 1054) provide a clear description:

> Mindfulness involves paying attention with curiosity and openness and doing so with the acceptance of feelings and thoughts … it can be characterised as a disposition, a skill that one practices and develops, or it can be a momentary practice.

Shapiro and Carlson furthered mindfulness as "*the awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, caring and non-judgmental way*" (2009, p.4). Moreover, they held the understanding that attention and intention can be cultivated through mindfulness, mirroring Kabat-Zinn's previous stance. Shapiro and Carlson (2009, p.8) formulated three core building blocks of mindfulness: intention, attention and attitude as "*interwoven aspects of a single cycle process*", not to be looked at in isolation. These three elements shaped the conceptual lens of this research study

as explained in Chapter One. Some widely used definitions of mindfulness are illustrated in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 Sample of Definitions of Mindfulness

Definition	Author
Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment	Baer 2014, p.6
Awareness of present experience, with acceptance	Germer 2005, p.7
Keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality	Hanh 1976, p.11
The awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment	Kabat-Zinn 2003, p.145
It is the awarenesss that arises through intentionally paying attention with kindness and curiosity	Shapiro et al. 2024, p.11
Giving full attention to the present without worries about the past or future	Thondup 1996, p.48

From these definitions it could be accepted that attention, intention and non-judgment are understood as salient elements of mindfulness (Germer 2005; Goldstein and Kornfield 2001). Recommendations have suggested moving to a more explicit and universal definition to enhance a shared understanding and remove ambiguity (Goldberg et al. 2022; Gibson 2019). Shapiro et al. (2024) highlighted some myths and truths of mindfulness which offers insight for the reader which may help address some misconceptions (Table 2.2)

Table 2.2 Myths and Truths of Mindfulness

(Source: adapted from Shapiro et al. 2024, p.21)

Myth	Truth
"I'm terrible at mindfulness practice, my mind wanders all the time"	Everyone's mind wanders, that is how the mind works. Mindfulness isn't about having a perfectly quiet mind. It's about learning to see the mind clearly, with all its chaos, confusion, ideas, insights, hopes and fears.
"Mindfulness is just about the present moment and ignores the past and future"	Instead of being hijacked by the past or future mindfulness helps us intentionally choose to reflect on our past and prepare for our future- but we do it in our present moment
"Mindfulness takes too much time"	Mindfulness actually saves time. It increases your clarity, attention, and effectiveness as you live your day-to-day life. When you are less distracted and make fewer mistakes, you save time.
"Mindfulness makes you soft"	It enhances your capacity for innovation, learning and memory. This is a chief reason why Fortune 500 companies and top universities have integrated mindfulness.
"Mindfulness is passive and won't help me change"	Mindfulness is not passive or resigned acceptance. Acceptance is the first step towards change and growth. We accept situations as they are, not because we want them to be happening but because they are already happening. Through acceptance we can see our situation clearly instead of getting stuck by denying, worrying, raging about what is happening. When we see things clearly, we respond to them effectively.
"Mindfulness is just a stress management technique"	Mindfulness is not just a practice for when life is stressful, it enriches all of our moments, big and small, good and bad.
"Mindfulness means you eliminate all your desires and passions"	Mindfulness is not passive resignation, nor is it an elimination of emotion or desire, Mindfulness forges a deeper connection with our values and feelings, it wakes us up to life- inside and out and helps us stay focused on what is most meaningful to us.
"Mindfulness is selfish"	Research shows mindfulness makes us more generous, more compassionate and better able to support others. Mindfulness helps us recognise our inherent interconnection with each other and all of life.
"Mindfulness is just about meditation"	Meditation strengthens our capacity for mindfulness, or our capacity to maintain awareness in the present. Paying attention is a way of living, not just a meditation practice, it can be practiced in every moment of our lives, including our professional work.

2.3.3 Differentiating Between Mindfulness and Mindfulness Practice

As outlined in the previous section, mindfulness is concerned with having awareness of the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn 2003) so how does one get to that state of awareness? This is where mindfulness practices come into play, the practices that help cultivate that sense of awareness (Brown and Ryan 2003). Current literature has made a distinction between state and trait mindfulness

which represent the dimensions of one's mindfulness experience (He et al. 2024; Kiken et al. 2015). State mindfulness refers to one's momentary experience of attention and awareness intentionally cultivated within a meditation or attention to a task (Brown and Ryan 2003). While trait mindfulness (dispositional mindfulness) has been described as one's general disposition of awareness and attention in the day-to- day, this disposition is evident through mindfulness characteristics within routines such as mindful eating, mindful walking and general daily living (Shapiro et al. 2024).

2.3.3.1 Formal and Informal Approaches to Mindfulness

Consistent engagement with intentional MP enhances feelings of state mindfulness in the present moment, and nurtures one's trait mindfulness, whereby mindfulness becomes an embedded integrated practice in daily life (Kiken et al. 2015).There has been considerable debate on how mindfulness can be practiced in daily life through formal and informal practices (Toniolo-Barrios and Pitt 2021; Zhang et al. 2021; Meiklejohn et al.2012; Kabat-Zinn 2003). Formal MP involves intentional, structured practices, such as meditations with focused attention on anchors, such as the breath, to collect, calm and focus the mind (Shonin et al. 2014; Birtwell et al. 2019), the use of the senses (Naik et al. 2013) or compassion focused meditations such as loving kindness and awareness of self and others (Behan 2020). MP encourages that attention gently returns to the chosen anchor (Meiklejohn et al. 2012) and allows wandering thoughts and feelings to drift away (Behan 2020). Other commonly used formal practices include body scans, sitting meditations, mindful movement meditations and yoga practices (Birtwell et al. 2019, Hindman et al. 2014).

Within the literature, at times it appears the words '*meditation*' and '*mindfulness*' are used interchangeably. Mindfulness skills develop through the state of awareness, via stabilising meditations, such as focusing on the breath (Kiken et al. 2015). However, Newman established the relationship between mindfulness and

meditation by stating that meditation can be the "*training ground for cultivating mindfulness"* (Newman 2016, p.12).

Although considerable studies have focused on formal MP, practicing mindfulness does not necessarily require pause and engagement in intentional meditations. Informal MPs refer to weaving mindfulness into everyday life with present focus awareness and equanimity (Hindman et al. 2014; Naik et al. 2013). It has been suggested that these practices could enhance mindfulness and state of awareness in daily life and attain that trait mindfulness. Such informal practices have included embodying mindful awareness when eating, walking, simple acts and interpersonal interactions (Meiklejohn et al. 2012; Nhat Hanh, 1999), with some studies highlighting benefits of such practices in enhancing wellbeing (Shankland et al. 2021; Hindman et al. 2014). Several scholars (Shankland et al. 2021; Shapiro et al. 2009) argued that informal MPs have potential positive impacts, others have highlighted the need for further studies to determine the positive impacts (Kakoschke et al. 2021; Birtwell et al. 2019).

There in inconsistency in what constitutes a mindfulness-based intervention and a mindfulness -based practice/ MP, with both terms often used interchangeably in the literature. For the purpose of this study, I accepted mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) as an organised intervention with a set duration to measure outcomes in educational and/or health settings. I also accepted MP or mindfulness-based practice as formal and/or informal practices that may be embodied within an intervention or within day-to-day life.

2.3.4 The Trajectory of Mindfulness from East to West

Originating from Buddhist contemplative traditions, the concept of mindfulness was historically embedded within a spiritual and ethical framework aimed at cultivating insight (vipassana). As mindfulness travelled to the west, these roots have been reframed. A former student of Thich Nhat Hanh, Jon Kabat- Zinn who is considered one of the pioneers of mindfulness in the western world (Creswell 2017) adopted a mindful experiential approach by integrating meditation and yoga into mainstream medicine through the introduction of his eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programme (MBSR) in 1979. Originally developed for patients who were experiencing chronic pain, mindfulness meditation was introduced as a way to help patients cope with their suffering. Mindfulness practices (MPs) are incorporated into individuals' daily routines to cultivate mindful states of awareness through a combination of formal and informal practices used in clinical and home settings. Kabat-Zinn acknowledged that the MBSR programme was not intended to be a therapy but a *dharma*; a tool to govern oneself. Kabat -Zinn (1982) conducted his early research with 51 patients who were experiencing chronic pain including back pain, headaches, neck pain etc who had reported not responding to standard medical treatments. He concluded from quantitative measures that patients showed significant improvements in mood and energy levels with 65% of patients showed a reduction in pain -related interference in daily life. These benefits continued at their 15 month follow up for those who continued the meditation practice. This first scientific report provided the cornerstone for the eight-week MBSR programme and paved the way for future studies.

Baer et al.'s (2012) study of 87 adults in a medical setting found that the MBSR programme fostered self-regulation skills by altering how they perceived and responded to their pain and fostered moment-to-moment awareness. Recently, a

systematic review by Dong et al. (2024) examined the effectiveness of the MBSR programme on cancer patients and reported significant positive impacts on depression and anxiety symptoms, however there were no reported differences for pain and stress, compared with usual care.

MBSR programmes are offered across 50 countries (Kabat- Zinn 2016) and in every continent (Crane et al. 2023), both in person and online. This digital expansion may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and may have introduced mindfulness to new populations. A recent systematic review conducted by Godage et al. (2025) highlighted the effectiveness of online mobile health platforms delivering MBIs for improving perinatal psychological wellbeing. These digital interventions show promise in reducing stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms during pregnancy, while also raising concerns of retention rates, most notably due to time constraints and technical issues. Despite limitations, online platforms reflect the adaptability of mindfulness interventions, offering accessible and flexible means to engage with MP. Outside of clinical settings, Schwartz-Mette et al.'s (2025) recent study of university nursing students and staff, found that participation in an in-person or online MBSR programme led to significant reductions in feelings of stress and burnout. Interestingly the outcomes did not differ between formats suggesting that both online and in-person could be equally beneficial.

This evolution of MBIs is supported by several meta-analyses of studies conducted with adult populations which demonstrated the benefits to practicing mindfulness that has extended beyond its initial application for pain management (Shankland et al. 2021; Semple and Burke 2019; DeVibe et al. 2012; Bishop et al. 2004).

MBSR and the use of MBIs have been recognised as a useful approach to combat the symptoms of stress and anxiety (Shankland et al. 2021; Malinowski and Lim

2015). This east to west trajectory signifies a profound conceptual shift from mindfulness as a spiritual practice to a scientifically validated intervention for managing stress and pain and widespread integration into healthcare and education.

2.3.5 The Popularisation of Mindfulness into Mainstream Culture

Mindfulness has infused into realms that include psychology, medicine, workplace environments and educational institutions (Flanagan et al. 2025). This cultural shift was labelled by Boyce (2011) as the *mindfulness revolution*. The surge in journal publications over the last decade keeps mindfulness current and contextual (Figure 2.2) with 1,312 journal articles published in 2024 compared to 465 published in 2014.

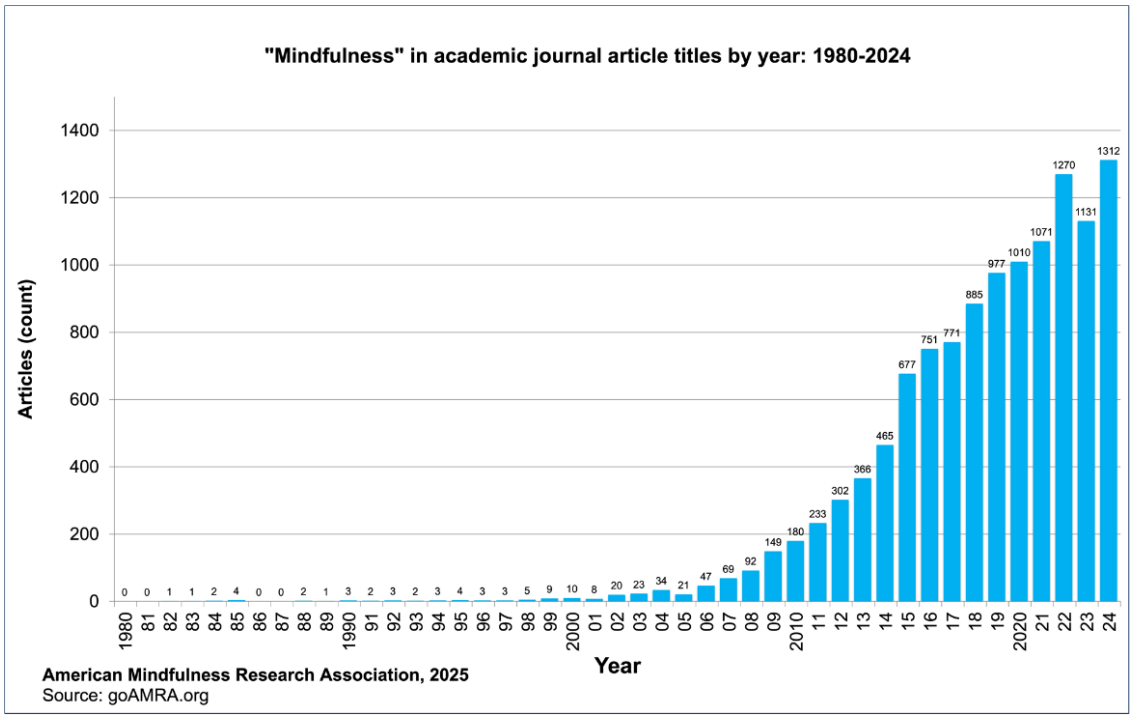


Figure 2.2 Mindfulness Studies Published from 1980-2024

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The shift of mindfulness beyond its original clinical use can be affiliated to pioneers that include Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein. Through their formation of the Insight Meditation Society (1975) in Massachusetts, USA, they introduced mindfulness into non-clinical societies (Schmidt 2011). By emulating their experiences of the Buddhist practice, they provided a retreat centre offering insight (Vipassana) and loving kindness (Metta) meditation. Over the last decade a network of Insight Meditation groups has developed globally, offering insight meditation, instruction workshops and retreats.

A national online survey conducted in the United Kingdom in 2018 with a sample of 1,013 adults found that 15% of respondents had learned how to practice mindfulness (Simonsson et al. 2021). This proportion was weighted to reflect the UK adult population (approximately 52 million adults) which they corresponded to eight million adults nationally. This study revealed a sociodemographic trend with higher levels of engagement among young single adults, with apps being the most used pathway for learning. They also noted high drop off rates in long-term MP, raising critical questions regarding sustainability of long-term practice. Davies et al. (2024) analysed the U.S. National Health Interview Survey from 2002−2022 involving 134,959 participants. Their findings showed an increase in the use of meditation, yoga and guided imagery over two decades, with 17% of respondents reporting meditation use in 2022, a figure comparable to the UK study. These large-scale surveys offer credibility and transferability and collectively indicate that MP is becoming more mainstream. Nevertheless, critical questions remain regarding sustainability and impacts of MP at a population level.

As mindfulness gains popularity within education and workplaces, supported by the growing body of evidence reporting positive outcomes, Hyland (2015) raises a

cautionary perspective about the commodification of mindfulness in education and workplaces, which he termed as McMindfulness. He highlights an ongoing tension between the ancient spiritual roots of mindfulness and its modern applications, raising questions about authenticity and depth. He argues for a reintegration of mindfulness with its spiritual and ethical roots, and to move beyond an outcome focused tool. While Hyland does not specifically mention ECE, his critique is relevant. In ECE where there is an emphasis on educators being present, fostering relationships and being attuned to young children, the ethical dilemma he discusses are applicable, where MPs could become more technical, self-serving and lose their deeper authentic meaning. His work underscores the need for qualitative research that delves into the lived experiences of educators to provide insight into how mindfulness is embodied and practiced by educators.

2.4 Theme Two: The Intersection of Wellbeing and Mindfulness.

The second theme explores the rise in discourse on wellbeing, the impact of COVID-19 on young children and the wellbeing of educators. Additionally, it looks at how the wellbeing of children is addressed in policy and touches briefly on the potential of MP to support resilience in the context of adverse childhood experiences. This theme is illustrated in Figure 2.3.

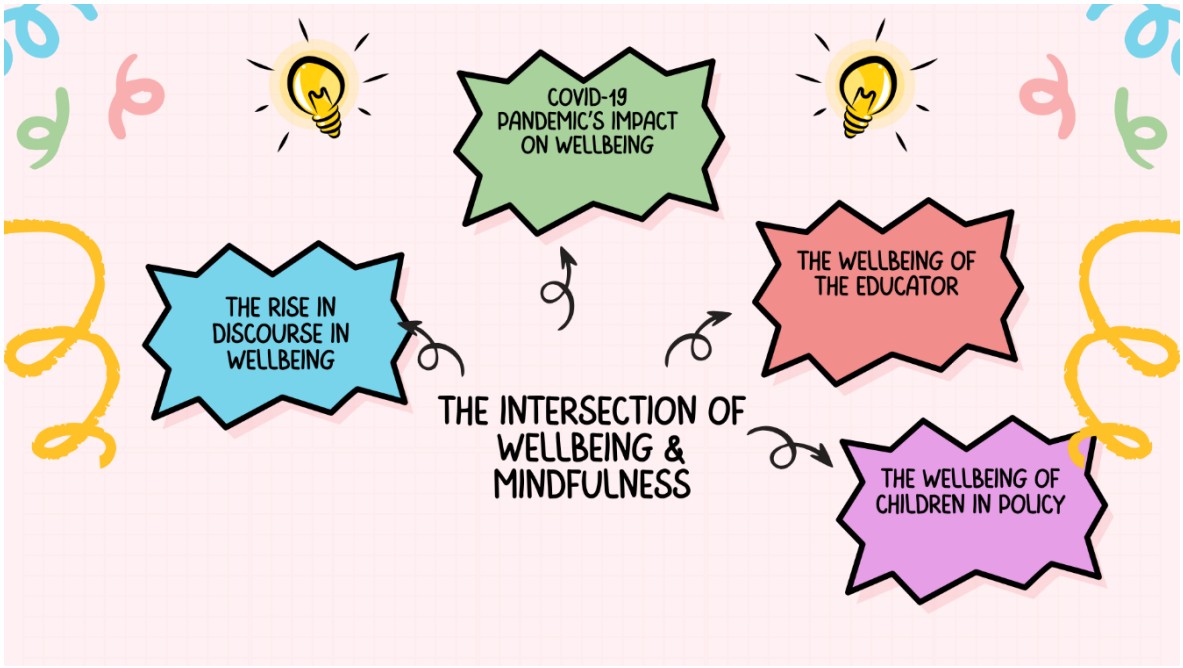


Figure 2.3 Overview of Theme Two: The Intersection of Wellbeing and Mindfulness

2.4.1 Rise in Discourse in Wellbeing

Wellbeing incorporates how individuals feel about their own lives while also taking account of their physical and mental health (Health Service Executive 2020). Debate continues regarding what constitutes wellbeing (Misselbrook 2014) and the importance of emotional wellbeing (World Health Organisation 2018) as an integral component of health. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015) explicitly prioritise wellbeing, with the aim of ensuring healthy lives for all encompassing aspects of physical, mental and social wellbeing. These dimensions have been associated with desirable individual and societal outcomes (Dahl et al. 2020). Allen et al. (2021) construct wellbeing as having both a hedonic element, how individuals manage pain and pleasure, along with a eudemonic element incorporating how individuals live a meaningful and functional life. Brown and Cordon (2009) and Brown et al. (2007) inferred that MP can promote these two elements of hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing through the development of self-awareness practices which foster self-regulation traits. Additionally, both Neff (2003) and Crego et al.

(2021) suggested that MP fosters wellbeing by instilling a sense of self-compassion and happiness in oneself and others. Randomised trials have shown MP to be associated with changes in participants' health through the reduction of psychological morbidity (Bishop et al. 2004), with further findings showing enhanced well-being and coping mechanisms (DeVibe 2012; Shapiro 2009; Grossman et al. 2004).

A recent literature review by Jamil et al. (2023) suggested mindfulness meditation may positively contribute to four areas of health, including physical, mental, immune function and genetics. However, this review lacks clarity on how many studies were included warranting further investigation. Extending beyond clinical trials, Barker et al. (2021) argue that MP can serve as both a preventative and proactive tool to nurture wellbeing. Their work in higher education highlights how mindfulness programmes can be embedded into organisations to support individual wellbeing, coping and self-regulation and contribute to a systematic approach to nurturing wellbeing.

2.4.2 The COVID 19 Pandemic's Impact on the Wellbeing of Young Children

The COVID-19 pandemic was widely recognised as a global trauma that significantly impacted individuals' wellbeing (Imran et al. 2020), and some scholars have suggested that MP could play a pivotal role to cope with those feelings of stress and anxiety (Behan 2020; Kabat-Zinn 2020). Emerging research has documented the negative impact of COVID-19 on children's levels of anxiety and depression (Malboeuf-Hurtibuse et al. 2021), with some reporting negative changes in young children's eating habits, activity levels and sleeping patterns (Clarke et al. 2021). Some scholars have noted the negative psychosocial impact to young children being in isolation (Chawla et al. 2021; O'Sullivan et al. 2021; Golberstein et al. 2020),

though research is still developing. The negative impact of COVID-19 on the mental wellbeing and learning of young children, particularly the loss of peer interaction and emotional support offered by ECE settings has also been described (Walton and Darkes-Sutcliffe 2021; Pascal et al. 2020). These findings underscore the importance of these early childhood spaces for young children's attachment and development and highlight the role of these interconnected systems around the child including family, educators, community and government structures in supporting the wellbeing of children.

2.4.3 The Wellbeing of the Educator

Teaching as a profession is deemed high risk due to the increased stress levels and burnout pertaining to the role (Zhang et al. 2021). Moreover, it has been noted educators are particularly susceptible to burnout (Jackson 2020; Turner and Theilking 2019; Koch 2016), due to contributing factors that include low wages, a stressful work environment and work demands (O'Hara-Gregan 2023; Farewell et al. 2022; Cumming et al. 2021; Grant et al. 2019). A recent survey conducted with educators in ECE in Ireland (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) 2024) found that 70% of respondents identified stress and burnout as the greatest work challenge, with less than 16% willing to remain in the ECE sector if conditions remain unchanged. He et al.'s (2024) large survey of 1,980 educators in ECE in China also revealed similar experiences of professional burnout and proposed that practicing mindfulness may help alleviate the symptoms of stress and burnout. However, the authors note that job burnout is influenced by a multitude of factors, which warrants further investigation.

Hwang et al.'s (2019b) large, randomised cluster study of 185 primary schools reported positive impacts from an eight-week mindfulness programme on educator's

wellbeing. This was measured through seven self-reported educator scales, classroom observations, interviews, and student surveys. Improvements in wellbeing were associated with reductions in perceived stress and increases in self-compassion, which remained significant at six week and five months post intervention. Although the authors had hypothesised that the intervention could strengthen student and teacher connectedness, this was not supported, possibly as students reported a strong connection with their teachers at baseline.

More recently, Carroll et al. (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study with 18 schoolteachers using quantitative self-reported scales and qualitative reflections. They indicated that teacher's participation in the 8-week mindfulness program led to a perceived reduction in stress levels, improvements in personal mindfulness attributes including observing, being non-judgmental and non-reactivity. A considerable body of evidence shows that MBIs can positively impact children's wellbeing (Piotrowski et al. 2017; Koch 2016; Flook et al. 2015) and the wellbeing of educators (Corthorn et al. 2024; Emerson et al. 2017; Flook at al. 2015, Goldberg et al. 2013). However, further research should establish if there is a direct connection between educator's wellbeing and that of young children. A common theme suggests that educators who engage in mindfulness training, often report positive impacts on wellbeing, reduced levels of stress and thus potential implications on educator student relationships.

2.4.4 The Wellbeing of Children in Policy

Childhood wellbeing has been prioritised by various stakeholders (Brown 2018; World Health Organisation (WHO) 2018; Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2015) within educational contexts. The Sustainable Development Goal's (SDG's) ambition is for all children to have access to quality ECE by 2030, also noting that

young children's attendance in ECEC could have a multiplier effect on additional SDG's including poverty reduction, hunger, health and wellbeing. A recent UNICEF report (2025) indicated a decline in children's wellbeing and overall life satisfaction and highlighted the importance of social and emotional learning at schools, specifically mentioning mindfulness as a wellbeing strategy. Similarly, here in Ireland, the State of the Nations Children's Report (DCEDIY 2024), found that 78.5% of children between the ages of 10-17 years reported feeling happy with life. This has decreased from the 88.2% reported in 2018, indicating a worrying trend. Irish policy recognises the importance of children's mental health, with the publication of "Sharing the Vision− a Mental Health Policy for Everyone" (Department of Health 2020) placing mental health and wellbeing front and centre via a multi-pronged approach of promotion of services, prevention strategies and early intervention methods. Taking a lifecycle approach, this policy emphasises laying the foundations for good mental health before birth and into early childhood.

Integrating wellbeing mechanisms within the school curriculum and pedagogical practices is seen as a fundamental process (European Commission 2021) with educational settings best placed to foster wellbeing within children outside of the home setting (Broderick and Frank 2014; Weare and Nind 2011). From an Irish perspective, the Framework for the Junior Cycle of Secondary Education integrates wellbeing as a fundamental component of the curriculum with an assigned 400 hours across the three-year cycle, while recognising that schools play a fundamental role in supporting and promoting children's wellbeing (NCCA 2023). In 2019, the Department of Education (DoE) introduced an emotional wellbeing programme in primary schools to assist children in managing stress and enhance wellbeing and resilience through a variety of activities centred on emotional literacy and MBP.

Consideration of the wellbeing of young children under six years of age is depicted in Irish policy within the First Five: Whole of Government Strategy (Government of Ireland (GoI 2019) which aims to improve the lives of young children. This strategy highlights birth to five years as the integral time when children develop lifelong skills through the magnitude of early learning experiences (GoI 2019). Similarly, within Aistear, Ireland's Early Years Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2009/ GoI 2024), wellbeing is captured as a key theme with emphasis on supporting children's physical and psychological wellbeing. More recently a systematic scoping review of the literature conducted by French et al. (2022) supported the update of the Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework that highlighted the importance of children's empowerment in the present moment rather than focusing on future outcomes. Notably, they documented under Aim Three that spiritual education can be transformative and contemplative practices like mindfulness could nurture children's spirituality and provide avenues for cultivating openness, developing greater reflection and enhancing overall emotional wellbeing.

During the process of this thesis, Aistear was updated and while it does not explicitly mention mindfulness, there is emphasis on wellbeing and supporting stillness, slowness and presence reflecting many mindfulness principles. The language used signifies a positive step in embedding MP to support children's wellbeing, nonetheless, the absence of an explicit mention of mindfulness could be a missed opportunity.

2.4.4.1 Mindfulness Practice to Help Mitigate the Impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Recent research (Martins et al. 2025; Lipscomb 2021) has shown a growing concern regarding the prevalence and negative impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which are defined as traumatic events and stressors occurring in childhood

(WHO 2018; Bethell et al. 2016) such as abuse, neglect, mental illness within the family, imprisonment of a family member, parental loss/ separation, substance use within the family and witnessed domestic violence. Scott (2021) estimated globally that 250 million children fail to reach their potential due to early childhood adversity with long- term impacts on children's physical and psychological health that manifest into adulthood (Elmore et al. 2020). In the USA, 61% of adults report experiencing at least one ACE with 16% of adults experiencing four or more ACEs (Centers for Disease and Control Prevention 2019). Bethell et al. (2016) drawing on survey data from over 95,000 parents of children aged 2-17 years, concluded that children who have experienced ACEs are 1.65 to 4.46 times more likely to display emotional and behavioural challenges. They further denoted increased negative impacts on children between the ages of 2 to 5 years, which underscores the critical need for early childhood intervention.

Evidence suggests that MP can support individuals who have experienced stressful or traumatic events by reducing negative impacts while providing coping strategies (Ortiz and Siblinga 2016; Van der Kolk 2014). A systematic review by Fischer (2017) concluded that formal MPs such as breathing meditations could assist children and adolescents who have experienced trauma by allowing them to become more connected to their minds and bodies and improve self-regulation skills. While MP holds promise as a tool for trauma recovery (Iacona and Johnson 2018), it must be approached with caution. For some children, mindfulness may be triggering, and such practices could result in negative psychological effects or re-traumatisation (Ortiz and Siblinga 2016; Compson 2014). Therefore, educators must ensure they approach mindfulness through a trauma sensitive lens, ensuring a trauma sensitive environment and remaining aware of trauma informed practices (Sun et al. 2024; Vericat- Rocha et al. 2019).

In Ireland, a position paper by the Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN (2019) emphasised the importance for all stakeholders to understand and raise awareness of the impact of ACEs. Notably, the report recommended incorporating mindfulness into ECE as a valuable intervention strategy. These studies propel the idea that MP can serve as a healing modality in early childhood, cultivating awareness and resilience at both individual and collective levels.

2.5 Theme Three: Exploring the Evidence- What Does the Research Tell Us?

This theme begins by looking at some of the findings from neuroscience, it explores studies conducted with older children and adolescents, and studies specifically conducted in early childhood. This theme concludes with an exploration of some of the mindfulness curricula being used. This theme is illustrated in Figure 2.4.

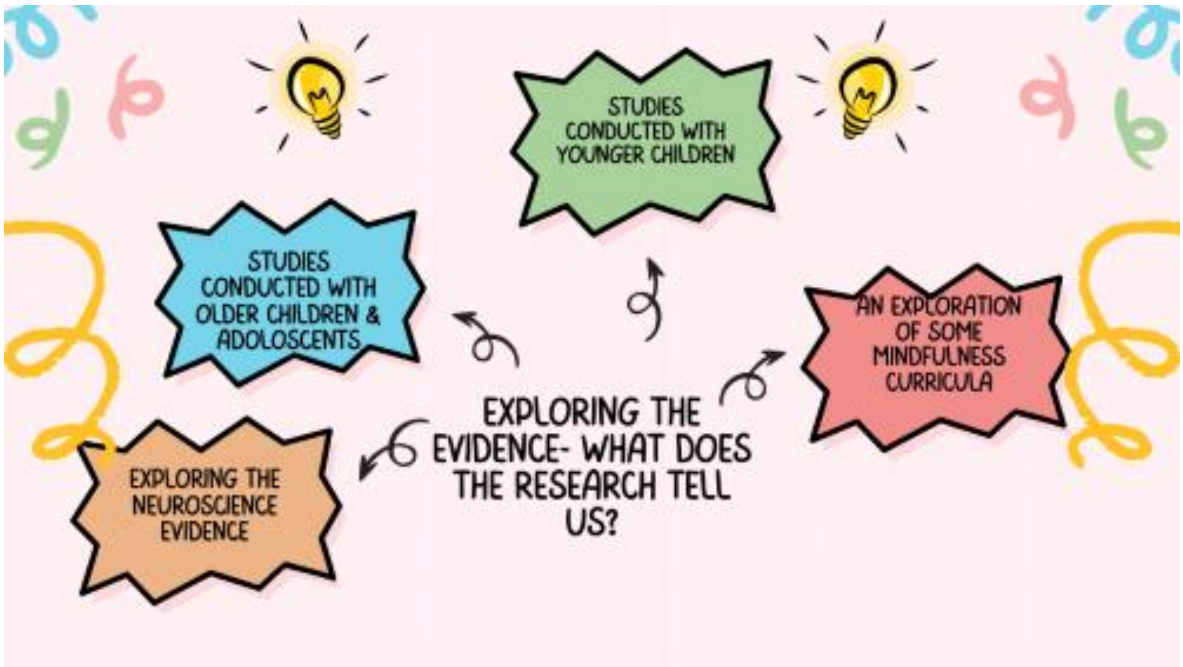


Figure 2.4 Overview of Theme Three: Exploring the Evidence- What Does the Research Tell Us?

2.5.1 Exploring the Neuroscience Evidence

While exploring evidence from neuroscience regarding the impacts of MP/MBIs, it must be noted that a full critique of neuroscientific mindfulness studies was not possible for this present study as I do not hold neuroscientific expertise and it goes beyond the scope of my thesis. However, some authors have suggested that there are correlations between MP and brain imagery studies, and these studies have contributed to the narrative of the potential benefit of MP. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the neuroimaging studies mentioned in this section examine the effects of formal meditative practices and the altering of the physical structure and functioning of the brain (Siew and Yu 2023; Fox et al. 2014; Singleton et al. 2014; Brown et al. 2007; Siegel 2007; Lazar et al. 2005) rather than informal mindfulness practices. These studies typically involved participants engaging in structured meditative practices allowing researchers to measure neural changes associated with formal MPs.

Some randomised controlled trials measuring brain electrical activity have supported the hypothesis that meditation practices enhance wellbeing (Jamil et al. 2023; Carmody and Baer 2008; Grossman et al. 2004). Studies that used electroencephalography (EEG) and magnetic resonance imagery (MRI) techniques have suggested that during meditation there are structural brain modifications with reported activation in areas of the brain associated with self-regulation, problem-solving and interoception (Falcone and Jerram 2018; Boccia et al. 2015). These studies typically compared long-term meditators, defined as individuals with several years of regular practice or more than 1,000 hours of lifetime meditation experience with those who do not meditate at all. Nevertheless, methodological variability remains a limitation with suggestions for researchers to make improvements in study design (Pernet et al. 2021). With advances in neuroimaging technology,

further longitudinal studies are warranted to investigate a correlation between mindfulness states and the effect of formal meditative practices on brain structure (Kral et al. 2022). Collectively, this research suggests that sustained meditation and MP may be associated with structural and functional brain differences supporting emotional regulation, though causal mechanisms need to be further explored.

While research regarding the impact of meditative practices and formal MPs on the brain in adults exists (Marusak et al. 2018, Siegel et al. 2009; Lazar et al. 2005), there is limited research on the neural correlates of MP with children. Additionally, Weare (2013) cautions making inferences between adult-based studies and children, largely due to the significant differences in brain development. Notably, the first five years of a child's life is marked by rapid neurodevelopment with critical periods for the formation of executive function, emotional regulation and social cognition (Pandey et al. 2018; Feng et al. 2017).

Interestingly, seminal neurological studies from Marusak et al. (2018) used multi-echo functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to examine functional brain connectivity in 42 children aged 6 to 17 years. Their findings revealed that children's higher trait mindfulness was correlated to increased neural flexibility, specifically greater flexibility between brain states of mind wandering, attentional awareness and focused present moment. This greater neuro flexibility appeared to mediate the relationship between mindfulness and lower anxiety. Similarly, outcomes from a 10-week mindfulness training programme with 47 children aged 9 to11 years were assessed through fMRI testing at pre- and post-intervention, as well as attention tests and anxiety questionnaires (Kennedy et al. 2020). They reported increased functional connectivity in brain networks associated with emotional regulation and executive function and a reduction in anxiety symptoms. A similar finding was

reported by Bauer et al.'s (2019) eight-week mindfulness programme with middle school students. Together, these neuroimaging studies suggest that MP may lead to increased awareness and attention which are deemed as fundamental aspects of mindfulness to this research project. Although studies with children are at a preliminary stage, more neurological studies are warranted to understand the relationship between the brain and mindfulness in ECE.

2.5.2 Studies Conducted with Older Children and Adolescents.

The majority of studies to date with children and adolescents have been undertaken around mental health within targeted populations and often outcomes focused, reliant on self-reported measurements by teachers and parents. Two systematic reviews exploring MBIs in educational settings reported positive results, one with primary school age children (6 to 12-year-olds) (Zenner at al. 2014) and the other with multiple age groups (4 to 18-year-olds) (Phan-Le et al. 2022). Increased wellbeing of children, enhanced emotional regulation, development of interpersonal relationships, and reduced displays of depression and anxiety were reported. Similarly, Maynard et al.'s (2017) synthesis of 61 studies of MBI's within preschool, primary and secondary school children, found modest impacts on social, emotional and cognitive development. However, one must be tentative with the findings due to the studies conducted with multiple age groups, differences in the MBI format adopted, and different methodological approaches being utilised. While the reviews are not specific to early childhood and used different formats, they demonstrate the potential for MBIs to attenuate stress and anxiety in younger children.

Edwards et al. (2014) found that an eight-week mindfulness programme with students aged 12 to17, decreased students' perceptions and constructions of stress and increased levels of self-awareness. Similarly, Zenner et al.'s (2014) systematic

review of 24 school-based mindfulness interventions concluded a general acceptance of MBIs for schools, with reported improved cognition and resilience, however, caution must be applied due to the heterogenous nature of the studies regarding measurement scales, duration and typology.

Chi et al. (2018) propose MBIs as a favourable approach to reduce anxiety in children that could be successfully incorporated within educational systems. Small scale studies (Crowley et al. 2018; Cotton et al. 2016) conducted with adolescents (*n*=12, *n*=10 respectively) indicated large reductions in anxiety and stress levels within their samples, however, due to the lack of a control group, the feasibility and accessibility of the studies must be considered. The first reported meta-analysis study conducted by Dunning et al. (2019) examined 33 RCTs evaluating MBIs with 3,666 children/ adolescents found small to medium effects although statistically significant improvements in children's executive function, anxiety, depression and negative behaviour. When compared to control groups, MBIs were seen to enhance mindfulness skills and decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety adding credibility to the use of MBIs with children; however, the authors highlight the need for longitudinal studies to understand the long-term outcomes for children. While the research on MP impact on depression remains at an early stage (Singh and Singh Joy 2021), the emerging data is promising in terms of mindfulness ability to reduce depression symptoms among adolescents. To contribute to this growing field, further longitudinal studies are needed in addition to specific studies with younger children.

Several meta-analyses examined the impact of mindfulness programmes on symptoms of ADHD (Xue et al. 2019; Cairncross and Miller 2016), with moderate effects on attention and impulsivity reported. However, the inclusion of adult studies

challenges childhood inference. Some studies conducted with children diagnosed with ADHD have focused on evaluations of the My Mind programme, an eight-week group intervention for children with ADHD and parental participation. Some of the positive impacts reported by parents included children's improved attention and reduced anxiety (Haydicky et al. 2015). Interestingly, one study conducted by Huguet et al. (2019) which delivered the eight-week My Mind programme solely to 72 children aged 7 to 12 diagnosed with ADHD, through conducting checklists found children in the mindfulness group showed significantly lower levels of deficient emotional self-regulation (DESR), with fewer difficulties managing intense emotional reactions compared to the control group. However, the outcomes varied dependent on ADHD subtype, highlighting the complexity of delivering a universal mindfulness programme to a heterogenous group. While this study suggests MP may provide a useful tool in supporting children diagnosed with ADHD, the small sample size and ADHD subtype variability means caution must be applied when making strong inferences.

Research on MBIs to support children with ADHD in ECE is limited. One notable study conducted by Cohen et al. (2018) evaluated the impact of a six-week yoga and MBI with 23 preschool children (3 to 5 years) who displayed ADHD symptoms. While parents reported moderate improvement in children's attention and decreased impulsivity, teachers reported no significant improvements. These mixed outcomes and low sample size highlight the need for larger and more rigorous studies to be conducted.

Similarly to studies with children diagnosed with ADHD, the group format of the My Mind programme is the most documented approach for children diagnosed with autism. In these studies, parents reported improvements in children's behavioural

symptoms and emotional regulation (Ho et al. 2021; Salem- Guirgis et al. 2019). Using an alternative design, Juliano et al. (2020) implemented a 16-session

mindfulness intervention with 29 children aged 11 to 16 diagnosed with autism without parental participation. They found significant improvements in children's inhibition and response control, although no control group was used which limits the strengths of the findings and warrants caution in interpretation.

Collectively, these studies have highlighted the potential of using mindfulness programmes for children with ADHD and autism, yet the evidence base remains limited. Small sample sizes, inconsistent design, and reliance on adult reports restrict the strength of the findings and highlights the need for more rigorous research and one that includes children's voice. While no studies were identified on autistic children in early childhood, research with older children has suggested that MP may help reduce symptoms of inattention and improve emotional regulation. This gap underscores the necessity for further studies to be conducted in early childhood to explore the applicability of mindfulness programmes for neurodivergent children.

2.5.2.1 Consideration of Potential Harm

Recently, research has begun to investigate whether school- based mental health interventions rooted in a mindfulness based/ cognitive behaviour therapy could lead to potential harm for children. Guzman-Holst et al. (2025) conducted a scoping review of 112 school-based universal mental health interventions grounded on cognitive-behavioural therapy and/ or mindfulness. Their aim was to map potential harm, such as negative outcomes, rather than focusing solely on positive impacts. They revealed that ten interventions reported at least one negative outcome (decline in prosocial behaviour, increase in internalising symptoms) among children aged

12-16, with three reporting adverse events although not specifically linked to the intervention. Importantly, the authors noted the reasons for the negative outcomes varied and, in some studies were not clearly declared. Some reported reasons included children's lack of interest, relationship with the school and how the interventions were facilitated. One key concern highlighted that MPs may focus on emotional awareness which may have unintentionally exacerbated emotional difficulties for some children. With negative outcomes reported in ten studies, six were CBT based and four were mindfulness based. This is not a benign finding and emphasises the importance of remaining mindful of children's needs and the importance of how these programmes are facilitated. From these findings, it is important for researchers to report positive and negative outcomes and the need for more comprehensive research in this field when specifically using MP as an intervention.

2.5.3 Studies Conducted with Younger Children

Across the globe there appears to be a plethora of mindfulness programmes available; Feuerborn and Gueldner (2019) reported 23 manualised mindfulness programmes being implemented worldwide with primary school children. However, there is less evidence in the literature of research exploring mindfulness programmes for ECE. The majority of the research conducted with this population has focused on measuring outcomes in intervention-based mindfulness programmes, typically finding positive outcomes (Erten and Günes 2024; Berti and Cigala 2020; Flook et al. 2015). Some studies (Shlomov et al. 2023; Denham 2019; Flook et al. 2015; Schonert-Reichl 2015) have predominantly focused on how MBIs might enhance executive function, self-regulation and pro social behaviour in young children. A summary of some of the studies reviewed are illustrated below in Table

2.3. These studies were selected due to their focus on early childhood, their methodological diversity in terms of intervention design, duration and assessment approaches. Although, the studies varied in their design, they provide rich insight into the potential impacts of MBIs in early childhood. While many of these studies provide significant quantitative data, they also highlight the need for a more qualitative approach to explore *if, how* and *why* educators are implementing MP with young children. These studies are explored below in Table 2.3 with some discussed in further detail in the following section.

Table 2.3 Summary of Studies Reviewed

Author, year	Age group	Type of MBI	Duration of MBI	Goal of MBI	Key findings
Flook at al. 2015	Preschool (4-5 years) *n*=68	Kindness Curriculum	12 weeks (2 x20-30 min sessions weekly)	Measure impact on executive function, self-regulation & prosocial behaviour.	➢ Enhanced prosocial behaviour. ➢ Increase in kindness, empathy. ➢ Improved attention ➢ Greatest impact on those who scored weaker EF at pretest
Poehlmann Tynan et al 2016	Preschool (3-5 years) *n*=29	Kindness Curriculum	12 weeks (2 x20-30 min sessions weekly)	Measure impact on children's empathy & self-regulation	➢ Improvements in attentional focus ➢ Enhanced self-regulation. ➢ No impact on empathy skills
Thierry et al 2016	Preschool (4-year-olds) *n*=47	MindUp	2 years (15 min weekly sessions + 3 breathing activities throughout day)	Measure impact on executive function and vocab and literacy	➢ Enhanced executive function e.g. working memory & planning skills. ➢ Enhanced academic performance
Thierry et al 2018	Preschool (4-year-olds) *n*=296	Settle your glitter.	9 months (Daily practices & 18 lessons biweekly)	Measure impact on self-regulation, prosocial behaviour & academic skills.	➢ Improvement in executive function ➢ No difference in prosocial behaviours and academic skills
Viglas & Perlman 2018	Preschool (4–6-year-olds) *n*= 127	Mindful Schools	6 weeks (3 x 20 min sessions weekly)	Measure impact on prosocial behaviour, self-regulation & hyperactivity.	➢ Enhanced prosocial behaviour. ➢ Increased self-regulation skills. ➢ Reduction in hyperactivity
Wood et al 2018	Preschool (3–4-year-olds) *n*=27	Minimind (MBI + Yoga)	6 weeks (12x 25 min sessions)	Measure impact on children's executive function	➢ Small to medium impacts on attention, working memory. ➢ No significant impact on social skills
Zelazo et al 2018	Preschool (3- 5-year-olds) *n*=218	Mindfulness & reflection	6 weeks (daily lesson)	Measure impact on executive function skills	➢ No initial improvements reported. ➢ Follow up reported improvements in EF
Jackman et al 2019	Preschool (3-5 years) *n*=262	OpenMind (OM)	9 months (7 integrated mindfulness practices daily)	Measure feasibility of programme for age group	➢ Improved self-regulation, emotional awareness, empathy skills.
Janz et al 2019	Kindergarten (6 years) *n*=55	CalmSpace	9 months (3 integrated practices daily)	Measure impact on executive function and children's behaviour	➢ Increased cognitive flexibility. ➢ Increase in attention and behaviour
Moreno-Gomez et al 2019	Preschool (4-6years) *n*=74	Mindkinder	6 months	Measure impact on school adjustment and behaviour.	➢ Decrease in externalised and internalised behaviours

Author, year	Age group	Type of MBI	Duration of MBI	Goal of MBI	Key conclusions
Berti & Cigala 2020	Pre-kindergarten (3-6 years) *n*=21	Mindfulness playful activities and meditations	6 weeks (30 min sessions 3 times weekly)	Measure impact on prosocial behaviour, self-regulation & perspective taking	➢ Improvement in perspective taking. ➢ Enhanced prosocial skills
Crooks et al 2020	Kindergarten children *n*=584	MindUP	15 weeks (15 min weekly lesson & daily breathing)	Measure impact on behavioural problems, adaptive skills and EF.	➢ Reduction in internalised & externalised behaviours ➢ Improvements in executive function skills
Kim et al 2020	Preschool (3-5 years) *n*=83	OpenMind Korea	2 years (daily integrated practice)	Measure impact on emotional regulation, resilience & prosocial behaviours	➢ Initially, No significant differences with control group ➢ Increasing impacts on self-regulation and adaptive skills reported over time
Sciutto et al 2021	Preschool (3-7years) *n*=136	Mindfulness in schools & MindUP	8 weeks (16 sessions)	Measure impact on children's prosocial behaviours	➢ Improved in externalising behaviours & prosocial behaviours. ➢ Improved teacher child engagement
Courbet et al 2024	Preschool (3-5 years) *n*=761	Mindfulness and adapted Kindness Curriculum	9 months (15-20 mins per day)	Evaluate impact on children's mental health, behaviour reg, prosocial behaviour & EF	➢ Improvement in emotional conduct & peer relationships ➢ No significant impact on EF & emotional processing

A novel randomised controlled design study conducted by Flook et al. (2015) discerned the impact of a 12-week kindness mindfulness curriculum with a preschool cohort of 68 children on executive function, self-regulation and prosocial behaviour. Via teacher-rated scales and specific tasks completed by the children, the authors reported greater improvements in the children who initially displayed lower executive functioning pre intervention. Similarly, a longitudinal study (Thierry et al. 2016) investigated the impact of the 'Settle Your Glitter' year-long mindfulness programme with 157 preschool children. They reported greater gains in executive functioning in children who initially exhibited lower self-control and emotional regulation issues. Together, these studies suggest that children who are considered higher risk and who display lower levels of executive function may reap greater benefits from MBIs compared to those with more typical developmental profiles.

Haines et al.'s (2023) replication of Flook et al.'s 12-week programme, used a larger sample (*n*=245 preschool children aged 4 to 5) across 16 preschools and 4 kindergartens. Furthermore, the authors opted to have the educators conduct the mindfulness curriculum rather than an external instructor, with broader measurement scales and reporting procedures. They reported positive changes in children's prosocial behaviour, empathy and social and emotional skills from both educators and parents. In contrast to previous studies, Haines et al. (2023) reported uniform impacts on children regardless of executive function skills at pretest. While the researchers do not explicitly indicate the reason for this finding, perhaps the difference in measurement scales and the programme delivery could account for these results. This posits that MP in early childhood has the potential to benefit all children irrespective of baseline levels of executive function.

Further studies conducted in early childhood remain focused on the “impacts” of manualised mindfulness interventions/ programmes (Crooks et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2020; Moreno-Gomez and Cejudo 2019) reporting improvements in external behaviours, emotional regulation and executive function. Moreover, there are minimal reports of improvement in young children’s prosocial behaviour (Sciutto et al. 2021; Berti and Cigala 2020), peer relationships (Courbet et al. 2024) and children’s empathy (Jackman et al. 2019; Flook et al. 2015) which may warrant further exploration. It must be noted that the quality of the interventions and the variety of MBIs used make it difficult to assume comparable benefits. However, more recent studies with young children, (Courbet et al. 2024; Haines et al. 2023; Bazzano et al. 2023) opted for more robust data collection and methodological rigour via teacher rated questionnaires and reports, observations and behavioural tasks. However, Haines et al. (2023) included both parents and children’s assessment measures, recognising the value of their perspectives.

Interestingly, Sun et al. (2021) revealed that no systematic review had been conducted that measured the impact of yoga / mindfulness programmes on children’s social and emotional development in early childhood. They discovered that mindfulness programmes with/ without yoga were being practiced in ECE settings internationally, with 15 studies (USA= 10, Singapore=1, Korea=1, Tunisia=1, Canada=1, Spain=1) included in their review. These studies assessed the impact of MBIs on young children’s self-regulation (*n*=7), executive function (*n*=6), and attentional capacities (*n*=2), demonstrating favourable results. However, it may prove challenging to draw solid conclusions due to the variety of MBIs being used and the differing duration of programmes ranging from a single once off 15 minutes session to six-week or year-long intervention. Similarly, Holt and Atkinson (2022) conducted a systematic literature review that investigated how school-based

mindfulness programmes have been adapted and they identified 15 papers (14 studies) that included 13 quantitative studies, 1 qualitative and 1 mixed method design. Of these studies,10 were conducted in primary schools, 3 in preschools and 1 in kindergarten. While offering valuable insight into the variety of MPs, they revealed heterogeneity in both the duration and types of interventions and practices used, and a strong reliance on external trainers implementing the programmes. Notably, all studies reported using mindful breathing with children, and those studies conducted in early childhood noted mindful movement as a key aspect of their MP. Despite some promising findings, the authors recommended more qualitative research to be undertaken in ECE to capture the experiences of educators conducting such interventions.

Whilst most studies have focused on measuring outcomes of a set mindfulness intervention through a variety of measurement scales, fewer have adopted a qualitative approach by interviewing educators who use MP with young children. In their respective studies both King et al. (2021) and Piotrowski et al. (2017) conducted qualitative interviews with preschool educators following completion of mindfulness programmes with young children, offering insight into educators' subjective experiences and the practicalities of implementation. King et al.'s (2021) study with eight preschool teachers found that the six-week programme was positively perceived, with educators reporting children appearing calmer and more relaxed while also recognising the feasibility of incorporating MP into their curriculum. Similarly, Piotrowski et al. (2017) echoed similar benefits with four educators reporting children's improved emotional regulation, enhanced self-calming, and improved attention and focus, while also highlighting practical barriers to using MP such as large class sizes and educators limited awareness of trauma

informed practice. Together, these studies suggest that MP could support the development of emotional regulation and attention skills in young preschool children. Although, both studies have a small sample size, their findings provide rich nuanced data that emphasise the importance of qualitative research to enrich the understanding of educators' experiences of MP with young children.

Emerging research suggests informal practices can cultivate children's mindful state of awareness with the potential of enhancing their wellbeing (Mukadam 2024; Jones 2018; Greenberg and Harris 2012). Interestingly, some scholars argue MPs whether formal or informal, could be utilised with young children (Mukadam 2024; Singh and Singh Joy 2021), by adapting content and structure for age and stage of development (Wood et al. 2018). Others suggest that formal MPs and mindfulness curricula approaches have a fundamental place in ECE settings (Bhandari and Douglas 2024; Holt and Atkinson 2022; Janz et al. 2019). Notably, Holt et al. (2021) and Janz et al. (2019) demonstrated that when MP is delivered through playful child-friendly and sensorial approaches, they are more engaging for young children. Holt et al.'s (2021) study embraced playful approaches including visuals, movement, and simple breathing activities that support young children's emotional regulation and attention, particularly when kept brief and embedded throughout the day. Together, this body of research highlights the importance of tailoring MP to children's age and stage of development.

2.5.4 An Exploration of Some Mindfulness Curricula

Chen (2021) explored mindfulness programmes globally and discovered mindfulness-based approaches and practices are integrated into primary classrooms in the form of yoga and meditative practice in countries such as Bhutan and India where mindfulness is an established cultural practice. The expansion of

mindfulness beyond eastern countries into western education systems marks a significant shift, for example in the United Kingdom since 2019, 270 schools have integrated mindfulness into their curriculum with the overarching goal to enhance children's mental wellbeing. School systems are increasingly embracing social and emotional programmes as an integral part of their curriculum (Crooks et al. 2020).

Whilst these approaches are a welcome addition into primary schools, some researchers have concluded that mindfulness in ECE could reap significant benefits for young children and their educators (Bockmann et al. 2022). Nevertheless, there remains a limited pool of studies conducted in ECE, with the majority focusing on measuring children's outcomes rather than exploring how such programmes are delivered and sustained (Holt and Atkinson 2022; Bockman and Yu 2021). According to Holt and Atkinson (2022) such programmes for ECE exhibit vast heterogeneity in both design and delivery and raises critical reflections about the quality and long-term impacts on young children after the programme ends. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that there is a limited body of research examining the programmes identified below that are commonly used with young children.

2.5.4.1 MindUP

The MindUP programme (Hawn Foundation 2011) is a social and emotional manualised programme that consisted of fifteen 45-minute lessons conducted once a week with children incorporating MP. Initially designed for primary school children to reduce feelings of stress, enhance emotional regulation and promote present moment awareness, a study (Schonert-Reichl et al. 2015) with 9 to 11-year-olds has shown positive impacts specifically increased optimism, empathy, emotional regulation and prosocial behaviours. In recent years, the MindUP has been adapted into three versions and used with children in early childhood. A study conducted by

Crooks et al. (2020) with 261 preschool children reported improvements in psychosocial and behavioural outcomes, and gains in the reduction of internalised and externalised behaviours, with positive impacts on reducing executive function deficits. Together these studies have demonstrated the promising impact of the MindUP programme in ECE.

2.5.4.2 Innerkids

Innerkids (Greenland 2010) established by Susan Kaiser Greenland in Los Angeles in 2001 offers a multi-session programme in four main areas, awareness of inner experiences focusing on the breath, awareness of inner experiences focusing on the senses, awareness of inner and outer experiences focusing on thoughts and feelings and lastly awareness of inner and outer experiences focusing on interconnection (Greenland 2010). Filled with an abundance of mindfulness activities that encapsulate a direct approach (Meiklejohn et al. 2012) where mindfulness is taught to the children in a structured manner, it is designed to foster children's proficiency in MP to enhance their wellbeing. Flook et al.'s (2010) initial study with 64 children aged 7 to 9 years based on an eight-week mindfulness program derived from the InnerKids approach, reported an increase in emotional regulation, executive function and prosocial skills. The InnerKids program played an integral role in ensuring mindfulness programmes were developmentally appropriate for children, with studies (Flook et al. 2015) demonstrating successful adaptation for younger preschool children as illustrated in Table 2.3 above. Although, these studies were conducted over a short period of time and within one educational setting, together they show promise of fostering self- regulation skills and executive functioning. Furthermore, the researchers agreed (Flook et al. 2015) that more longitudinal studies comprising of more diverse populations and larger

sample size would provide insightful research to support the implementation of mindfulness-based practice in the early years.

2.5.4.3 Paws b

The Paws b programme (Mindfulness in Schools Project n.d) established in the United Kingdom offers a formal and direct approach of teaching mindfulness to primary school children through weekly thirty-minute mindfulness lessons over 12 weeks. A study by Vickery and Dorjee (2016) of children aged 7 to 9 years (*n*=71) demonstrated that 76% of participating children enjoyed practicing mindfulness. However, discrepancies from educators and parents was noted in relation to the assessment of the impact on the children studied. Similarly, Thomas and Atkinson (2016) quasi-randomised intervention of the six- week Paws b progamme across two primary classes of 30 children noted group improvements in sustained attention which were largely sustained at follow up, however parental ratings did not reflect these changes. When the authors delved further through a qualitative evaluation with post intervention focus groups of 16 children and three interviews with teachers, they found that most children enjoyed the sessions. Teachers noted the feasibility of the programme and reported increased attention, self-regulation and emotional wellbeing. The authors called for adapting MPs to shorter more frequent classes, and for differentiated content in order to support children's varied abilities (Thomas and Atkinson 2017). A recent study by Crompton et al. (2025) involving 133 children aged 7 to 10, used a multi-informant design to measure the impact of the programme. Children in the intervention group were found to be more prosocial and helpful following the intervention although no differences in empathy or sharing were found. However, these effects were not sustained at the three-month follow-up. The authors note contextual factors may have impacted the outcomes and suggested the need for improved age-appropriate measurement tools and more longitudinal

studies. Unfortunately, there remains limited evidence of the impact of Paws b on cognition, learning and social and emotional outcomes.

In response to the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on younger children, MISP introduced the Dots mindfulness curriculum for children aged 3 to 6 years attending preschools following a similar remit as the Paws b. This marked a significant milestone for mindfulness and MP becoming a recognised element of the ECE curriculum to enhance young children's wellbeing in the UK. Similar to the Paws b programme, the Dots curriculum takes a systematic approach, however, it offers educators more flexibility, whereby the 30 sessions can be spread across the academic year, distributed by term or a duration adapted to suit the children and educators. (Mindfulness in Schools project, n.d). At the time of this present study, I could not source any studies conducted on the impact of this programme on young children.

2.5.4.4 The OpenMind

The OpenMind preschool program for 3 to 5 year-olds developed by Jackman at al. (2019) differs as it represents a combination approach of formal and informal MPs. The program emphasises educators embodying a mindfulness disposition for teaching authenticity. Grounded in five conceptual foundations, it integrates direct mindfulness lessons and activities for the children, while also developing a mindfulness integrated pedagogical approach which mirrors Kabat-Zinn's premise that mindfulness is a way of being (Kabat-Zinn 2016). Play is viewed as the optimal vehicle to teach mindfulness through stories, puppets, activities and games. The program provides ten daily activities which the educator can choose how and when best to implement. A recent RCT (Kim et al. 2020) conducted with preschool children (*n*=83) reported that the OpenMind preschool program improved emotional

regulation and prosocial behaviours including sharing, helping others and cooperation when compared to the control group.

2.5.4.5 Little Minds- UK

The Little Minds programme is an emergent mindfulness based pedagogical framework designed for ECE (Little Minds 2025). Initially constructed to support children's language and communication, it is now being expanded from an intervention to a more pedagogical approach for educators to use with young children.

Although being currently trialled in early childhood settings in the UK, there is no peer-reviewed research published to date. Initial feedback from reports on their website indicates positive outcomes from educators and children regarding enhanced literacy, self-regulation and high educators' engagement. This emergent approach reflects a shift towards contextually grounded and developmentally appropriate approaches of MP.

While the aforementioned mindfulness curriculums appear to reap benefits for children, it has been argued that measuring the impact or benefits of mindfulness-based practice remains more problematic in early childhood due to the different developmental levels posed (Butterfield et al. 2020). Therefore, with children rapidly maturing in early childhood and beyond, more longitudinal studies are warranted to measure the impacts on executive function, emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour and attention given to understanding the long -term impacts for these children.

Furthermore, the curricula programmes and approaches discussed thus far, have tended to be constructed on set lesson plans where mindfulness-based practice is task orientated thus shifting away from Kabat Zinn's initial perception (2020) that

mindfulness should be a way of general wellbeing and a state of consciousness (Brown and Ryan 2003). However, the OpenMind programme and Little Minds may offer educators more flexible ways to integrate both formal and informal practices for children and educators supporting a more embedded approach as pointed to in the literature. Further research in ECE is needed to map what mindfulness programmes or interventions are being used, and what demographics and contexts have been considered, as many studies are conducted in areas of deprivation or have been with children presenting with difficulties.

While studies with preschool children are limited, studies with children under three are non- existent. This raises a critical question: should MP be an embedded approach throughout the child's day in ECE supporting the agentic, confident, competent and happy child as described in the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (GoI 2024) aligning with Weare's (2019) call for contemplative education.

2.6 Theme Four: The Role of Mindfulness In and As Education

This theme explores different mindfulness teaching approaches including those proposed by Meiklejohn et al. (2012) and Hawkins (2017) and the principles of slow relational pedagogy. It considers where mindfulness fits in education, the role of the educator in facilitating MP and the importance of training and self- practice. Additionally, it identifies some barriers to practice. A whole-school approach to mindfulness and the role of the wider system is explored. This theme is illustrated in Figure 2.5 below.

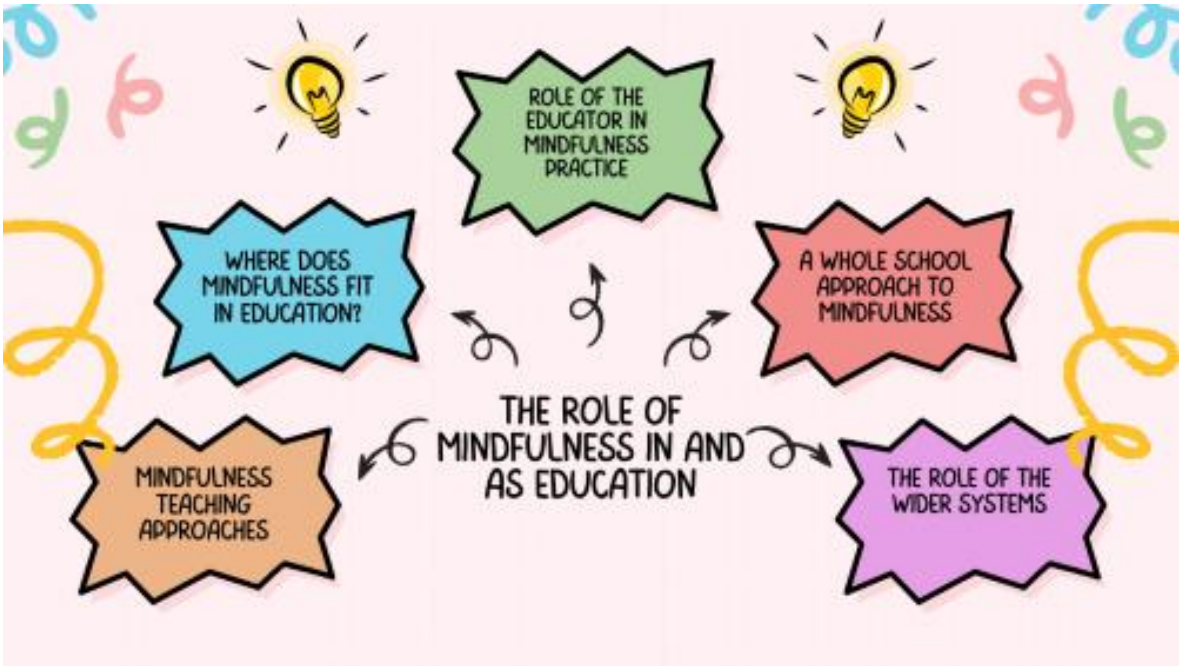


Figure 2.5 Overview of Theme Four: The Role of Mindfulness In and As Education

2.6.1 Mindfulness Teaching Approaches

Research has suggested that mindful teaching, where educators remain present with their inner and outer experiences, enables being more present with children (Lubis et al. 2024; Schussler 2025). This approach cultivates mindfulness both inside and outside of the classroom (Carsley et al. 2018; Meiklejohn et al. 2012). Developing MP in this way has been suggested to enhance the overall quality of education provided for children (Roeser et al. 2012). It also facilitates educators to develop a holistic view of the curriculum (Napoli et al. 2005), enhances educator wellbeing (Jennings and Greenberg 2009) while strengthening student educator relationships (Albrecht 2018) and increases the possibility of becoming a more effective educator (Emerson et al. 2017; Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Furthermore, Lubis et al.'s (2024) qualitative literature review reinforced the importance of integrating MPs into teaching, noting its potential to enhance classroom behaviours, strengthen relationships between the educators and children, while recognising the fundamental role of the educator modelling MPs to

children. Similarly, Albrecht (2018) emphasised the importance of being a mindful role model for children; through meaningful modelling and emotional presence, so children can internalise MP, shifting the focus from traditional teaching to relational transmission.

2.6.1.1 Exploring Teaching Approaches

Meiklejohn et al. (2012) identified three approaches to teaching mindfulness in educational settings, direct, indirect and embedded. A direct approach involves a more explicit teaching of mindfulness to children such as through MBIs or curricula (Crane et al. 2023). Recent studies have suggested that MBIs could be used in conjunction with existing social and emotional learning programmes in primary schools to support present moment attention, social and emotional learning and academic readiness (Kander et al. 2024; Lee et al. 2023). In contrast, an indirect approach involves the integration of MP in the classroom through educators' behaviours, attitudes and interactions with the children (Koch 2016; Meiklejohn et al. 2012). By encapsulating a mindfulness disposition (Roeser et al. 2012; Jennings and Greenberg 2009), we can see similarities with a slow relational pedagogy through being responsive and present with children in the moment (French et al. 2022).

An embedded approach combines both direct and indirect methods integrating formal and informal practices, which has been advocated for in education (Janz et al. 2019; Burke 2009). A variety of MPs with children are explored within literature including sitting meditations and breathing exercises (Jones 2018; Nhat Hanh 2017; Zelazo and Lyons 2012), utilising the senses (Buchanan 2017), yoga practices (Sun et al. 2021), music and movement activities (Berti and Cigala 2020; Auerbach and Delport 2018), and specific games and activities to support children's greater

awareness of their own thoughts and feelings (Erwin et al. 2017). It has been suggested that repetition and everyday MP would be of greater benefit to young children (Kenrwight et al. 2021; Piotrowski et al. 2017; Sheinman and Hadar 2017). A recent qualitative study by Rosati (2023) highlighted the importance of integrating mindfulness into a preschool curriculum while recognising the importance of teacher training to do so successfully.

Building on Meiklejohn et al.'s approaches there is growing recognition of the educator's role in modelling mindfulness and supporting MP in education. Hawkin's (2017) outlined three interconnected dimensions of mindfulness in education. *Being mindful* emphasises the importance of the educator developing their own MP through formal and informal practices to nurture their own wellbeing and emotional balance amidst a stressful job. *Teaching mindfully* is where the educator brings a sense of presence to teaching and remains aware of the needs and emotions of the children and through the creation of a mindful environment remains responsive to the classroom atmosphere. *Teaching mindfulness* involves the educator intentionally guiding and teaching children a variety of MPs to help foster emotional regulation. While these three dimensions provide a continuum of mindfulness integration in education, it raises questions if these dimensions could/ should be used in isolation. Taken together, both Meiklejohn's and Hawkins approaches highlight the various approaches that can be employed by educators and underscore the important role of the educator in modelling these practices for young children and the need for adequate educator training in MP.

2.6.1.2 Consideration of a Slow Relational Pedagogy

Over the last decade there has been increased emphasis on the importance of a relational pedagogy between the educator and children, where French et al. (2022)

emphasised the centrality of this relationship to promote a '*slow*' pedagogical approach throughout a child's day (Sorrells and Madrid 2024). Valuing the present moment while remaining attentive to young children's rhythm, pace and interests are seen as the foundations of a slow pedagogy (Clark 2022). Clark argued that encouraging unhurried routines and allowing time and space for pauses and silences, and through seeking opportunities to foster wonder and awe embodies the concept of '*being with*' children. The importance of relationality was further emphasised in the Starting Strong VI 2021 report (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2021) which highlighted meaningful relationships as a key component of quality ECE where close responsive relationships are central for nurturing social and emotional development in young children (Zoggeler-Burkhardt et al. 2023; Morales-Murilla et al. 2020). Similarly, Weare (2019) highlighted mindfulness pedagogy as incorporating both what is taught and how it is taught emphasising congruence between content and teaching. This focus on relational centred practice is echoed in the updated Aistear (GoI 2024) where emphasis is placed on slowing down and being present with children and the centrality of the relationship between the educator and the child. While mindfulness or MP is not explicitly mentioned in the updated Aistear (GoI 2024), many core elements such as *stillness, being present*, *slowing down* are mentioned in the framework. Educators are encouraged to embrace a slow relational pedagogical approach, one that mirrors an intentional slowed down environment as mentioned by Clark (2022) where children are respected as agentic learners (GoI 2024). The slower, intentional practices that are recognised in Aistear (GoI 2024) align closely with the principles of intention, attention and attitude, while also reflecting the values underpinning this study.

2.6.2 Where Does Mindfulness Fit in Education?

Where mindfulness fits within education in the United Kingdom is currently under debate due to the publication of the My Resilience in Adoloscence (MYRIAD) trial report (Kuyken et al. 2022) which led to some critical attention to the .b mindfulness programme. The .b mindfulness programme is an iteration of the Paws b programme discussed previously, adapted for use with older children and adolescents from 11- 18 years of age. The MYRIAD report was based on a large randomised controlled trial (RCT) involving 84 schools and 8376 students aged 11 to 14, whose primary aim was to investigate if a universal school-based mindfulness training was effective, cost efficient and scalable. The findings demonstrated no difference in measured outcomes between the intervention and control group. Furthermore, they reported some negative effects including increased stress levels and negative emotional responses among adolescents who had existing or emerging mental health challenges. These results also highlighted the challenges with mindfulness training and implementation in this context and revealed fewer positive impacts on children than expected. These findings have led to a reconsideration of adopting a universal approach of mindfulness into secondary education, with potential ramifications for its use across all educational contexts.

However, some positive findings were less emphasised in the study. Most notably, the positive impact of the mindfulness programme on teacher burnout and school climate, furthermore, students who engaged in MP at home reported increased levels of positive wellbeing. While the MYRIAD trial focused on mapping outcomes and scaling of programmes, it sparked a shift in how researchers conceptualise mindfulness in education. Roeser et al. (2023) noted a move from a traditional view of mindfulness as an external optional add on intervention (‘mindfulness in education’) toward a more integrated understanding of mindfulness as a

foundational part of education (‘mindfulness as education’) as advocated for by Ergas (2019). From the report, several recommendations to enhance the understanding and implementation of mindfulness in education have been suggested. These include aligning the design and structure of the MBI with children’s developmental stages (Roeser et al. 2023). Using iterative and innovative teaching strategies to encourage children’s participation (MYRIAD 2022) and adopting a whole-school approach with all stakeholders may prove more beneficial rather than using an individualised or clinical approach (Baelen et al. 2023; Roeser et al. 2023; Weare 2023). There were recommendations for further research to assess the feasibility of mindfulness in education paying attention to methodological rigour (Roeser et al. 2023). This novel shift to ‘mindfulness as education’ takes on a relational approach to mindfulness where the role of educators is important, whereby mindfulness should not be viewed as a solitary pursuit but rather as a social process experienced through interactions (Weare 2023).

Farias (2022) argued that, following the results of the MYRIAD trial, that confidence in mindfulness research is on the decline, particularly in universal based school interventions. However, this assertion could be challenged as the research output in the field has increased to 1,312 publications reported in 2024 (American Mindfulness Research Association (AMRA) 2025) suggesting continued scholarly interest. In response to the concerns raised, Millar (2025) conducted research into the negative experiences of those pupils who participated in the MYRIAD trial where he highlights significant key issues. Firstly, Millar noted that neither the. b nor the MYRIAD trial were designed with young people in mind. Secondly, the curriculum was still under development and overlooked trauma informed practice, a gap which may have led to some of the negative impacts reported. Thirdly, there was non-alignment between the. b programme and the intended objective of the MYRIAD

trial. Fourthly, the. b programme was often delivered by novice educators who may have had limited or no experience in MP themselves. These findings prompt important reflection on the role of educators' MP in effectively delivering such programmes to children. Millar sums up by stating that mindfulness will only fall into decline, if we as educators and researchers stop being mindful, particularly of the lived experiences of those participating in mindfulness programmes. While the MYRIAD trial report is not applicable to ECE due to its focus on secondary school children, it offers a note of caution regarding the feasibility of whole-school approaches. The findings of the report highlight the importance of continuity, adequate training, understanding children's needs, interests and abilities, experience of trauma informed practices and ongoing support if mindfulness programmes are to be implemented sustainably.

2.6.3 Role of the Educator in MP

Although, many mindfulness interventions are led by external trainers, research has highlighted the benefit of having educators who work directly with children to lead these programmes to support greater integration and longevity (Wood et al. 2018). Bockman and Yu (2022) affirmed this stance, suggesting it is not only cost effective but allows for a more meaningful and embedded practice in the setting.

The educators' perspective has been explored previously, for instance in an online survey conducted by Kenwright et al. (2021) of 45 primary school teachers without formal mindfulness training. Although not focused on early childhood, 76% of participants believed mindfulness should be taught to all children, with 77% in favour of engaging in professional development to equip them with the skills to be able to teach mindfulness to children. Additionally, they reported that 71% were in favour of utilising a more integrated approach rather than a once off intervention with children.

In the ECE context, Kim et al. (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study via questionnaire and interviews with 10 educators pre- and post- intervention who implemented the Open Mind Korea programme. Educators reported high levels of feasibility and acceptability of the programme, with some highlighting barriers such as uncertainty with the terminology and integration within their existing curriculum. They emphasised the importance of training and developing one's own MP to help overcome such barriers.

As previously noted in Section 2.5.3 many studies conducted in early childhood have focused on the "impacts" of manualised mindfulness interventions/ programmes. Pascal and Marieke (2022) argue that qualitative research exploring usage of MP with children has the potential to advance the understanding and usage of mindfulness, provided the issues of data collection, subjectivity and efficacy are addressed. They also suggest a shift towards qualitative research would be useful and it is further suggested within this thesis that research that focuses on the educators' perspective is essential to complement the outcomes-based intervention studies that have been conducted to date.

Holt's et al.'s (2021) yearlong action research project with 52 children and 5 educators found embedding mindfulness in a flexible manner benefited children's emotional regulation and enhanced the classroom environment with unexpected benefits for the educators. The authors reported a whole-class embedded approach positively impacted children's regulation and classroom environment. A focus group with the educators revealed initial concerns of low self- confidence and fears of appearing silly to the children. However, engaging in daily practice increased their confidence and over time prompted other educators to start implementing MP, underscoring the importance of mentoring. Building on Holt et al.'s (2021) action

research study, Lyndon et al. (2025) investigated a 10-week mindfulness programme implemented with 27 children across four nursery schools which used a Mindfulness Champion to lead the MP with young children. The authors highlighted the relationships between children and educators were central to the programme, alongside educators modelling practices, attunement to children and providing a fun programme which supported children's engagement with MP.

In their respective qualitative studies O'Hara-Gregan (2023) involving twelve educators and King et al. (2021) involving eight educators, explored educators' perspectives through interviews following the completion of an MBI with young children. Both studies emphasised the importance of educators' personal MP in nurturing their own wellbeing, fostering positive relationships with children and creating a calmer classroom climate. Together, these studies provide rich nuanced subjective insight into the practicalities and implementation of MP in early childhood and help address the gap in qualitative research. Building on this, this present study continues to foreground the educators' perspectives.

2.6.3.1 Importance of Educators Self-practice and Mindfulness Training

Research has also highlighted the importance of primary school educators ongoing engagement with MP noting how varied levels of educator experience of MP can significantly impact child outcomes demonstrating that educator's depth of practice as being integral to enhance educators' wellbeing, motivation and classroom attunement (Emerson et al. 2020, McKeering and Hwang 2019; Albrecht 2018). Regular self-practice has been associated with increased student participation, improvement in positive student behaviours, development of authentic teaching and a culture of mindfulness within classrooms (Berti and Cigala 2020; Weare 2019; Carsley et al. 2018; Emerson et al. 2017).

The importance of self- practice is widely mentioned in the literature as fostering child and educator wellbeing (Weare 2013; Napoli et al. 2005). While self-practice builds on educators' self-efficacy it also allows the educator to build familiarity with MPs for their teaching (Crane et al. 2023). This builds on the primary aim of mindfulness to become more of a way of life (Albrecht 2018, p 15), similar to Kabat-Zinn's initial aspiration. Empirical studies demonstrate these benefits mentioned. For example, a large study conducted by Jeon et al. (2022) with 52 educators and 329 children across 13 ECE settings via analysis of teacher questionnaires, researcher observations and measurement scales revealed educators' level of MP was strongly associated with children's social emotional and behavioural functioning, thus highlighting the important role of the educators practice in supporting those young children's emotional regulation.

Similarly, Hatton-Bowers et al. (2020, 2022) reported enhanced educator wellbeing following online mindfulness training. Participant surveys found over 89% of participants reported learning a lot or a great deal, with more than 93% intending to use their learning with young children. Educators reported learning a multitude of practices, and identified benefits for themselves and children, along with increased confidence following the training. While the findings indicate perceived value for an online professional development module, it raises a critical question if educators pre-existing interest in mindfulness may have contributed to the high percentage of positive outcomes reported. Building on this, Hatton-Bowers et al.'s (2022) study with educators (n=99) in ECE found that the eight-week mindfulness teacher training programme (CHIME) enhanced educators' emotional regulation and wellbeing. Although, the authors noted the involvement of a bioscience laboratory, the published report emphasised self-reported emotional and workplace stress outcomes rather than physiological stress markers. The authors suggested these

gains may support children's development of emotional regulation through educators enhanced responsive caregiving and modelling of MP. However, as both studies utilised online surveys, in depth qualitative research could provide deeper insights into educators lived experiences, explore challenges and to understand how training transforms practice and outcomes.

A recent study by Lyndon et al. (2025) which provided training and resources to "Mindfulness Champions" in four nurseries, highlighted the value of a train-the-trainer model and the importance of educators developing their own MP, contributing to increased confidence and sustained practice with children. It is widely documented across the literature, that educators who undertook mindfulness training reported higher levels of life satisfaction (Tsang et al. 2021), increased self-efficacy (deCarvalho et al. 2021), reduced stress and anxiety (Mendelson et al. 2023) and improvement in classroom management (Hwang et al. 2019a; Benn et al. 2012). Some educators valued in person training for its shared embodied practice with others (O'Hara-Gregan et al. 2023). Overall, the literature suggests that mindfulness training and personal practice could bring transformational change for both educators and children, supporting the rationale for more research in this area.

2.6.3.2 Understanding the Barriers and Complexities

Despite positive outcomes reported, several barriers hinder educators' engagement with mindfulness as noted by both Albrecht (2018) and Kim et al. (2019) who indicated that introducing mindfulness may be challenging for educators due to the addition of something new to an already demanding job where time constraints are a real issue. As noted in Section 2.5.2 educators face a multitude of challenges with risk of professional burnout. Further findings indicate that educators' perceptions and buy-in can influence the degree of involvement and motivation for effective mindfulness implementation into the classroom (Weare 2023; Hwang et al. 2021;

Saunders and Kober 2020). Moreover, Kwon's (2015) small scale study with four educators in ECE argue that educators not being afforded the time to practice mindfulness inside and outside the classroom could be a barrier to successfully embedding mindfulness into the educational setting. In line with the aforementioned shift to explore educators' perspectives and contrary to studies that focused on the impacts of MBIs on children, this current study seeks to add to the evidence base by exploring the perceived barriers of implementation and educators to suggest solutions.

A recurring theme in the literature was educators' self-efficacy which impacts their willingness and ability to implement MPs with young children. Some scholars noted that educator self-efficacy is potentially an important protective factor for classroom quality and student wellbeing (McKeering and Hwang at al. 2019; Emerson et al. 2017; Piotrowski et al. 2017). A common finding across all three studies was educators enhanced feelings of self-efficacy which they attributed to their participation in mindfulness training.

Incorporating mindfulness knowledge and self-practice in pre-service educator training to develop educator's self-efficacy to share practices with young children in early childhood has been discussed (Tonga 2020). It has been indicated in the literature that including mindfulness within pre-service early childhood educator training could provide a range of personal and professional benefits. These include developing self-awareness (Tonga 2020), increased teacher efficacy (Cochran and Peters 2023), supporting educators to respond more appropriately to stressful situations (Kerr et al. 2017) and enhanced classroom management (Hirshberg et al. 2020). These findings emphasise the value and feasibility of including mindfulness in pre-service educator training.

However, challenges remain as Tonga (2020) noted the importance of having a standardised definition, for educators to have a shared understanding on how to integrate mindfulness into the classroom with young children. Moreover, Beers-Dewhirst and Goldman's study (2018) with preservice teachers showed motivation to use MP, although 90% were more likely to use MP as a response strategy. However, they revealed an eagerness for training to be included in the programme and further advocate for sustainable mindfulness training to be made available. Taken together, the literature underscored the need for appropriate mindfulness training for educators to ensure its successful implementation.

2.6.4 A Whole- School Approach to Mindfulness

While research into adopting a whole-school approach to mindfulness in ECE is still in its infancy, Flook et al. (2015) and Thierry et al.'s (2016) retrospective studies concurred that embodying a whole-school integrated approach would be of greater benefit to young children. Embracing a whole-school approach with all stakeholders, including educators, parents, children and management structures through modelling and engaging with MP has been suggested to be two-fold enhancing the efficacy of said practice while also building on all stakeholders' wellbeing (Sheinman and Russo-Netzer 2021; Weare 2019; Roeser et al. 2012). Extending this idea of a whole-school approach, Hosan et al. (2022) suggested that including board members and upper management in the planning and implementation of a mindfulness programme with a novel suggestion of appointing a school champion to lead the new curriculum could lead to higher engagement.

Although not conducted in early childhood, Hudson et al.'s (2020) qualitative longitudinal study with 15 secondary school teachers in five schools offered valuable insights into their early implementation and assessment of a whole-school

approach. The teachers revealed the importance of leadership commitment, continued mentoring and ongoing training as essential elements for a successful whole-school approach. Similarly, Ventura et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of embedding mindfulness within daily practice but more importantly within the school culture via school policy, ethos and values to ensure sustainability. Both Weare (2013) and Meiklejohn et al. (2012) argued that for mindfulness to be embedded in schools, systemic support through policy frameworks is fundamental. They noted that to enhance sustainability and impact, mindfulness initiatives should be within broader educational policies. Together, these studies suggest that whole-school approaches to MP could be most effective through cultural and systematic commitment.

2.6.4.1 What About Children's and Parent's Voice?

When considering adopting a whole-school approach, capturing the voices of important stakeholders, namely, children and parents must be considered to allow them to share their opinion. Traditionally, most mindfulness studies conducted with young children have focused on quantitative methods, particularly the use of measurement scales to measure the impact of MP on children. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of including children's voices through a qualitative methodology. For instance, Andreu et al. (2021) conducted interviews with 18 children aged 9 to 11, who were deemed at risk that attended an under resourced Chilean school about their experiences of a nine-week mindfulness programme 'Growing Up Breathing'. They found that children reported improvements in self-awareness, emotional regulation and interpersonal behaviours. The authors emphasised the importance of capturing children's perspectives and recommended that future research should include parents' perspectives

and a larger sample of children. Likewise, Duff (2024) conducted focus groups with 24 children aged 4 to 5 to explore their opinions, thoughts and feelings of a mindfulness programme. Thematic analysis of their responses revealed five key takeaways where MP positively impacted them: children felt they were kinder to others, MP allowed them to slow down, they were able to recognise their own feelings, helped them overcome challenges and that they enjoyed the practice. This study underscores the importance of collecting data directly from children to better understand their subjective experience of MP. Collectively, these studies signify an important methodological shift, recognising the value of including children in research pertaining to them.

While studies exploring parents' perspectives of MP with young children are scarce, Maclid (2023) discovered that including parents' perspectives of an eight-week mindfulness programme that was undertaken by their preschool children, allowed parents to record their experiences and share the benefits of MBP in addition to gaining insight into parents own constructions of MBP. Involving parents in the implementation or assessment (Lyons and Delange 2016) of MBP/MBIs appears to be underdeveloped in the literature, with further recommendations (Nieminen and Sajaniemi 2016) offered that parents could provide valuable insight into how a mindfulness programme may impact the child in the home environment.

While the majority of mindfulness programmes explored within this study did not appear to give due consideration to sharing mindfulness based practice with parents, there is a congruence that a whole-school approach to mindfulness (Sheinman and Russo-Netzer 2021; Hudson et al. 2020; Kielty et al. 2017; Flook et al. 2015; Thierry et al. 2016) may result in greater outcomes for children and enhance wellbeing. This approach of involving parents was mirrored in Haine's

recent (2023) study where families were encouraged to take part in the mindfulness programme via access to mindfulness resources and a mindfulness training course. Parent mindfulness training programmes have been suggested to be effective in reducing behavioural issues in children (Singh and Singh Joy 2021), decreasing parental stress (Sethi and Sharma, 2018; Benn et al. 2012) and increasing mindful parenting behaviours (Kil et al. 2022; Perry-Parish et al. 2016) such as consistent parenting and parental self-regulation skills (Kil et al. 2022) and enhancing specific parent-child interactional approaches (Perry- Parish et al. 2016). Unfortunately, there remains a dearth of research exploring the sharing of MP with parents and families in early childhood.

2.6.5. The Role of the Wider Systems

From an international perspective, there has been increased attention to approaches to support the wellbeing and emotional and social development of children as reflected in the OECD's 2030 agenda (OECD 2018), which focused on children's wellbeing, agency while also recognising the importance of fostering educators' wellbeing. While MP is not explicitly mentioned in the report, mindfulness has been mentioned within OECD materials as an approach to support these aims. In the United Kingdom, government support for mindfulness has evolved over the last decade and continues to be on the agenda. In 2014, a key milestone was the establishment of the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) a cross-party coalition of Members of Parliament (MPs) whose task was to review research and look at the potential of mindfulness to inform public policy (Mindful Nation UK 2015). This initiative was supported by external mindfulness experts and the nonpartisan policy institute, The Mindfulness Institute, who provided eight weeks training to over 100 MPs. The direct involvement of the MPs gave the APPG's

recommendations greater credibility and led to the publication of the Mindful Nation UK report in 2015. The report advocated for the integration of mindfulness programmes in policy, healthcare, the criminal justice system and education. It also emphasised the importance of scaling up teacher training in mindfulness and for the UK's National Health Service (NHS) healthcare system to adopt mindfulness programmes for patients. Simonsson et al.'s (2023) qualitative study with 18 politicians who participated in mindfulness training, reported positive impacts on their personal and professional development and enhanced capability to overcome challenges as a result.

The UK Parliament hosted the first International Mindfulness in Politics Day in 2017 with government representation from 14 countries (Bristow 2019). Following this event several other mindfulness initiatives emerged across Europe. For example, both France and Belgium launched mindfulness initiatives to inform and raise awareness of the benefits of mindfulness for governments, health and education; citing inspiration from the UK initiative.

Despite some negative feedback from the MYRIAD trial (see Section 2.6.2 above), the value of mindfulness was reaffirmed by the UK government during the Westminster Hall Debate in February 2024 (UK Parliament 2024), where mindfulness was highlighted as a tool to support children's wellbeing, lifelong skills and to support teachers' wellbeing. These developments in the UK show a growing recognition of the value of mindfulness not just for education but as a foundation for broader societal flourishing.

In Ireland, following the International Mindfulness in Politics Day (Bristow 2019) in the UK, momentum was generated through the establishment of Mindful Nation

Ireland in April 2018. It was set up as a company limited by guarantee as a voluntary non-profit organisation that aimed to promote mindfulness and compassion across public policy including education, criminal justice programmes and within healthcare and occupational settings. Drawing on the UK approach and with support from the APPG in the UK, mindfulness training was offered to members of the Irish government with support from external experts with the aim to help politicians with decision making in high pressured political contexts. However, despite promising beginnings, there are no publicly available reports detailing any potential outcomes of the initiative and the formal dissolution of Mindful Nation Ireland in November 2023 raises questions about institutional support for mindfulness within Irish Government.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE) (2020) released a mental health and wellbeing initiative titled “Mind your wellbeing” offering the nation a free training tool incorporating mindfulness, gratitude and self-care practices. Additionally, since 2021 the HSE has launched the six-week Mindfulness-based health and social care programme (MBHSC) to support health care professionals to navigate their stressful work environment through mindfulness-based practices. At the height of the pandemic, The Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in collaboration with Barnardos (2020) recognised the importance of mindfulness as a tool for educators in ECE and parents to use with young children through their authorship of Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care. This resource offered educators and parents informal mindfulness activities to use with young children, to help alleviate stress and foster a sense of calm and harmony.

This underscored the interconnected roles of policy initiatives, ECE settings, and family environments to support the wellbeing of young children, highlighting the importance of collaborative systems in early childhood development. Within the updated Aistear, Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (GoI 2024), the inclusion of mindfulness- based terminology marks an important step, signalling the relevance of mindfulness in ECE. Together, these historic moments in Irish policy suggest there is a growing support for MP despite the cessation of Mindful Nation Ireland.

More recently, the systemic recognition of mindfulness and meditation has been reinforced at a global governance level. In December 2025, the United Nations convened its first meeting titled United Present: Global Solutions from Within, formally acknowledging the role of meditation in supporting the wellbeing within high pressured humanitarian and political environments, recognising these practices as vital tools for stress reduction, empathy building and improved focus within complex contexts (United Nations 2025). This commitment was marked by the establishment of December 21st as World Meditation Day, signalling global recognition that wellbeing is linked to professional effectiveness. This explicit promotion reflects a collective shift towards viewing wellbeing as a shared responsibility and how mindfulness and meditations can create sustainable global systems.

While MP is often embraced within health and education studies with reported benefits, Bristow (2019) argues that mindfulness goes beyond the parameters of an intervention strategy. He advocates for a broader societal perspective, one that accepts and values mindfulness for both individual and societal flourishing. Although this study's focus is to explore MP in ECE, it is important to acknowledge that such mindfulness initiatives don't exist in a vacuum, therefore, ongoing dialogue regarding the political, educational and cultural implications must continue.

Moreover, as different countries explore integrating mindfulness into education, health and the political sphere, there is value in nurturing information exchange by learning from experienced success and challenges.

2.7 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Closure of Chapter

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

As I reflect on my research questions, I notice how the literature has both confirmed and challenged what I know. There is a significant gap in Ireland of studies conducted in early childhood education, which makes this study timely and relevant. There is such a depth of knowledge from the outcomes focused studies which capture the benefits for young children, nonetheless there is a big gap in qualitative inquiry with early childhood educators. This has me pondering how I can add something different to the qualitative discourse.

Figure 2.6 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Whilst there are many constructions and definitions of mindfulness, the literature suggests an appetite to understand and explore the concept of mindfulness and MP and its place in early childhood to foster the wellbeing of young children. The studies reviewed suggest that mindfulness-based curricula implemented in early childhood may enhance children's executive function (Sun et al. 2021; Wood et al. 2018; Flook et al. 2015), social and emotional skills (Erten and Gunes 2024; Haines et al. 2023) and emotional regulation (Bockman and Yu 2022; Razza et al. 2015). However, there appears to be a lack of studies exploring the experiences of teaching and implementing MP and what that looks like in practice.

There seems to be congruence in more recent literature that has suggested adapting mindfulness programmes to suit preschool children, by using child-friendly and playful mindfulness activities with a shorter duration (Holt and Atkinson 2022; Janz et al. 2019) would be more beneficial for young children and help foster their attention skills. Whilst the majority of the studies of MBIs have focused on measuring

outcomes using a variety of scales and measurement tools, there are concerns over the variability and measurement tools being used (Kander et al. 2024), inconsistencies with outcome domains and questions regarding the quality of implementation (Sun et al. 2021). Encouragingly, in more recent studies there appears to be a shift whereby more rigorous measures and assessment-based tools (Courbet et al. 2024; Bazzano et al. 2023; Haines et al. 2023) were adopted to reduce such limitations, albeit more qualitative research is required to understand the lived experiences of those who we are researching. Exploring the implementation of MP in ECE remains a nascent phenomenon with the necessity for more qualitative studies exploring educators' perspectives of implementation (Duff 2024; Holt et al. 2022).

If MP is to be viewed simply as an intervention to be measured, we may fail to appreciate the myriad of ways that children can simply be present as children, and how MP could provide opportunities for wonder and awe. This study seeks to contribute to the existing research gap of qualitative and mixed-methods studies by exploring the lived experiences of educators' use of MP. Given the growing interest in MP in ECE, it is both timely and important to explore *if, how* and *why* MPs are being used by educators.

Gaining insight into the current landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland provides a crucial foundation for understanding its role therein. Phase One, through a national questionnaire, offers an important first step by capturing educators' perspectives to inform policy, practice and research in this field. To date, in Ireland, there is no national research on MP in ECE, highlighting the timeliness and relevance of this current research. Phase Two offers further contribution by exploring the subjective, lived experiences of educators implementing MP.

The following chapter provides an overview of my methodological choices that shaped my research journey. It explores my research paradigm, the development of my ontological and epistemological perspectives and provides an overview of the methodological decisions made within this three-phase study.

Chapter Three: My Methodological Journey

"Just take a breath, one at a time and see what happens"

(Lee-Educator)

3.1 Introduction

This study explored mindfulness practice (MP) in early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland, through conducting a three-phase study. Each phase including the methodology and findings has been presented in its own distinct chapter.

Phase One: A mixed-methods questionnaire conducted with educators to map the landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland.

Phase Two: Qualitative semi-structured interviews with educators that explored their lived experiences of MP in ECE in Ireland.

Phase Three: A qualitative single focus group that discussed the findings to date with a panel of thought leaders, those who have influence and expertise in policy, education and research in ECE in Ireland.

3.2 Chapter Structure

This chapter presents the foundational methodological decisions made throughout the research process.

Section 3.3 explains the philosophical assumptions that underpin this study, describing the journey in shaping my ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Section 3.4 outlines the rationale behind my methodological choices, an overview of the three-phase study and the reasoning for adopting a mixed-methods design.

Section 3.5 provides a summary of the data analysis undertaken.

Section 3.6 explores the role of axiology, including the influence that my values, positionality and reflexivity had on this study.

Section 3.7 provides a summary of the ethical considerations and procedures that were undertaken to ensure the study's integrity.

3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings and Navigating the Four Ologies.

Understanding my research paradigm was crucial in shaping my approach to this study. A paradigm can be understood as an integrated set of ideas that guide how knowledge is understood and interpreted and what methods are appropriate (Chafe 2024; Jamal and Hollinshead 2001; Kuhn 1962). In contrast a worldview is much broader, encompassing an individual's overall beliefs about reality and existence (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in research, I viewed my paradigm as my research framework through which I made ontological, epistemological and methodological choices that were strongly influenced by my worldview.

At the core of my worldview is the belief that reality is socially constructed and fundamentally shaped by human experiences. I have drawn on Shapiro et al.'s (2006) model of mindfulness, which conceptualises mindfulness as involving intention, attention and attitude. From this perspective, I believe that reality, especially the experience of MP is multiple, subjective and context dependent. Each person may understand or experience MP differently due to their context and background. My choice of paradigm reflected my belief in the socially constructed nature of the experiences which has been shaped by my personal experiences and my broader worldview (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017).

Guba (1990) characterised the research paradigm through a researcher's ontology (what is reality), epistemology (how one knows something), through methodology

(how one goes about finding it out) and axiology (the role of values). Reflecting on these four branches allowed me to approach this research study with the aim of understanding (Lather 2006) the phenomenon that is MP in ECE. Exploring these four 'ologies' provided the philosophical basis of my study to guide what knowledge was sought, how that knowledge could be discovered, how to collate the data into knowledge, and how my values may have impacted the study.

From the beginning, I was not trying to capture a universal truth, moreover I sought contextual nuanced insight to explore and understand educators experience of MP, while holding a subjective stance due to my own lived experience with the phenomenon, as was discussed in Chapter One. These four ologies will be explored within this chapter, namely ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology.

3.3.1 Developing My Ontological Position.

Ontology can be defined as the nature and construction of knowledge and reality (Merriam and Tisdell 2016), where social researchers are concerned with how reality is understood (Cohen et al. 2018). Bryman et al. (2021) expanded on this concept, suggesting that social researchers are not only interested in understanding reality, and it is through understanding one's ontological position that establishes how a researcher defines that reality. Exploration of the various complex ontological positions was grappled with, however, I found Lather's (2006) paradigm chart offered a valuable framework for reflection. It guided my thinking as I considered my aim and if I was looking to test, understand or deconstruct the phenomenon that is MP in ECE (See Table 3.1)

Given my study's focus on the subjective experiences of MP in ECE, I soon identified with the interpretive aim of seeking to understand. My intention was not to test or measure outcomes, nor to deconstruct MP, but rather explore how mindfulness is

understood, experienced and enacted. Engaging in this reflection solidified my intent to ask exploratory questions *if, how* and *why* MP was being used by educators so I could deepen my understanding of the phenomenon. My aim was to reveal many stories, capture multiple and diverse experiences and perspectives from the educators, not searching for universal truths, while being mindful that there could be multiple constructs to uncover that may differ to my own beliefs and experience.

Table 3.1 Adapted Paradigm Chart Illustrating my paradigmatic reflections

(Source: Adapted from Lather and St. Pierre, 2005)

Paradigm	Ontology (nature of reality)	Epistemology (nature of knowledge)	Purpose of research	Methodological Implications	My reflections
Positivist	Reality is objective and singular	Knowledge is observable and measurable	To predict or test hypothesis	Quantitative, experimental methods	I was not trying to predict or test a theory. I don't believe reality is objective
Interpretivist / constructivist	Reality is many and socially constructed	Knowledge is co-creative, subjective	To understand lived experiences and meaning	Qualitative and context rich	My aim is to understand the educators' experiences with MP
Critical theory	Reality is subjective and shaped by power structures	Knowledge is influenced by ideology and power	To emancipate, critique and transform	Participatory, action research	I was not aiming to transform or explore power dynamics
Post modernism/ post structural	Reality is fluid and discursively constructed	Knowledge is provisional and context dependent	To deconstruct assumptions and narratives	Deconstructive methodologies, textual analysis	I was not trying to deconstruct what is known

3.3.2 Consideration of Ontological Positions

Due consideration was given to objectivism as an ontological position which asserts that the phenomena and their meanings exist beyond the influence of social actors (Bryman et al. 2021) which infers that the body of knowledge is external (Saunders et al. 2020). Adopting this stance could provide a researcher with a clear theoretical focus (Creswell and Creswell 2023) to which phenomena are observable and measurable, while the researcher remains objective and independent. It was determined this stance was not feasible due to the subjective nature of the current study and my positionality. Some mindfulness studies conducted to date in early childhood (Thierry et al. 2016; Flook et al. 2015) have focused on measuring outcomes of mindfulness programmes, measuring impacts, conversely this study does not aim to do so but to capture the experiences of educators' practice of mindfulness.

I considered deconstructivism as a potential framework, which would allow space to question knowledge and resist habitual ways of reading and analysing data. This approach invites attention to other subjectivities that may be challenging to define. While it shares similarities to constructivism, such an approach places focus on power dynamics and contradictions (Guba 1990), which falls outside of the scope of this study. Nevertheless, deconstructivism advocates for researchers to embrace the messiness of the research process rather than to sanitise it. While I did not adopt deconstructivism, I valued this element of embracing the messiness, and I incorporated it into my reflexive processes, understanding my role as an active participant.

3.3.3 Rationale for Framing the Research Study Within the Constructivist Stance.

Constructivism, as an ontological position, understands that social phenomena are created from the perceptions and actions of social actors. Furthermore, that individuals construct knowledge from their individual experiences and those with others (Bryman et al. 2021; Flick 2018). This perspective views reality as a human experience that is not objective nor singular, but rather consists of multiple, subjective interpretations, shaped by experience and context (Creswell and Creswell 2023; Flick 2018; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Taking a constructivist stance positions the researcher as an active participant in the research process, while acknowledging their interpretive role and the subjective nature of the process. (Charmaz 2002,2017).

For this research study, I adopted a constructivist approach as I recognised that each participant constructs their model of the world from their experiences and reflections (Gaudet and Robert 2018). I accepted that each participant may have their own understanding and lived experiences with MP and within various contexts of ECE in Ireland. I recognised that each viewpoint could be subjective, individual, personal, and situational which aligns with the constructivist tradition (Creswell and Creswell 2023).

Reflecting on my values-based conceptual lens of intention, attention and attitude (IAA), as outlined in Chapter One, the constructivist paradigm aligns with the idea that mindfulness develops through personal meaning making as I was focused on understanding how the educators constructed and enacted MP in their specific context. Therefore, my belief in the IAA model of mindfulness was grounded in my paradigmatic assumption that knowledge is subjective, contextual and co-constructed. Rather than evaluating or measuring MP, my intent in this study was to

explore how educators individually and collectively construct their understanding of MP, how they practice it and why in early childhood. This research study sought to highlight the variety of ways MP could be used and experienced across ECE in Ireland.

3.3.4 The Deductive ↔ Inductive Continuum

Due consideration was given to choosing a deductive or inductive approach to the research study. While a deductive approach typically allows the testing of a particular hypothesis or theory (Bryman et al. 2021, Gaudet and Robert 2018), I recognised this would align more specifically with a quantitative study and instead an inductive, bottom-up approach was more suitable. I did not aim to test a theory or test my values-based conceptual lens of IAA, rather I used this lens more interpretively. Some of the questions were shaped by this lens, but the study predominantly took an inductive approach which allowed me to give voice to the participants. However, I acknowledge I am not fully inductive as I brought my perspective, theory and experience of MP to this study.

To support the process of induction, analysis was conducted sequentially across the three phases, however this was not a linear process. While each phase was analysed in turn, I moved back and forth between the data provided by the questionnaires in Phase One and the interviews in Phase Two. This approach enabled me to formulate new insights, question connections, identify patterns and meaning and also contributed to the forming of the questions for the Phase Three focus group.

3.3.5 The Journey to My Epistemological Position

Epistemology as an integral branch of the research paradigm can be described as how one comes to know reality (Merriam and Tisdell 2016), how knowledge should

be produced (Bryman et al. 2021), and the nature, scope and legitimacy of that knowledge (Crotty 2003). It raises questions on how the social world should and could be studied while challenging us to consider how we know what we think we know about the world (Bruce and Yearley 2006). Exploring the different epistemological positions provoked me to ask questions about my research study including: Am I aiming to generate a hypothesis to be tested? Do I believe there is an external reality to focus on; rather than one's descriptions or experience of it? Do I want to make sense of the different meanings that the educators may hold? Ultimately, what is my overall intention for this study?

3.3.6 Considerations of Epistemological Positions

Positivism as a philosophical perspective denotes that a single tangible reality exists (Park et al. 2020), and that knowledge is developed objectively without the values and beliefs of the researcher influencing its development. Positivism alludes to the idea that real events can be observed empirically and can be explained through logical analysis (Bryman et al. 2021). Positivism aligns itself with realism that is concerned with facts rather than impressions or interpretations (Saunders et al. 2020). Consequently, it lends itself to be more deductive in nature with the researcher remaining distant from subjective experiences (Park et al. 2020). I decided this was not a suitable framework for this present research study.

Critical realism was also considered as a potential epistemological stance. While it acknowledges an objective reality exists independent of individuals, it also accounts the various forms of trepidation of reality experienced through one's senses and cognitive processes with knowledge being socially constructed (Gaudet and Robert 2018). Epistemologically, there are similarities with constructivism pertaining to its attention of causal relationships in the social world and its emphasis on synthesis

and context (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2018). However, critical realism often engages deeply with the complex relationships in the social world and systems of socio-political power (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2018). These areas, while important, fell outside the central aim of this study which focused on the lived experiences and perspectives of educators. That said, I remained cognisant that such ideas could surface particularly in Phase Three which included a panel of experts who work beyond the immediate ECE context.

3.3.7 Rationale for Framing My Research Within an Interpretivist Approach

In disparity to a positivist stance, interpretivism is grounded in the assumption that reality needs to be interpreted, moreover, that reality is multiple and relative (Bryman et al. 2021). Researchers embracing this stance seek to understand and interpret the motives, the meanings, and the experiences of the phenomenon. Interpretivism has been associated with a constructivist ontology where truth is subjective, based on individual perspectives, where truth and reality are reliant, individual, and multiple (Braun and Clarke 2021). In this study, the role of 'social actors' in this instance the educators, are salient to gain insight into how they construct and experience the phenomenon that is MP.

My research was firmly grounded within an interpretivist paradigm. Clough and Nutbrown (2017) noted that researcher's values influence their positionality. I acknowledge firstly that I bring my own values and beliefs of MP and ECE, as described in Chapter One, to this present study which are integral to the framing of this study. Secondly, my ontological position rooted in constructivism sat soundly within the realm of interpretivism, as I was concerned with exploring how the individual educators, construct, interpret and enact MP in their unique contexts and how that would in turn generate the data. Thirdly, from my background and

experience as an educator and mindfulness practitioner I brought informed insight to this study, consistent with Bryman and colleagues (2021) recognition that researchers often enter with prior knowledge and experience which may shape their study. I accepted that knowledge about mindfulness would be generated through my interpretation and understanding of the educators' experiences. As I believe MP is an individual and subjective experience, this stance required me to explore how individual educators interpret this n and justified the qualitative open-ended approach used in Phase Two to better capture the depth and nuance of the phenomenon.

Interestingly, when delving into the different paradigms, I recognised that my research journey would not be a linear one, just as it could not be solely inductive. While my research was underpinned by a constructivist and interpretivist stance where I valued subjective meaning and understanding, I integrated pragmatic elements to add depth to this study which enabled greater methodological flexibility. Notably, this included the use of a mixed-methods questionnaire in Phase One where the quantitative elements complemented the qualitative data and offered a more comprehensive insight into the landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland.

3.4 Research Methodology and Design

To align with my ontological stance of constructivism and my epistemological approach anchored in interpretivism, I adopted a predominantly qualitative design for this study. Specifically, I adopted a Big Q qualitative approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) which enabled me to explore the meaning, experience and context of MP through a widely interpretive lens. The study focused on *if, how* and *why* educators are using MP in ECE in Ireland and embraced the subjective and

contextual nature of those experiences. Recent literature (Pascal and Marieke 2022, Albrecht 2018) has supported that qualitative methods such as interviews allow a researcher to explore the lived experience of a mindfulness practitioner.

Phenomenology with its philosophical underpinnings is commonly described as the study of "*lived experience*" (VanManen 1997, p.37). While I did not adopt a formal phenomenological methodology, elements of a phenomenological orientation informed this study. The emphasis on capturing the subjective and contextual experiences of educators' practice of mindfulness particularly aligned with my constructivist and interpretivist foundation. Scholars such as Neubauer et al. *(*2019) and Cohen et al. (2019) highlighted how phenomenological approaches seek to understand the meaning of experiences from the perspective of those who have experienced them, an aim that resonated with this study.

Semi-structured interviews, often the preferred method for exploring such lived experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014) were used in Phase Two to explore *if, how* and *why* educators engage with MP in ECE. This orientation towards lived experience helped shape my interpretive lens through data collection and analysis and remained consistent with the principles of RTA. Within my constructivist and interpretivist stance, particular attention was paid to listening closely to participants' stories and experiences of MP in Phase Two. I engaged not only with what was said but how it was said, remained open to nuance, tone and texture of the words due to my IAA positioning.

While my initial positioning was reflective of 'qualitative thinking' (Mason 2006), seeking to understand the social world through the eyes of the participants (Bryman et al. 2021), I was mindful that the research journey is rarely linear and can take many routes. Using Salmon's Wheel Framework (2022), I continually reflected and

refined my methodological considerations throughout all the three phases of the research study (Figure 3.1).

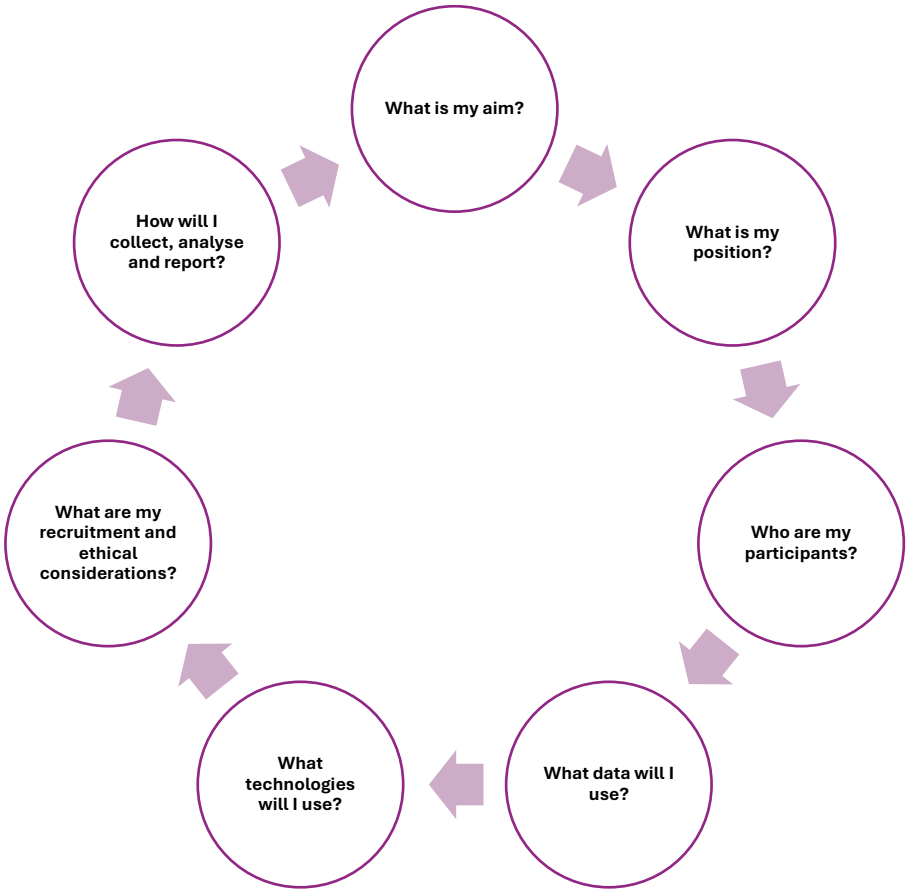


Figure 3.1 Application of Salmon's Wheel Framework

Phase One: I recognised the value of integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This led to a mixed-methods approach solely in Phase One where a qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted through the construction of a questionnaire and the use of different analysis tools (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson 2004). The quantitative questions yielded objective findings, while the qualitative questions captured the educators' subjective experiences allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of MP in ECE in Ireland and to capture that national landscape. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and qualitative answers through RTA.

Phase Two adopted a qualitative approach and used semi-structured interviews with educators who practice mindfulness with young children. RTA was also used to analyse this data.

Phase Three also followed a qualitative approach and consisted of a single focus group with a panel of thought leaders in ECE in Ireland. This phase emerged in response to educators' suggestions in Phase Two who had emphasised the importance of engaging with leaders in the field. RTA was used to analyse the data.

Each phase of the study informed the next, creating a cumulative and responsive process. The findings from Phase One shaped the interview questions in Phase Two and interview participants were recruited from those who completed the questionnaire. Phase Three emerged organically from the educators' suggestions made in Phase Two. This layered approach allowed for the exploration of MP in ECE from multiple and interconnected vantage points. Rather than solely relying on traditional triangulation, I used methodological triangulation through multiple data collection methods to generate a more comprehensive understanding of MP (Phases One, Two, Three). Furthermore, the study also embraced data source triangulation by using multiple perspectives from educators and leaders in policy, education and research to enrich my interpretations. By using multiple phases, it strengthened the trustworthiness of the study while also providing a more comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of MP in ECE. A summary of the three phases of this study is illustrated in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Summary of the Three-phase Study

Phase of study	Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three
Methodology	Mixed methods embedded approach	Qualitative approach	Qualitative approach
Methods	Mixed methods online questionnaire	Semi-structured interviews	Single focus group
Rationale	Capture prevalence of MP in early childhood education in Ireland. Capture multiple view points	To reveal many stories from the educators. In depth insight into lived experiences of MP. Builds on previous phase	Triangulation purposes to allow convergence/ divergence. Offers a collective perspective Builds on previous phase
Timeline	March to May 2023	November 2023- January 2024	February 2025
Sample details	N= 744 Early childhood educators who may/ may not use mindfulness practice with young children	N= 27 Early childhood educators who use mindfulness with young children	N=5 A panel of "thought leaders", individuals with expertise in education, policy and research in early childhood education in Ireland.

3.4.1 The Rationale for a Mixed-methods Approach

Adopting a mixed-methods approach that employs both quantitative and qualitative methods as part of a singular study can add significant value to a research study (Bryman et al. 2021; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010). Moreover, taking such an approach could provide richer insight into MP in ECE that may not be fully understand using a mono method.

At the outset, due consideration was given to the four primary types of mixed-methods design: convergent, embedded, sequential and multiphase. An embedded

design was deemed the most suitable for this research study that aligns with Creswell's definition that the "*researcher combines the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data within a traditional quantitative research design or a qualitative research design*" (2010, p.90). For this study, I decided the quantitative element of the questionnaire was complementary and embedded within a predominantly qualitative study (Creswell and Plano-Clarke 2018; Halcomb and Hickman 2015).

When reflecting on my ontological and epistemological position where interpretation plays an integral role, I intentionally allowed for the mixed-methods approach to be emergent. Initially I considered a full quantitative questionnaire, however as I reviewed the literature and reflected on my research paradigm, I recognised the importance of including open and closed questions. This allowed for statistical insight and to map the landscape of MP in early childhood while also providing an exploration of educators' experiences.

Using a mixed-methods approach in the questionnaire use in Phase One afforded depth and breadth to my analysis (Creswell and Poth 2018; Mason 2006). Through the quantitative questions, I was able to quantify trends, and through qualitative questions I captured the nuances of educators' experiences with MP. Although I hold a primarily qualitative orientation (Mason 2006), the inclusion of the quantitative material in Phase One helped to reveal the broader landscape of MP in early childhood in Ireland. Taking this pragmatic approach also allowed me to capture multiple viewpoints; from educators who practice and do not practice mindfulness with children allowing a more comprehensive understanding.

Additionally, the questionnaire in Phase One assisted with the participant recruitment for the qualitative interviews conducted in Phase Two. In summary,

adopting an embedded mixed-methods approach in this research study allowed multiple ways of acquiring knowledge and enabled me to:

- Use a variety of methods, questionnaire, interviews and focus group to capture the multidimensionality of MP.
- Assess the prevalence of MP in early childhood in Ireland identified in Phase One.
- Build sequentially from one phase of the research study to the next.
- Gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research question.
- Add depth and breadth to the analysis through methodological triangulation via multiple data collection methods and data source triangulation through educators and thought leaders' perspectives.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis process can be time consuming for a researcher with vast amounts of data to be analysed, so it is imperative to have a robust system in place (Janesick 2011) in order to make sense of what has been generated (LeCompte 2000).

3.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Data analysis for Phase One employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analysis tools to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the questionnaire responses. I considered different ways to approach quantitative data analysis while being mindful of the potential size of my sample, the types of variables, and whether I would need to conduct univariate and bivariate analysis

(Bryman et al. 2021). I wanted to explore the variables and consider the possible relationships between responses.

Quantitative data was analysed using IBM SPSS (V28) predictive analytics software, while qualitative responses were explored through manual thematic coding. This dual method approach was chosen to align with the mixed-methods questionnaire design to capture measurable trends and rich insights from the educators.

3.5.2 Consideration of Qualitative Analysis Methods and Route to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

I initially considered Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), however within IPA, bracketing one's ideas and beliefs is an important element and as discussed in Chapter One due to my positionality, from my thirteen years' experience as a mindfulness practitioner and 20 years as an educator in ECE, this would not be probable. Additionally, I was mindful of my sample size of 20 to 30 participants in Phase Two, which did not suit the smaller sample of 3 to 10 participants for deep idiographic analysis that IPA typically recommends (Smith et al. 2009). I also considered the possibility of content analysis for Phase Two and Three, which focuses on counting and categorising words (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). Upon reflection I felt such an approach could prioritise the presence and meanings of words, which could deviate from my interpretative focus of this study.

Given my constructivist and interpretivist underpinnings, I aimed to understand the subjective meanings and experiences of the educators, while being reflexive throughout the research process. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, and my positionality as both a mindfulness practitioner and previous educator, Reflexive

Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) was identified as the most suitable method of analysis.

RTA acknowledges the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and views subjectivity as a resource, not a limitation. This was particularly relevant to the present study as my professional experience informed a deeper, contextually grounded interpretation of the data. Through ongoing reflexivity, I was able to critically reflect on how my assumptions, values and experiences shaped the research process.

Moreover, RTA's flexible and interpretive nature also aligned with my conceptual lens of IAA, where awareness and intention are integral. RTA facilitated me to identify, analyse and generate patterns of meaning across participants' accounts rather than seeking an objective truth. It allowed me to use a larger sample size which supported the development of rich, patterned insights across educators' experiences.

3.5.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and the Present Study

RTA is considered a flexible interpretive approach to qualitative data analysis that enables the discovery of themes and patterns (Byrne 2021). RTA is rooted within the researcher's interpretive analysis of the data, whereby RTA differs from other thematic analysis methods as it is concerned with the researcher's own reflective and thoughtful engagement (Braun and Clarke 2021). Given my positionality, the study's epistemological and ontological stance and following in-depth reflection, I determined that RTA was the most suitable fit for this study.

3.5.3.1 Application of the Four Dimensions of RTA

Throughout this phase I was guided by the four dimensions of RTA (Braun and Clarke 2021) which afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my conceptual lens of intention attention and attitude. Firstly, in taking an inductive and experiential approach I sought to capture educators' voices by listening and documenting what the educators were telling me in Phase Two and the panel of thought leaders in Phase Three. My intention was to stay open and curious to their stories and allow those experiences to shape the data. This meant I approached each interview with an open and mindful listening approach. Secondly, the process of semantic and latent analysis by exploring both the explicit meanings and underlying sentiments from the educators took sustained attention. This attention allowed me to remain attuned to what was being said and potentially what was meant which provided a deep analysis. Thirdly, through an experiential orientation I focused my attention and respectful curiosity of the educators' lived experiences of MP and listened to their observed impacts on young children. Lastly, taking a constructivist approach helped me to understand how the educators constructed their meaning of MP. Reflexivity was critical here as I recognised my intentions and attitude shaped by my experiences influenced how I made sense of the data. This approach aligned with my epistemological and ontological perspective as discussed previously in Section 3.3. How I applied RTA in Phases One, Two and Three are described in their respective chapters.

3.6 Navigating the Other Ology: Axiology: the Role of Values, Positionality and Reflexivity.

Axiology is a fundamental component of the research paradigm concerned with the ethical issues that need to be contemplated during the research process commonly referred to as the theory of values (Khatri 2020; Maxwell 2013). Exploring axiology

was integral for this research study with an ethical understanding that not only is the research value bound, and that I as researcher may be part of what is being researched. I spent considerable time reflecting on my 'research imaginary' (Lather 2006) as a conceptual approach for researchers to explore their beliefs, values and assumptions that may influence how we think, how we speak, and how we read and interact with empirical data. Consequently, I reflected on my positionality, my values, and how I engaged with reflexivity, which will be explored in the following sections.

3.6.1 Exploring My Positionality.

It has been suggested that a researcher influences and shapes the research process both personally and within the position of a theorist (Pillow 2003). Comparably, Holmes (2020) suggested that a researcher must be aware of one's positioning that not only impacts the ontological and epistemological assumptions, moreover, their assumptions regarding participants agency, how individuals interact and respond to their environment. In interpretivist research there is an understanding that knowledge is situated in relations between people (Bryman et al. 2021). My position as researcher within a predominantly interpretivist stance played a fundamental role in the interpretation and unveiling of situated knowledge (Cohen et al 2019). Moreover, my personal characteristics, background, and experience took a central role in the research process (Bryman et al. 2021).

I was mindful of my social origin, and my position within the academic field in addition to the scholastic point of view that I hold (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Considering their reflexivity interrogation allowed me to recognise the influence of my individual autobiography. As described in Chapter One, I draw on 13 years' experience of personal MP and 20 years working in the early childhood sector in Ireland. I possibly share some similarities with the participants in this study;

therefore, I could not keep an objective distance from the phenomenon. As I explained in Section 3.3.3 my constructivist stance infers that knowledge is constructed with multiple realities, and that my own construction shaped my understanding and interpretation of the data.

I spent time reflecting on my positionality and the role I would play in this research journey. Metaphors have been used by both Kvale and Brinkman (2014) and Salmons (2015) to explain the different roles a researcher can employ. Looking through this lens allowed me to accept my role as miner, traveller and gardener at different stages of the research journey. In Phase One, I acted as a miner (Kvale and Brinkman 2014) within the mixed-methods questionnaire where my aim was to dig out facts and information from the educators' responses that would answer my research questions. In Phase Two within the semi-structured interviews, I acted as a traveller (Kvale and Brinkman 2014), whereby I was journeying alongside the participants with an attitude of curiosity and open mindedness where I explored, described, and interpreted what the educators shared with me. At times, I acted as a gardener (Salmons 2015) using mindful listening, intentional questioning and nurtured a collaborative discussion. Within the focus group in Phase Three, I further developed my role as gardener (Salmons 2022), by nurturing group discussions, mindfully engaging with the online platform, providing meaningful questions to elicit responses, and engaged in mindful listening and created a space for each person's contribution.

3.6.2 My Value Driven Approach of Intention, Attention and Attitude (IAA)

Given the predominant interpretivist positioning of this study, I understand that this research is value bound, thus I could not be separated. Due to my positioning and experiences, I recognised I was part of what was being researched. My professional

background in ECE and MP inevitably shaped how I viewed and interpreted the data (Creswell and Creswell 2023).

As described in Chapter One, I brought a strong intrinsic value to the study rooted in my belief of the universal and inclusive potential of MP to enhance the wellbeing of all from early childhood to adulthood. This value refers to internal satisfaction and commitment to MP rather than for external satisfaction (Biedenbach and Jacobsson 2016).

My values based conceptual lens of intention, attention and attitude (IAA) guided how I shaped this study. Intention shaped the purpose of this study as I explored MP rather than evaluating. Attention was central to how I engaged in this study through my interactions with the participants where my MP supported me to be present and attentive to what was unfolding. My attitude was rooted in openness, curiosity and compassion throughout as it supported me on how I approached my data analysis and cemented my reflexivity and openness to diverse perspectives.

I remained mindful that my values influenced the research process (Bourke 2014), moreover I was cognisant that values and positionality can change over time that may be situation and context dependent (Sirris 2022; Holmes 2020). Drawing on Warin's (2011) value-based mindfulness as described in Chapter One, I held significant value to my personal practice of mindfulness and lent into my IAA lens for stability, focus and grounding and remained open to the research journey as it unfolded.

3.6.3. Reflexivity

Throughout this research journey, it became apparent to me that reflexivity was intertwined with the concept of my value-based mindfulness (Warin 2011). Maintaining my personal mindful and reflexive approach allowed me to interrogate

my decisions and consider how my values drive my research (Sirris 2022; Warin 2011). This reflexivity also allowed me to remain open to participants differing values as they arose.

For the purpose of this study, reflexivity began at the early stages through identification of my preconceptions that I brought into the project. By embracing an interpretivist stance, I recognised the impact of my values, beliefs and insight into the phenomenon being explored. As explained in Chapter One, reflexivity was not used in isolation or as a quick tool but was an embedded practice throughout this research study. Through the intersection of reflexivity and mindfulness I was able to include mindful reflexive pauses (MRP) to engage in present moment attention, share my thinking, consider my IAA approach and to critically examine my choices throughout the research process.

By reflecting on my personal background, culture and lived experiences that may have potentially shaped the interactions (Creswell and Creswell 2023) I had with the participants, I was also able to shift beyond these components that may otherwise have influenced the direction of the study. Personal introspection (Finlay 2002) prompted deeper reflection about my own interpretations of the data. This type of reflection allowed me to question why I thought of the data in a certain way, the meaning I attached to it, and also as a method to understand each educator's experience. Keeping reflexive diaries and engaging in mindful reflexive pauses allowed a continual process of reflexivity which aligned itself with the RTA method used for this study Taking this reflexive approach enhanced the trustworthiness and value of the study (Sirris 2022), while allowing me to identify my changing role, how I managed my role as researcher, and the impact that my values and experiences had on this research study. Some reflections are included in Appendix A.

The image below illustrates my research paradigm and visually summarises the philosophical and methodological foundation of this study. It captures my roots of reflexivity, and the influence of my values based conceptual lens of IAA (intention-attention-attitude). The tree metaphor as illustrated in Figure 3.2 symbolises how each element, ontology, epistemology, methodology methods and axiology interconnects and grounds my research process.

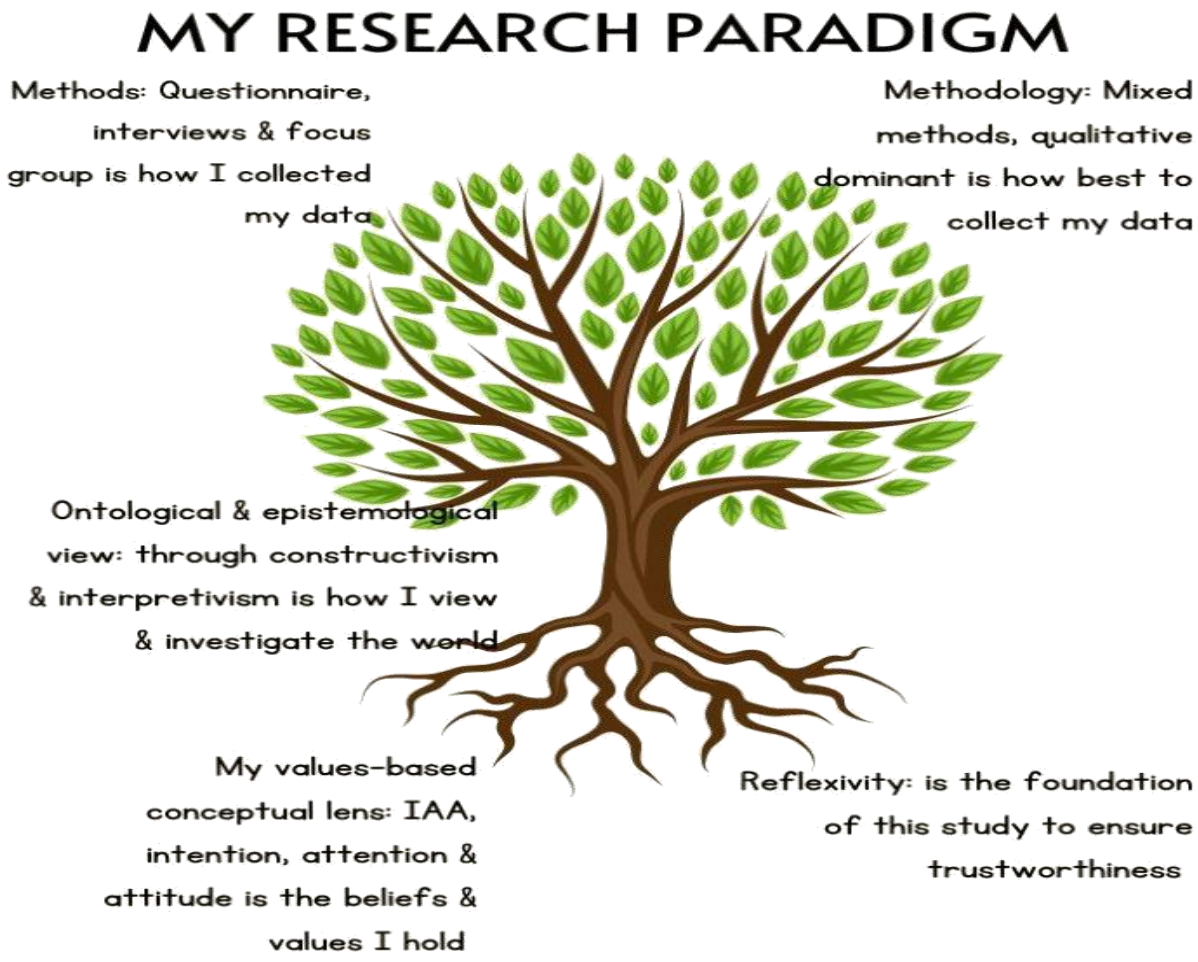


Figure 3.2 My Research Paradigm Tree

3.7 Ethical Procedures

Ethics forms the foundation of responsible research practice, protecting the rights and wellbeing of participants while ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research study (Creswell and Creswell 2023; Wa-Mbaleka 2019). Bertram et al. (2025,2016) argue that ethical practice goes beyond receiving ethical approval from an ethics committee but remains an ongoing process that early childhood researchers must embody to ensure respect and reflexivity.

This research study was guided by the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al. 2025, 2016) which provides a framework grounded in values of justice, equity, respect, integrity and reflexivity. Most notably, I was drawn to what the authors describe as an ‘ethic of respect’ which acknowledges the rights, autonomy and dignity of the participants, as my aim was to extend the knowledge of MP by knowing different multiple perspectives (Bertram et al. 2025, p.4). Ethical practice was not viewed as a single check point but as an ongoing reflexive process where I reflected on my positionality, social responsibility and power dynamics.

Approval was sought from Dundalk Institute of Technology’s (DkIT) School of Health and Science Ethics Committee before commencing the study. All participants were fully informed of the nature of the study and the measures taken to ensure consent and to protect their anonymity and confidentiality (informed consent, participation information sheets).

The ethical procedures for each phase of the research study will be explained in more detail within Chapter Four, Chapter Five and Chapter Six respectively. A summary of the ethical procedures undertaken is illustrated below in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Summary of Ethical Procedures

Phase	One	Two	Three
Methods	Mixed methods questionnaire	Semi-structured interviews	Focus group
Ethical approval	February 2023	October 2023	January 2025
Informed consent & voluntary contribution	Participants provided with participant information sheet, participant consent, gatekeeper information sheet	Participants provided with participant information sheet, participant consent, gatekeeper information sheet, follow up information sheet	Participants provided with participant information sheet, participant consent, follow up information sheet
Anonymity & confidentiality	Not asked for name Appropriate data storage	Use of pseudonyms Appropriate data storage	Use of pseudonyms Appropriate data storage
Data storage	Encrypted file on password protected laptop and encrypted one drive. Emails saved separate from data.	Encrypted file on password protected laptop and encrypted one drive. Recordings erased after transcription and analysis.	Encrypted file on password protected laptop and encrypted one drive. Recordings erased after transcription and analysis.
Rigour method	Application of trustworthiness	Application of trustworthiness	Application of trustworthiness

3.7.1 Down a Rabbit Hole of Validity, Reliability, and Rigour Which Led Me to Trustworthiness.

Validity and reliability are two key aspects of research that are essentially concerned with the adequacy of measures and the soundness of findings. Although primarily geared towards quantitative research, validity and reliability can be determined differently in mixed-methods studies (Bryman et al. 2021). In quantitative studies validity is mainly concerned with statistical inclusion, internal, external and construct validity (Shadish et al. 2001). Conversely, qualitative studies are more concerned with the understanding and interpretation of the data (Maxwell 2013; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The concept of rigour has been described as the process of how both validity and reliability are applied in a research study. When exploring these

concepts, I considered if and how these concepts relate to my study. I was drawn towards the concept of 'trustworthiness' as coined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) where qualitative researchers can ensure rigour through the quality, truthfulness and authenticity of the work undertaken by the researcher. Trustworthiness was applied throughout the research study, with an overview of the measures illustrated in Table 3.4. The application of trustworthiness is examined separately for each phase of the study, with each discussed in its own chapter.

Table 3.4 Overview of Application of Trustworthiness in study

Credibility (in preference to validity)	**Transferability (in preference to generalisation)**	**Dependability (in preference to reliability)**	**Confirmability (in preference to objectivity)**
Adopted clear procedures, thorough exploration of typology of questions for questionnaire, interviews and focus group. Rigorous exploration of data analysis methods. Familiarisation with phenomena of mindfulness and early childhood education through extensive literature review. Ensured inclusion of rich descriptions. Engaged in continuous debrief with supervisors as a sounding board and address arising issues. Engaged in rich in-depth discussions with participants in phase two and three. Used mindful reflexive pauses throughout, considering multiple and different view -points, sharing my own thoughts, ideas and interpretations. .	Clarity on the use of purposive sampling and provision of thick descriptions will allow future researchers explore the contextual factors. Immersion in data throughout all phases to ensure a comprehensive understanding. Recordings were meticulously transcribed. Included diverse perspectives, those who practice and do not practice mindfulness with young children in Phase One. Focus group provided further view-points.	Used a multi-prong strategy of questionnaires, interviews and focus group. Reviewed data multiple times to ensure I was immersed, and understood meaning. Documented all steps and procedures undertaken in the study to create an audit trail. Quantitative data from closed questions in Phase One were analysed through SPSS ensuring consistency and transparency in data handling. Engaged in ongoing debriefs with supervisors to discuss findings.	Maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to reflect on my role, positionality, values and choices. Using reflexive thematic analysis allowed me to analyse and interpret the data in a robust manner. Inclusion of direct quotes from participants to ground the findings across all three phases. The use of SPSS for quantitative data reduced some of the manual handling of data and assisted with analytics. Used triangulation of methods, questionnaires, interviews and focus group.

3.7.2 Considering Beneficence.

While designing this research study I considered whether this study could potentially cause harm to the participants, consequently, I created a distress protocol and took

measures to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. I started to reflect beyond these ethical parameters. I began to question, outside of myself as a PhD candidate, who would benefit from this research study (Hennink et al. 2020)? While the initial aim was academic to attain my PhD, I also hoped to contribute to the evolving field of MP in early childhood.

3.8 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Closure of Chapter

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

I pause to reflect on my intentional design of this research study, resting on a mixed-methods approach felt an authentic way to capture the complexities of mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland. It allowed space for breadth with the quantitative elements and depth through the qualitative insights which gifted me with a sense of balance, quite similar to mindfulness itself. I made the intentional decision to structure the methodology across all three phases rather than presenting it in one chapter. This choice was both practical and philosophical by holding attention to each chapter as it unfolded.

Figure 3.3 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

This chapter has outlined how my research study is grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, which reflected my aim to explore educators' meaning, experience and context of MP in ECE. While my primary stance was qualitative and interpretive, I adopted a pragmatic layer in Phase One by incorporating a mixed-methods questionnaire. In doing so, this helped me capture broad patterns and themes, which I was then able to explore within the following phases of semi-structured interviews and the focus group. Within this chapter, I shared my intentional methodological choices that underpinned the three-phase study, a study that sought to understand the participants lived experiences with MP in ECE.

My study is also underpinned by a reflexive consideration of axiology, highlighting how my values most notably my conceptual lens of intention attention and attitude

and my background as an educator and mindfulness practitioner shaped the research study. Ethical procedures were summarised reflecting the care and responsibility I brought to each stage of this study. The next chapter presents Phase One of this research study, titled: "*Exploring the landscape of mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland".* The chapter is divided into three sections, methodology and ethical considerations, questionnaire findings and a discussion.

Chapter Four: Phase One: Exploring the Landscape of Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education in Ireland.

> **"***Mindfulness practice is a way of connecting to myself, to others and to the children"* (Eve- Educator)

4.1 Introduction to Chapter

From the literature review it became apparent that existing research on mindfulness practice (MP) in early childhood education (ECE) has prioritised measuring the impacts of mindfulness-based interventions. While these studies are valuable, there is a notable gap in exploring the lived experiences of educators engaging in MP with young children in ECE. This gap is particularly significant within the Irish context as to date no national study has explored *if*, *how* and *why* MP is being implemented in ECE.

Addressing this gap is timely and relevant as without such insight it remains uncertain if MPs are being used in ECE, how educators implement MP and the reasons for doing so or not doing so. Establishing a national overview is an essential first step in understanding the landscape of MP in ECE.

To do so, a survey approach was adopted utilising an online mixed-methods questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. This method was chosen to capture both quantitative trends (prevalence, typologies of practice) and qualitative data (capture insights) from educators across Ireland. As Bryman (2016) highlighted, surveys using questionnaires are a useful tool to gather large data from a large population when the goal is both exploratory and descriptive. Therefore, the questionnaire served a dual function, to map the landscape of MP in ECE at a national level while also amplifying the voices and experiences of the educators.

The research aims were addressed by the following research questions for this phase of study:

- Is MP being implemented in ECE in Ireland?
- In what ways is MP being implemented in ECE?
- What are the reasons for sharing/ not sharing MP with young children?
- Do educators engage in personal MP and if so, in what ways?
- Have educators engaged in any training in mindfulness?
- What are educators' understanding of mindfulness?

This chapter is laid out in three sections:

Section 4.2 presents the methodological choices I made including the sampling and recruitment processes undertaken, data collection procedures used, data analysis performed and ethical considerations.

Section 4.3 presents the findings of the questionnaire.

Section 4.4 offers a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature

4.2 Phase One Research Method and Design

The research process undertaken is summarised in Figure 4.1 below.

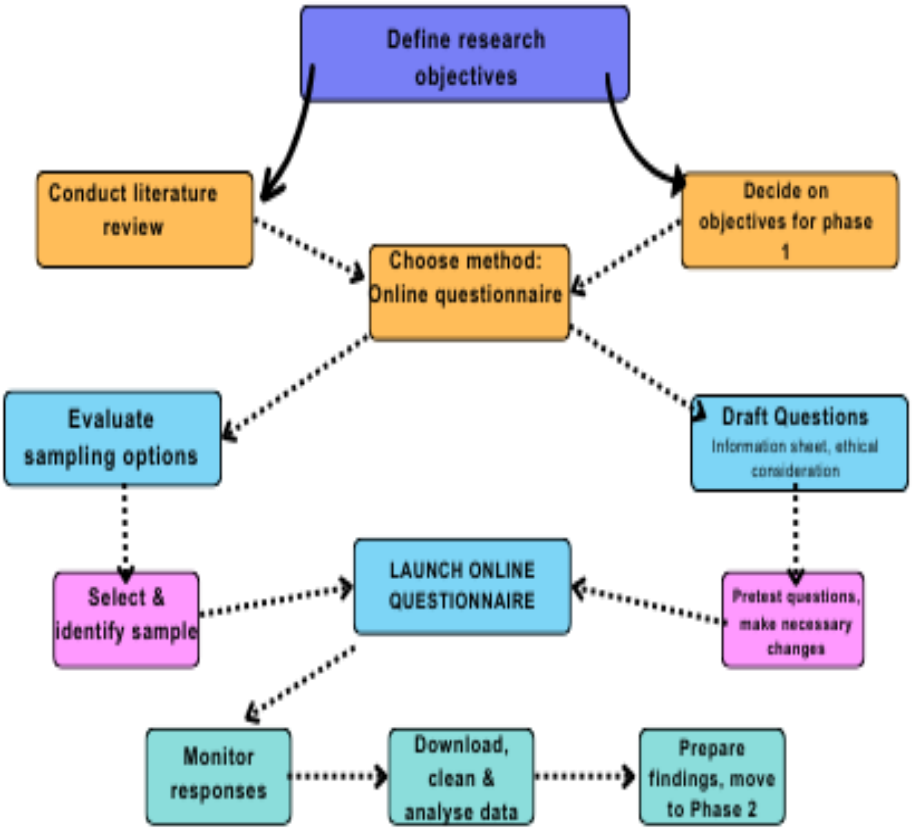


Figure 4.1 Research Process Phase One

4.2.1 Sample and Recruitment

This phase was conducted in Ireland between March and May 2023 and invited contributions from educators currently working in ECE within the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland, with the questionnaire open for six weeks. Given the inclusion criterion of working as an educator in ECE, nonprobability purposive sampling was used. Nonprobability purposive sampling does not seek to represent the wider population but instead targets participants with the specific knowledge necessary for the study (Cohen et al. 2019). A multi-pronged strategy was used to maximise reach across the country and ensured adequate responses (Ponto 2015).

Access to the population was generated in the following three ways:

1. Emails sent to early childhood services in Ireland (3,854) via the list from the publicly available HIVE database.
2. A link on my professional LinkedIn page
3. Engagement with early childhood professional organisations and networks.

1. Direct Emails to ECE Settings

The Hive database is a public catalogue of early childhood and school age childcare settings that are registered for funding schemes in Ireland (www.ncs.gov.ie). The details on the database include the location, type of service offered and email contact details of the services. Of the 4,119 services detailed on the platform, 265 declared they were school age childcare only, therefore were excluded. Consequently, all 3,854 early childhood services were contacted directly by email (see Appendix B)

Each service was contacted via an email of invitation to take part in this national study, explaining its purpose, what was required and the link to the online Microsoft Forms questionnaire. I ensured the cover email detailing the study and why their contribution would be valuable to this study was coherent. Attached to the email was the gatekeeper information sheet for the manager/owner explaining the purpose of the study in more detail (see Appendix C), along with the participant information sheet (see Appendix D). Details of consent and participation are explored in Section 4.2.5.1 below.

2. LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a business and employment focused social media platform used for professional networking was identified as an efficient recruitment tool because it provided access to professional groups and had the potential to increase my sample

size. A public advertisement was displayed on my professional page, inviting educators to participate in my study. This included a summarised version of the study, what was required of the potential participants, and links to the participant information sheet and online questionnaire. Reminder posts were shared at two weeks, four weeks and the final sixth week to generate interest. While there may be valuable concerns regarding the efficacy of recruiting participants through social media (Gelinas et al. 2017) with possible exclusion of potential participants without access to social media (Khatri 2020), LinkedIn was nevertheless an optimal strategy that would require minimal resources, one that could have a widespread reach across the twenty-six counties of Ireland. Moreover, using LinkedIn allowed me reach educators or services that may not be listed on the Hive database; however, I was cognisant that the contacts on my LinkedIn page may result in like-minded individuals who may already have an interest in mindfulness.

3. My Own Professional Contacts

I was cognisant that my sample involves individuals that represent a specific population, namely early childhood educators. Leaning into my knowledge and experience of the sector allowed access to several professional early childhood organisations that may be able to act as gatekeepers to disseminate my questionnaire. The list of organisations I contacted with details of my current study, gatekeeper information sheet, participant information sheet and the link to the online questionnaire is outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 List of Organisations Contacted with Invitation to share Questionnaire

Organisation	Rationale for choice
31 childcare committees in the Republic of Ireland	May have professional connections with individual ECE settings
Universities in Ireland that deliver an ECE undergraduate or postgraduate programmes	May have database of ECE graduates
Professional early childhood education organisations	May have contact details of ECE settings / educators.

4.2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires are a widely used robust system for collecting qualitative and quantitative information from participants (Salmons 2022; Sue and Ritter 2012). An online questionnaire was chosen as it allowed a broad reach, making it a cost-effective means for engaging geographically dispersed educators. An online questionnaire can be suitable for descriptive, case control and evaluation studies and can be used at one point in time to capture the viewpoints from the educators (Nayak and Narayan 2019).

The online questionnaire allowed for a mixture of quantitative questions and open-ended questions to be used to encourage multiple responses and viewpoints. In total 27 questions were included. It comprised of 16 closed questions that required a yes/ no answer or a selection of pre-populated options, and 11 open-ended questions that allowed the educators to provide reflections and insight into their thoughts and experiences of MP (see Appendix E).

Question types were carefully chosen, reflecting the research study's objectives (Bryman et al. 2021). The development of the questions was informed by reflecting on the research objectives to gain breadth and depth of MP in ECE. As there was no existing questionnaire conducted that was directly applicable to ECE to map the landscape, items were developed iteratively, drawing on key concepts in the literature. The questionnaire included personal factual questions (educational level, personal MP), attitudinal questions (e.g. reasons to practice mindfulness or not practice mindfulness), and knowledge-based questions (e.g. understanding of mindfulness). I remained mindful of my ethical considerations and approached the process in a respectful and reflexive manner (Bertram et al. 2025). Care was taken to avoid leading and lengthy questions, and balancing closed with open- ended questions to support a greater response (Bryman et al. 2021).

The development of the questionnaire and its refinement was supported through discussion with my research supervisors, ensuring clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research study's aim and objectives. Examples of the types of questions are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Question Types for Questionnaire

Single answer multiple choice (n=10)	**Multiple answer multiple choice (n=5)**	**Dropdown question (n=1)**	**Open ended questions (n=11)**
A closed question to allow exploration of quantitative data. E.g. "Have you ever practiced mindfulness with young children in your setting?" "Have you ever practised mindfulness yourself?" "Have you ever attended any accredited/certified training(s) that allows you to teach mindfulness to young children in the early years?"	A closed question which allowed participants select multiple reasons. E.g. " Could you please share the possible reasons you do not practice mindfulness with young children, please select all the apply to you" "If you have practiced informal mindfulness with young children, below are some of the mediums of informal practice. Please select all that apply to your work with young children.	A dropdown question for participants to select county they work in.	To allow participants use own words and descriptions. E.g. "Could you share with me what mindfulness means to you?" "If there is anything else you would like to contribute regarding mindfulness practice, please do so here."

While the online questionnaire was the optimal choice, upon reflection I was aware there were some limitations to this approach. For instance, I could not probe the participants to answer a question or rephrase the question in a different way to nurture a response, opportunities that are more associated with an interview.

By not offering the questionnaire in paper format, I unintentionally excluded educators without access to electronic devices to participate. Reflecting on my role in this phase, I was drawn to Kvale and Brinkman's (2014) metaphor of the researcher as a miner. Within this phase I aimed to dig out the facts through the quantitative questions while also excavating educators' experiences and personal insights from the qualitative responses. Using this metaphor helped me strike a balance between the structure and reflexive nature of the questionnaire.

4.2.3 Data Generation Platform

Microsoft Forms web-based application was selected as it provided me with an accessible and secure platform that did not require specific training or technical expertise (Nayak and Narayan 2019). It placed no restrictions on the number of questions or response completion time. It enabled clearly arranged and branched questioning to allow ease of accessibility (Holtz et al. 2024; Bryman et al. 2021) to increase participation. Informed consent was embedded into the first page with a summarised information sheet, and participants were required to select a check box to indicate consent before accessing the questions. The questionnaire was customised to make it visually appealing and included a personal closing message of thanks to the participants. The responses were stored electronically, and transferred with ease to Microsoft Excel and SPSS, while providing visualisations and graphs of the data.

Nevertheless, I was mindful of some limitations in using Microsoft Forms, initially I set all questions as forced responses, but to protect participants right not to answer, a mixture of forced and not forced answers were included. While I included a shortened version of the information sheet and consent at the beginning of the questionnaire, I also included a link to the full information sheet and consent form for the participants. In line with ethical requirements of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Bryman et al. 2021), participants were not asked for their name or the name of the service they worked in. Where participants voluntarily submitted their email to declare interest in receiving results or participating in the next phase, these were stored separately from the participants' responses. Ethical considerations will be explored in more detail in Section 4.2.5.

4.2.4 Piloting the Questionnaire

I piloted the questionnaire as a necessary step to refine the questions (Saunders et al. 2020) and to test the overall effectiveness of the questionnaire to generate the data required (Bryman et al. 2021). By using an expert driven pretest (Presser and Blair 1994), I sourced a small comparable sample to the main study made up of six educators and managers that were personally known, whose data was not included in the study. The purpose of this pilot was to gather feedback to explore the following components of the questionnaire:

- Test the questions to ensure they are comprehensive and clearly articulated.
- Ensure that myself as researcher and the participants interpreted the questions in the same way (Converse and Presser 1996).
- Test the structure of the questionnaire and flow from one section to another.
- Review the balance between open- ended and closed questions.
- Review the response latency of the questionnaire, including the timeline to answer each question, each section and the reading of the participant sheet.
- Allow any additional feedback on the questionnaire.

4.2.4.1 Changes as a Result of Piloting

Six participants took part in piloting the questionnaire and completed feedback (see Appendix F) which provided valuable insight into the clarity, usability and structure of the questionnaire. This feedback was instrumental in refining the questionnaire and were made to enhance the quality. I included a title and description at the beginning of each section of the questionnaire to guide participants and provide an explanation. The background colour of the questionnaire was modified to make it more visually appealing for participants to engage with. Based on the feedback, I revised certain questions to allow multiple selections rather than a singular answer.

These amendments were decided upon to encourage more participant engagement and reduce ambiguity.

4.2.5 Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing the research study, I received ethical approval for Phase One from the School of Health and Science Ethics Committee in DkIT in February 2023 (Appendix H). The principles outlined by the EECERA Ethical Code (Bertram et al. 2025/2016) were reflected upon and adhered to, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and a commitment to avoiding harm. This included reflecting on my professional competence, respect for human rights, integrity, diversity and equality and holding an awareness of my social responsibility as a researcher. Importantly, I approached informed consent not just as a procedural requirement but as an ethical commitment to my participants (Holtz et al. 2024)

4.2.5.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Information sheets were emailed to gatekeepers of prospective participants. Additionally, for recruitment via LinkedIn, a digital information sheet was made available through a link on the platform.

- The participant information sheet outlined the overarching aim and rationale for the study, who was conducting it, what participation involved, potential advantages and disadvantages of participating and how confidentiality and storage of data was managed. This allowed participants to make an informed decision and ensured they had autonomy (Hammer 2017).
- The gatekeeper information sheet was also provided outlining the details of the study and inviting gatekeepers to make an informed choice to distribute the questionnaire to prospective participants.

- Consent was integral to this online questionnaire as it ensured participants are fully informed and fostered self-determination and freedom of choice for the participant (Cohen et al. 2019). Consent was embedded on the first page of the questionnaire, separate from the main questions. Only when participants clicked yes, could they proceed to the next page. This was clearly marked “Consent: I understand that by pressing yes, I confirm that I have read the information leaflet and consent to take part in the questionnaire.”
- I prevented any form of coercion to participate, participants were informed they could opt out by exiting the questionnaire at any stage and the data would not be saved.

4.2.5.2 Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Data Storage

To ensure privacy and anonymity, at no stage were participants asked to reveal their name, age, or place of work, aligning with Cohen et al.’s (2019) stance that the essence of anonymity that information provided should in no way reveal participants identity. Within SPSS, I used ID labels for each questionnaire response which ensured anonymity and a way to organise the data. Nevertheless, there can be difficulties assuring anonymity when combining data that could uniquely describe or identify a particular participant, consequently due care and diligence was taken throughout.

At the end of the questionnaire there was an option for participants to input their email if they wished to receive the findings of the questionnaire and/ or express an interest in partaking in the next phase of the study. To reduce any risk to privacy, I stored the email addresses separately from the participants responses in an encrypted file on my password protected DkIT One Drive account to which I have sole access.

Steps were taken throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Cohen et al. (2019) mention the importance of confidentiality that will not only ensure anonymity but also ensure that no connection to the participant can be made publicly. Consequently, participant data were anonymised through the use of unique identification codes in SPSS. The storage of notes and transcripts were kept on DkIT One Drive which was password protected on a password protected computer that ensured no unauthorised access. My handwritten notes and reflexive diary used during the SPSS analysis process were secured in a locked cabinet to which I had the only key.

Regarding the retention of data, I adhered to the policies of DkIT and GDPR guidelines where data will be retained up to two years post completion of this PhD research study to allow further analysis and potential peer review publication of the study. After the period of two years, all the data will be destroyed/ erased, and no additional copies will be retained.

4.2.5.3 Risk of Harm

According to Bryman et al. (2021) and Hammersley and Traianou (2012) researchers must not put participants in a situation where they may be at risk of harm as a consequence of their participation in the study. I anticipated there to be minimal risk of harm to the participants in terms of safety, welfare and rights for participating in this online questionnaire. Safeguards such as the coding of data as described in Section 4.2.5.2 and secure data storage were implemented in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 (GoI 2018). Voluntary and informed consent was obtained as described in Section 4.2.5.1 to protect participants and minimise any risk. Throughout the ethical approval process and data collection, I met with my

research supervisors which allowed opportunities to discuss any potential ethical issues if they arose.

4.2.5.4 Application of Trustworthiness

Looking through a pragmatic lens with this mixed-methods study, I considered how to address issues of quality and rigour. While quantitative traditions have focused on validity and reliability (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson 2006), these terms were not adopted in their traditional positivist sense within this study. While reliability is traditionally concerned with the consistency and replication of measures utilised (LeCompte 2000), replication was not feasible due to my interpretive role and the one-time use of the questionnaire. (Bryman et al. 2021). Furthermore, the concept of stability of measurement was not discernible as responses may have differed if collected at a different point in time.

While trustworthiness was used as the overarching framework for rigour for this study, in this phase due to the inclusion of closed ended questions, it required consideration of validity and reliability for the quantitative elements. Both content and face validity were explored through the development of the questionnaire which was influenced by the research questions, an exploration of the literature, and the piloting of the questionnaire with participants that were similar to the target sample. While statistical measures of reliability were not used within the pilot, quantitative data from the study was analysed through SPSS to ensure credibility and reliability.

Rather than applying validity and reliability as fixed criteria for this study, I drew on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability which are viewed as appropriate markers of rigour and to ensure the design and administration of the questionnaire generated robust and rigorous findings (See Table 4.3 below).

To address credibility and confidence in my findings, I adopted clear procedures for data collection and analysis. A mixture of closed and open-ended questions were constructed to align with the aims of the study and answer the research questions, while also allowing educators to express their own insight and not be restricted by pre-defined categories. Comprehensive participant information sheets ensured informed consent adding trust to this study. A multi-pronged recruitment strategy maximised wide participation, while piloting the questionnaire with participants similar to the target sample allowed for reflection and refinement. Ongoing debriefing with my supervisors allowed for further reflection and feedback.

Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research data enabling researchers to decide its applicability. Recruiting a sample from the four provinces of Ireland reflected a national landscape. Detailed reporting of inclusion criteria, participants demographics, and the rationale behind methodological decisions allowed others to determine the study's transferability in other contexts.

Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail of changes I made throughout this phase. Piloting the questionnaire played a central role in enhancing dependability by ensuring questions were understandable and appropriately worded for the target audience. Modifications to the questionnaire following the pilot were documented ensuring transparency of the research process.

Confirmability was adopted through ongoing reflection via a reflexive journal which documented my personal reflections, thoughts, assumptions and decision-making processes. Critical conversations with my supervisors helped maintain alignment with the study's aims and objectives and ensured findings were shaped by educators' perspectives.

Table 4.3 Application of Trustworthiness in Phase One

Credibility (in preference to validity)	Transferability (in preference to generalisation)	Dependability (in preference to reliability)	Confirmability (in preference to objectivity)
Adopted clear procedures, questions and choice of SPSS and RTA. Questionnaire aligned with study aims and research questions. Engaged in ongoing debrief with supervisors as a sounding board for questionnaire. Combination of qualitative and quantitative questions to get breadth and depth. Included extracts from the participants.	Described choice of purposive sampling and provision of thick descriptions, e.g. data collection procedures allows researchers explore the contextual factors. Participants from four provinces of Ireland were included, providing a national landscape. Inclusion criteria, methodological decisions documented to enable other researchers to determine transferability.	An audit trail was kept by documenting all steps and procedures undertaken within this phase. This included decision making processes, coding and theme development etc. Piloting supported the refinement of the questions to ensure questions were understandable for the target sample. Quantitative data was analysed through SPSS and qualitative analysis through RTA. I reflected on my theoretical framework, my positionality and values regarding the phenomena being explored. Engaged in ongoing debriefs with supervisors to discuss findings.	I maintained a reflexive journal throughout this phase including my thoughts, ideas and decisions in this phase. Critical conversations with supervisors ensured findings were grounded in participants. .

4.2.6 Data Analysis Procedure

4.2.6.1 Using SPSS

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS. SPSS has been regarded as a user-friendly and straightforward interface (Rahman 2021; Ozgur et al. 2017), which facilitated the performance of statistical analysis. A sample of my engagement with SPSS is provided in Appendix G. Initially, descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequencies and summarise responses, which enabled an exploration of the use, typologies, rationale and barriers to MP. Cross-tabulation was then employed to compare variables and examine patterns. Inferential analysis was conducted to determine potential associations between certain variables. Chi-square tests were used to assess whether a significant relationship existed between factors such as educators' own practice of mindfulness and practice with children, as well as between engagement with training and practice with children. These were selected as they are highlighted as key components impacting practice within the literature. To further examine the strength of relationship between variables,

Cramer's V was employed to examine the strength of relationship between educators' qualifications and their use of MP with young children. The analytical steps I took are illustrated in Table 4.4 below.

Table 4.4 Steps Taken When Using SPSS

Step One **Data Cleaning & Entry**	I imported data from the excel sheet from Microsoft Forms and prepared and cleaned the data for entry into SPSS. I prepared the code book and organised codes, labels and values into data and variable view format. I used thematic coding to assist in quantifying some of the qualitative data.
Step Two **Data Processing**	I inputted the data in two ways via raw data inputted from the cleaned up excel sheet and manually inputted each case of data to ensure immersion in the research process. I separated the data into groups, labels and descriptives for the data. This was repeated three times to ensure there were no errors or missing data.
Step Three **Data Analysis**	I performed effective statistical analysis including mapping trends, creating graphs, charts, diagrams of the data. I embarked on univariate analysis to get a feel of my data through diagrams and charts. I used bivariate analysis using descriptive analysis and chi square testing to explore relationships between variables. I did not proceed to multivariate analysis as I was not looking to explore relationships between three or more variables.

In preparing the dataset for analysis using SPSS, value labels were applied. 99 was inputted to non-relevant cells. For example, when educators were asked to provide a reason they share MP with young children, for any participant that did not use MP with young children, a code of 99 was applied.

4.2.6.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

I conducted thematic coding of the qualitative responses in parallel, manually coding and grouping the data to identify patterns of meaning (Jnanathapaswi 2021; Braun and Clarke 2013) Thematic coding was integral to this phase of data analysis as it allowed me to organise the qualitative responses. Although, I employed thematic

coding techniques to organise the qualitative responses, my approach was more pragmatic and descriptive rather than interpretative for the four open-ended questions that invited personal insight from the educators such as, “Could you share with me what mindfulness means to you?”, “Could you describe what mindfulness practice you have engaged with yourself?”, “Would you share your reasons for practicing mindfulness with young children?” and the final question, “Is there anything else you would like to contribute regarding mindfulness practice?”

Manual coding was intentionally selected over the use of qualitative data analysis software (e.g. NVivo) that allowed me to stay close and engaged with the qualitative data. This approach allowed me to become familiar with the data set and supported a more iterative and reflexive approach of analysis. Additionally, as SPSS was used for quantitative analysis, a more visual and manual approach to coding was considered complementary. This approach allowed me to be more attentive and intentional engagement with the RTA process.

I systematically read and re-read the responses to support familiarisation and the identification of patterns within the data set. In doing so, I identified recurring words and phrases as points of interest. While these codes were primarily more descriptive and semantic in nature, I was able to group similar responses under shared codes to allow me to capture how certain ideas appeared. This process helped inform my understanding and guided the development of questions in Phase Two. An example of this coding process drawn from the question, “Could you share with me what mindfulness means to you?” is provided in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5 Sample of Categorising Codes for Question: Could you share with me what mindfulness means to you?

Codes	Present moment	Breathing	Awareness of self and place	Coping and self-regulation	Positivity	Spirituality	Connection with self
Sample excerpts	"Being present" [P1] "Being here" [P18] "Living in the now" [P62] "In the moment" [P72] "Tuning into the moment" [P83] "Taking a time to pause in the moment" [P85] "Focus on the present" [P108] "Stop and notice what is happening" [P135] "Minding myself in there here and now" [P176] "Being present in your experience" [P205] "Not worrying about past or future just be in the moment" [P573] "Ability for human presence" [P613] "To experience the present moment" [P617] "Being really in what you are doing" [P713] "Me living in the now" [P719] "To pause and be" [P741]	"It is deep breaths" [P2] it is breathing" [P22] "Taking a breath" [P226] "It is relaxing breathing" [P295] "It is simply breathing" [P667] "Checking in on yourself through the breath" [P619] "Taking a breath to pause" [P621] "It is to wind down and breathe" [P624] "Breathing in and breathing out" [P707]	"Being aware of something" [P4] "Aware of my feelings" [P101] "Being aware of myself and what is going on around me" [P195] "Being aware of what and who is around you" [P376] "Being mindful of everyone and everything" [P580] "Understanding yourself and of life" [P647] "Being aware of you and others" [P665] "Aware of your own feelings also others" [P716]	"It is to pay attention to my inner self" [P32] "Time to be more responsive" [P178] "Calm your internal self" [P183] "Feeling grounded and calm" [P208] "It is about processing emotions" [P216] "Calming my mind" [P324] "Calm everything down in myself" [P368] "Creating space in the mind" [P601] "To clear the headspace and be calm" [P610] "It is resetting myself" [P628] "It centres me" [P652] "Calm and not reactive" [P700]	"Looking on bright side of life" [P15] "Being happy and content" [P68] "Happy in yourself" [P80] "Enjoying each moment" [P204] "Being positive" [P303] "Happy and peaceful in yourself" [P320] "Being content in yourself" [P353] "Being kind to myself" [P604] "Being happy kind and grateful" [P662] "Positive attitude and positive thinking" [P722]	"It is about my spiritual self". "It is connecting to the divine" [P675] "Connection to something higher" [P692] "a buddha relaxing and happy" [P709]	"Connecting with your whole self" [P348] " Listening to your mind and body "[P350] "Making connections to your own self" [P361] "a way of reflection" [P577] "a sense of inner peace" [P578] "Connection to all parts of me for peace" [P649]

Given the exploratory nature of this study, my aim in this phase was to map the landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland. While RTA is often associated with rich interpretive processes, Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasised that it is a flexible and adaptable approach, one that is positioned on a continuum between descriptive and interpretive, thus allowing for researcher autonomy. In this phase, I intentionally adopted a more descriptive stance; I quantified certain qualitative responses into percentages to understand the landscape and summarise trends while emphasising educators' voice through the inclusion of their narratives (Figure 4.11) Although this type of approach may differ from the more interpretive focus associated with RTA (Braun and Clarke 2021), it remains consistent with their view of researcher flexibility.

4.2.7 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Conclusion of Section

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

At the outset, I planned to engage with a traditional RTA of the qualitative responses, however, as I progressed through the analysis, I realised this was not best suited. My original intention was to develop themes from the data, however it became clear to me the importance of this phase was to map the national landscape of mindfulness practice in early childhood education and to inform the subsequent phases of the study. While I did draw on elements of RTA, especially familiarising myself with the data by reading and re reading and developing codes, I made a conscious decision not to progress to generate full themes and focus on the codes. This decision I grappled with, I questioned whether I was being true to RTA and my paradigmatic stance? Taking a step back, I recognised the importance of methodological flexibility as Braun and Clarke (2021) highlight RTA is not a rigid process but a flexible framework that is to be used authentically and meaningfully and I knew I was on the right path.

Figure 4.2 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

In summary, using a mixed-methods approach in Phase One allowed me to explore diverse perspectives (Dawadi et al. 2021) from educators who do and do not practice mindfulness with children. Conducting a national questionnaire added

breadth to the study by accumulating data from a wider number of participants across the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland which I would not have been able to capture with a monomethod of interviews. The next section will delve into my findings from this online questionnaire.

4.3 Introduction to Findings

The aim of Phase One was to generate information regarding educators' experience using MP with young children in ECE settings in Ireland. Demographic data is presented to understand the representativeness of the sample. Descriptive statistics have captured educators' use, rationale, typology, barriers and construction of MP. Inferential statistics are also reported, exploring associations between variables such as educators' own practice and that with children, qualification level and practice, training and practice. The total response rate was 806 questionnaires; however, 62 responses were excluded from the final analysis for not meeting the inclusion criteria (participant working as an educator in ECE), which resulted in 744 responses being included in the analysis.

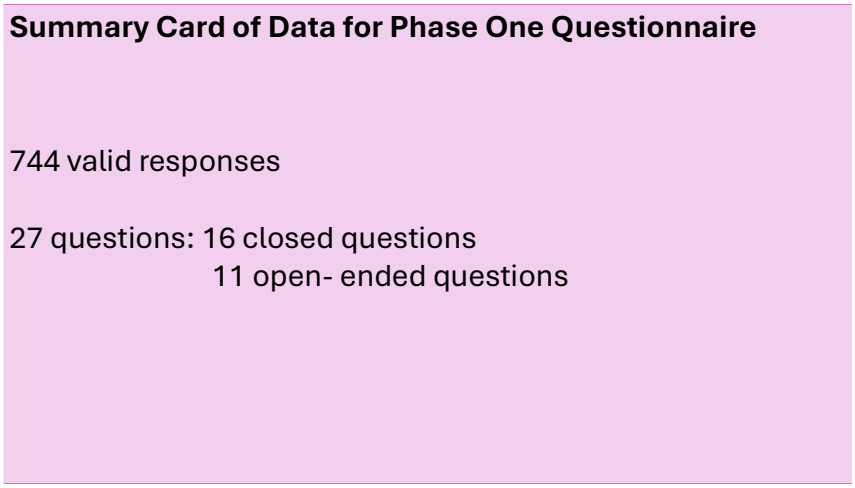


Figure 4.3 Summary Card of Data for Phase One

4.3.1 Demographic Data

In total *n*=744 participants completed the questionnaire; 714 participants identified as female (96%), 11 (1%) as male, 14 (2%) preferred not to say and 5 (1%) as non-binary. Over one third (*n*=267) had more than 16 years' experience in ECE with 27 respondents (4%) working in ECE for less than one year. Almost half (46%) of the sample were from Leinster in the east of Ireland with the smallest proportion (8%) being from the Ulster counties within the Republic of Ireland. Forty-four percent reported primarily working with preschool age children, whereas 43% worked with multiple age groups. Further demographics of the participant sample are provided in Table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6 Demographics of Sample Phase One

Category	Sub-category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
ECEC Qualification	Level 5 (Entry level certificate)	52	7%
	Level 6 (Higher certificate)	208	28%
	Level 7 (Ordinary Bachelor's degree)	149	20%
	Level 8 (Honours Bachelor's degree)	268	36%
	Level 9 or above (Master's degree +)	67	9%
Time Working in ECE	Less than 1 year	29	4%
	1 to 3 years	88	12%
	4 to 6 years	91	12%
	7 to 9 years	83	11%
	10–12 years	89	12%
	13–15 years	97	13%
	16 years +	267	36%
Ages of Children Educators Work With	Under 2s	89	12%
	Preschool (2.5–6 years)	328	44%
	Afterschool (4–12 years)	7	1%
	Multiple age groups	320	43%
Location of Sample	Leinster (East of Ireland)	339	46%
	Munster (South of Ireland)	261	34%
	Connaught (West of Ireland)	86	12%
	Ulster (North of Ireland)	58	8%

4.3.2 Do Educators Engage in Self -practice of Mindfulness and/ or Practice with Children?

The educators were asked if they engage in self-practice of mindfulness, with 502 (67%) of the respondents reporting they practice some form of mindfulness (see Figure 4.4). Similarly, 486 (65%) reported using MPs with young children in their ECE setting (see Figure 4.5).

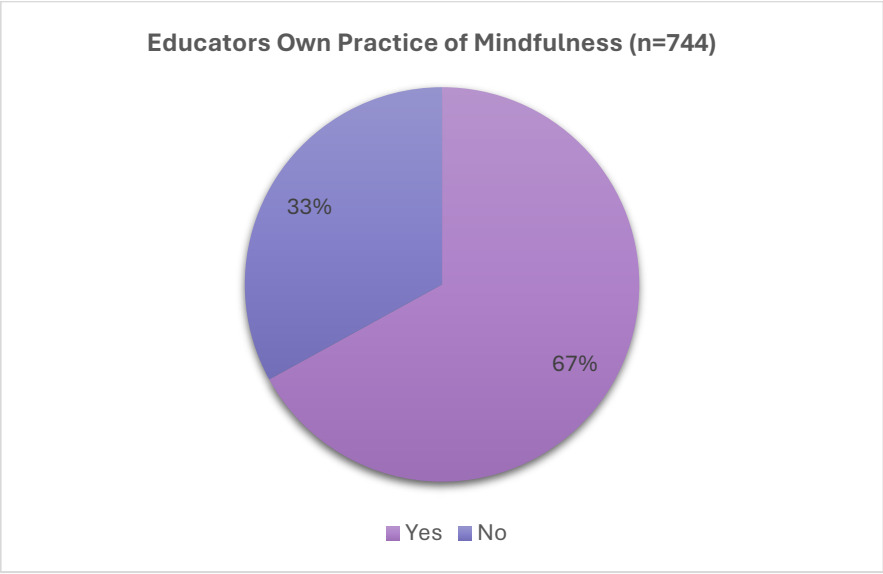


Figure 4.4 Educators Who engage in Self-practice

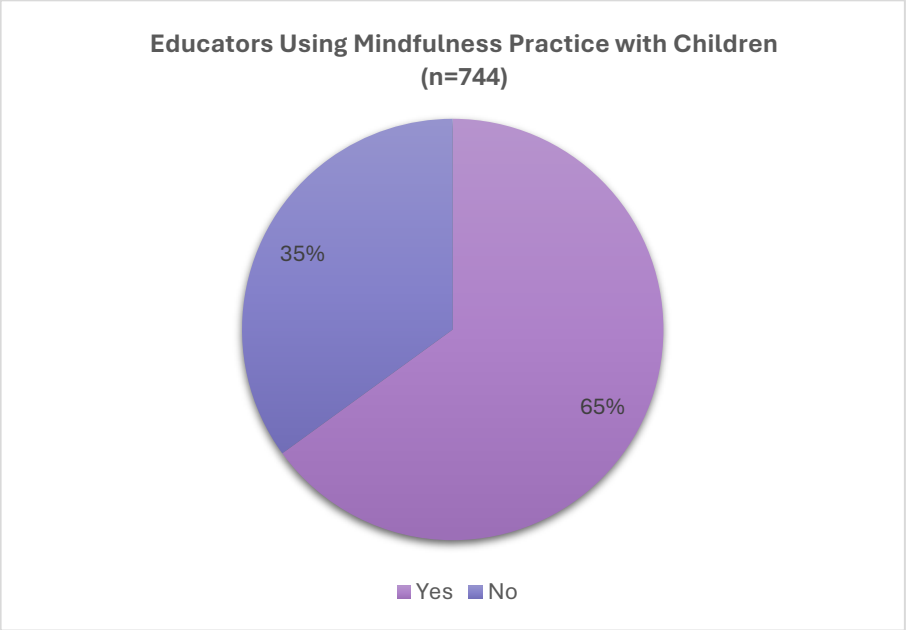


Figure 4.5 Educators Using Mindfulness Practice with Children

4.3.3 Typology of Mindfulness Practices

Out of the 502 educators who reported engaging in mindfulness self-practice, in an open-ended question, 72% identified breathing meditations as their practice. Walking in nature was widely described (50%) which suggests MP is used outside of formal meditations. Other practices reported included journalling (21%), yoga (10%) and listening to music (6%). While these were less common, they highlight the varied ways educators interpret and engage in MP (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7 Educators Personal Mindfulness Practices

Personal Mindfulness Practices	
Breathing meditations	72%
Walking in nature	50%
Journalling	21%
Yoga	10%
Music	6%

In a multiple-choice option, of the 486 educators who reported using MP with young children, all selected at least one type of formal practice and 96% selected at least

one type of informal practice. Among the formal practices, breathing practices (89%) were the most commonly used, whereas music (67%) was the most selected informal MP used. The diversity of approaches used is presented in Table 4.8 below.

Table 4.8 Types of Mindfulness Practices Used with Children

Formal mindfulness practices		**Informal mindfulness practices**	
Breathing exercises	89%	Music	67%
Yoga	61%	Creative arts	60%
Meditation	45%	Stories	50%
		Outside in nature	20%

4.3.3.1 Exploring an Association Between Educators' Self -practice of Mindfulness and Mindfulness Practice with Young Children

Due to the high percentage of educators who reported engaging in personal MP and practice with children (see Table 4.9), a chi -square (χ^2) test for independence (with Yates continuity correction) was undertaken to determine if an association existed between whether educators engage in self-practice of mindfulness and whether or not they use MP with children. The analysis demonstrated that there was a significant association between educator's own practice of mindfulness and practicing with young children χ^2 (1, n=744) x=136.303, p = <0.001 with a Phi coefficient of 0.431, suggesting a medium effect of those who engaged in self-practice being more likely to engage in MP with children.

Table 4.9 Educators Self-practice of Mindfulness and Mindfulness Practice with Young Children

Educators' self-practice of mindfulness	Educators who don't practice mindfulness with children	Educators who practice mindfulness with children	Totals
	No	Yes	
No	155	87	242
Yes	103	399	502
Total participants (*n*=744)	**258**	**486**	**744**

4.3.3.2 Exploring an Association Between Educator's Qualification and Mindfulness Practice with Young Children

Examination of the crosstabulation suggested a relationship between educators' qualification level and reported use of MP with young children (see Table 4.10). At Levels 5 and 6, just over half of educators reported using MP (56% and 57%, respectively). The proportion increased with higher level of qualifications, rising to 74% among Level 8 educators and 78% among those with Level 9 or above qualification.

Table 4.10 Qualifications of Educators and Use of Mindfulness Practice with Young Children

Crosstabulation of ECEC qualification and mindfulness practice with young children				
Count				
		Mindfulness Practice with young children in setting		Total
		No	Yes	
ECEC Qualification	Level 5	23	29	52
	Level 6	89	119	208
	Level 7	60	88	148
	Level 8	71	197	268
	Level 9 or above	15	52	67
	other	0	0	0
Total		258	486	744

To test whether this was statistically significant, a chi-square test of independence was conducted, which revealed a significant association between educators' qualification level and their use of MP with children χ^2 (4, N = 744) = 22.59, p < .001. This analysis indicates that educators with higher qualifications are significantly more likely to implement MP with young children.

However, it was important to note there may be other factors influencing implementation that were not explored in this questionnaire. From conducting Cramer's V, the effect size was small (Cramer's V = .17, p < .001), indicating that while qualification level was associated with reported use, the strength of the association was modest, and suggests there are other factors likely to contribute to their implementation of MP with young children.

4.3.4. Exploring Why Early Childhood Educators Are Using Mindfulness Practice

In an open-ended question, the 486 educators that use MP with young children were asked to describe a reason why they do so. To analyse the responses I used RTA, specifically reading and rereading the responses to become familiar with the data and generate initial codes. I moved between semantic and latent coding, where at times educators explicitly mentioned "*intervention strateg*y", while others implicitly stated, "*for children to be".* The codes were reviewed, refined and grouped together to generate broader codes to ensure the pattern of meaning represented the voices of the educators. The most cited reason, described by 37% of educators was using MP as an intervention strategy to support children's emotional regulation. Additional reasons cited less frequently are highlighted in Figure 4.6.

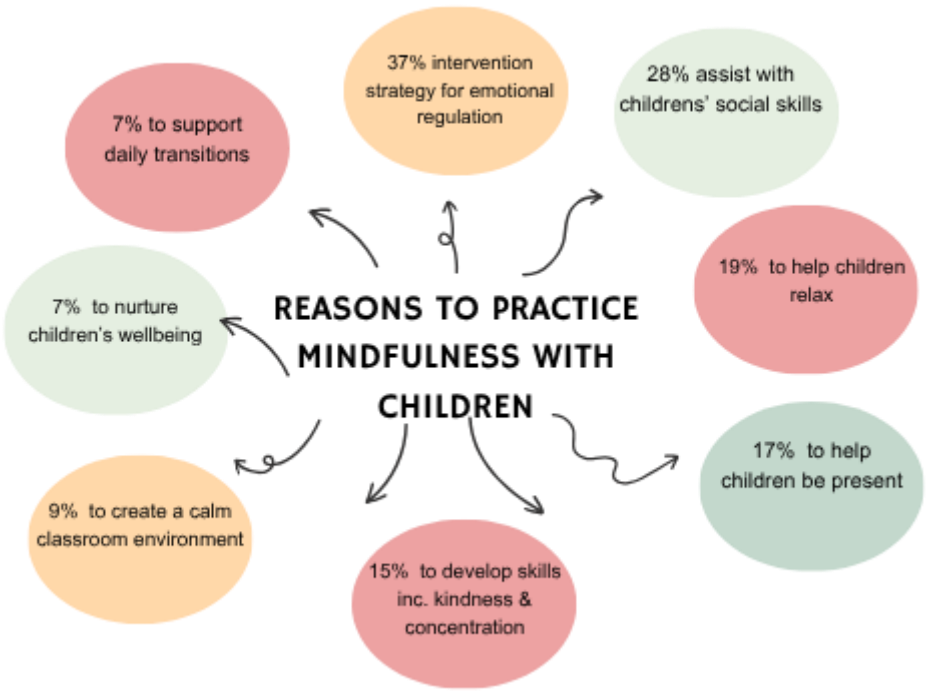


Figure 4.6 Reasons Educators Practice Mindfulness with Children

4.3.5 Exploring Why Educators are not Using Mindfulness Practice with Young Children

Of the total sample, 35%(*n*=258) of educators reported not using MP with young children in their settings. These educators were asked to select a reason/ reasons from a list of eight pre-defined options and one open 'other' option. The most selected reason (50%) was uncertainty on how to use MP with their existing curriculum. Other frequent reasons included lack of access to training (47%) and low self - confidence to use MP with children (44%). Additional barriers included not having enough time (20%), cost of training (17%) and resistance from colleagues (17%) which were reported in "other". A small portion of respondents (3%) indicated having no personal interest in MP.

4.3.6 Educators Experience and Perspective on Training

Educators were asked how they initially learned about mindfulness, with six response options provided including books, websites, podcasts, newspapers, 'other' and 'none of the above.' Educators could select multiple answers. Out of 490 responses 40% (*n*=196) reported multiple sources for learning about mindfulness with the majority selecting books and websites, 22% (*n*=109) learned from a singular source with books being the most selected, 38% (*n*=185) selected the 'other' option and these varied responses are illustrated in Figure 4.7 below, reflecting the diverse ways educators learnt about mindfulness.

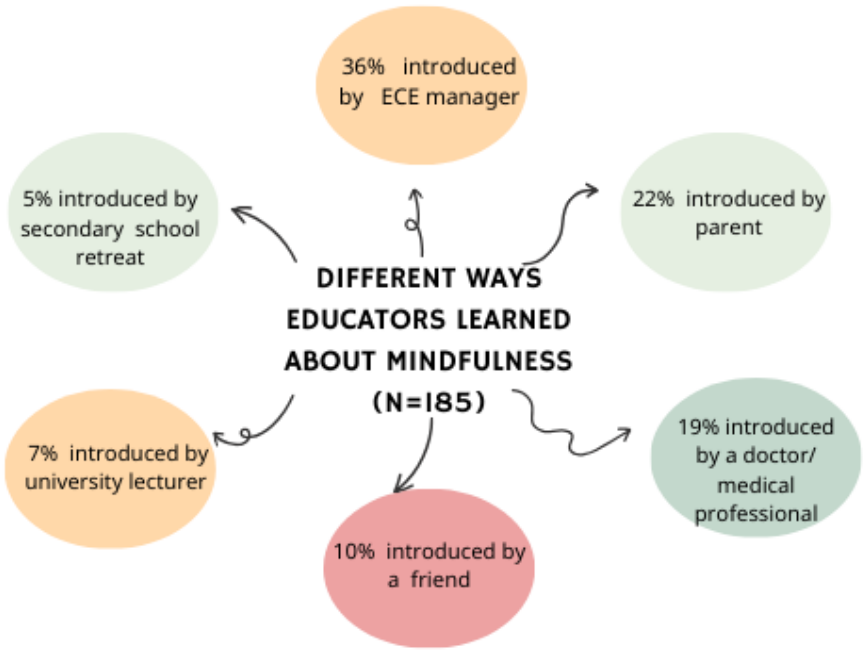


Figure 4.7 Different Ways Educators First Learned About Mindfulness

4.3.6.1 Details of Accredited Training Undertaken by Educators

When asked about training to teach mindfulness to young children, 183 (25%) of educators engaged in some form of training. Fifty-one (7%) respondents reported they had undertaken accredited training, with 132 (18%) noted they had attended

non-accredited training, while the majority of educators (*n*=561) indicated that they had not attended any mindfulness training. Among those who participated in accredited training (*n=51*) the largest group (39%) reported undertaking training which lasted four to six months with the minority (4%) reporting training that lasted under one month. Further details regarding training durations are illustrated in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11 Duration of Accredited Training Undertaken by Educators

Duration of Training	n	Percentage
1 day or under	5	10%
1 week or under	6	12%
1 month or under	2	4%
1-3 months	6	12%
4-6 months	20	39%
1 year	9	17%
2 years	3	6%
Total (*n*=51)	51	100%

Educators who engaged in accredited training (*n*=51) were invited to provide details of the mindfulness training they had undertaken. The majority of respondents (61%) reported Creative Mindfulness as their training provider. The range of accredited training undertaken by the participants is illustrated below in Figure 4.8.



Figure 4.8 Details of Accredited Training Undertaken by Educators

4.3.6.2 Details of Non-accredited Training Undertaken by Educators

Educators who reported participating in non-accredited training (*n*=132) were invited to provide details of the programme. Just over half (51%) indicated they attended a singular online webinar/ workshop, a further 12% indicated they attended multiple online webinars. Additionally, 26% reported they attended an in-person workshop through their workplace. A further 8% noted that MP was a component within other training they received, and a small minority (3%) mentioned MP was incorporated as part of a third-level course.

4.3.6.3 Exploring the Relationship Between Training and Implementing MP with Young Children

Inferential analysis was conducted to determine if there was an association between educators' training and implementation of MP with young children. Notably, all educators who had received accredited training (*n* = 51) reported using MP with

children, indicating training almost guarantees implementation. A chi-square test confirmed a significant association between accredited training and use of MP, χ^2 (1, N = 744) = 29.07, p < .001 indicating that accredited training is strongly associated with the likelihood of implementing MP. Interestingly, training did not need to be certified/accredited to influence practice. Of the 132 educators who engaged solely in non-accredited training, 100% reported using MP with young children. Taken together, these findings indicate that training whether accredited or non-accredited significantly increases the likelihood of MP implementation. Nevertheless, while 183 educators engaged in some form of training to teach mindfulness to young children, there was a significant cohort of educators (*n*=303) who had not engaged in any training but implemented MP with young children.

4.3.6.4 Educators Preference for Mindfulness Training

Educators were asked in two separate questions if they would consider undertaking accredited and non -accredited training (Figure 4.9) to teach MP to young children. Responses were similar for both questions indicating a general openness to training.

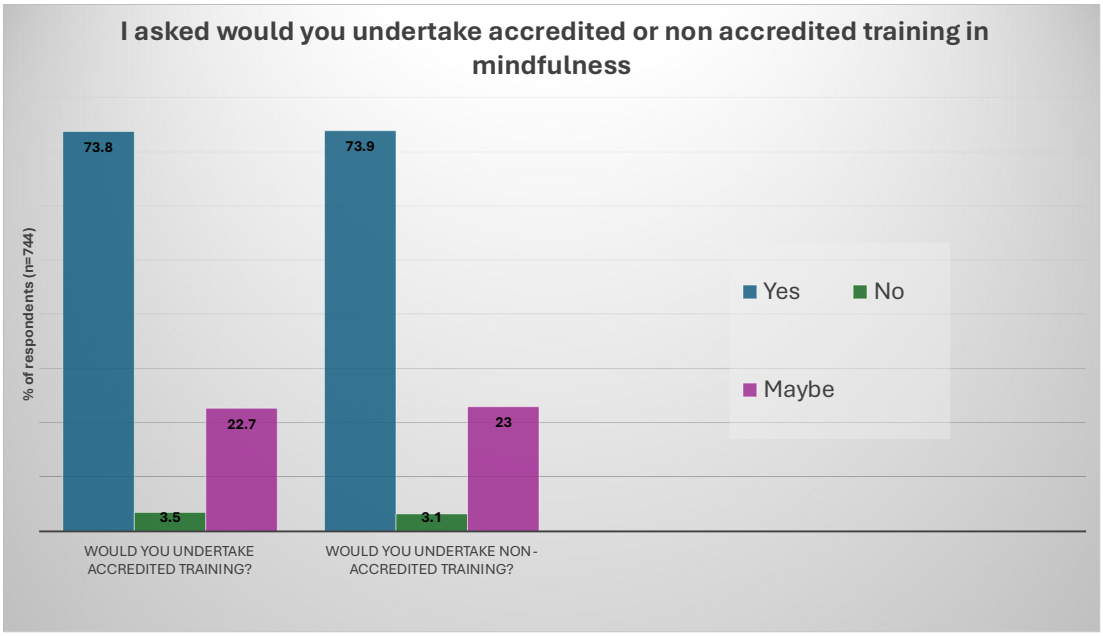


Figure 4.9 Educators Responses to Undertaking Accredited and Non-accredited Training

However, when the educators were asked to express a preference between accredited and non-accredited training, a clear majority (91%) indicated accredited training as their preferred option.

4.3.7 Exploring Educators' Construction of Mindfulness

When educators were invited to describe their understanding of the term mindfulness, 722 (97%) provided a written description, while the remaining respondents either left the field blank or declared they were unsure. Inductive thematic coding was undertaken to interpret the multiplicities of descriptions with generated seven descriptive themes (Figure 4.10). The two most widely described concepts were *being in the present moment* (43%), and *breathing* (32%).

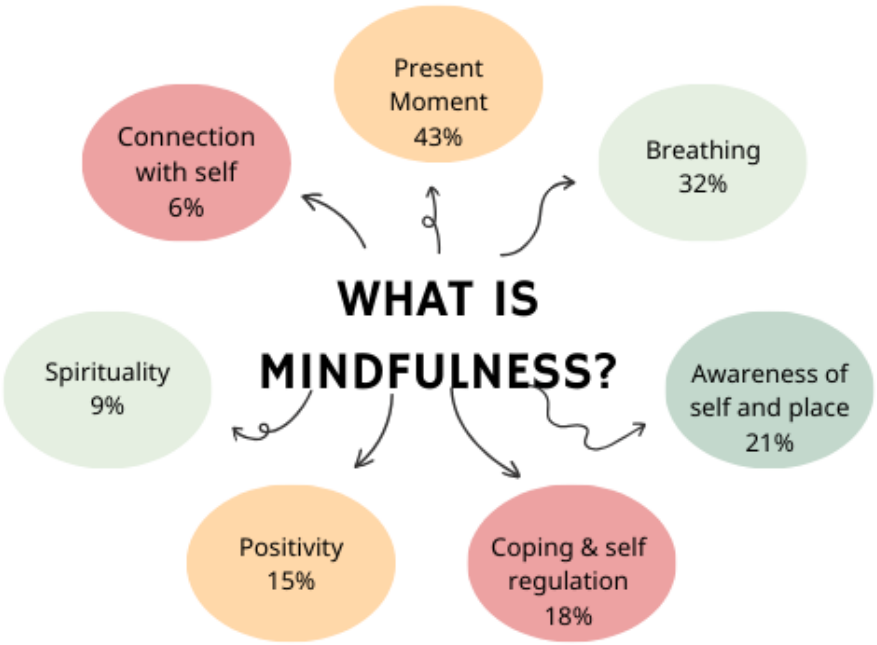


Figure 4.10 Educators Conceptualisation of Mindfulness

4.3.7.1 Exploring Additional Insights from Educators

At the end of the questionnaire, educators were invited to share further commentary relating to MP which allowed an opportunity to share any personal insights (see Figure 4.11). A total of 201 educators (27%) provided an open response which were analysed through thematic coding to identify common insights.

Among these responses, a significant number of educators (64%) expressed a desire for mindfulness to be part of their daily pedagogical practice. While 61% described the importance of developing their own MP and personal presence which they attributed to helping manage stress and also supporting and the children. One educator stated:

> Mindfulness should be a part of our teaching, part of our interactions, mindfulness needs to be in everything we do with children, so we are calm and present for us and for them.

Access to training was highlighted by educators, with 59% citing it as a key barrier for implementing MP with young children. A further 19% referred to the lack of paid continuous professional development (CPD) available for educators in Ireland. In terms of specific training, many educators (63%) described that training should be practical and in person. One participant noted:

> Mindfulness training needs to be in person, a shared meaningful experience with other educators so we can experience the benefits, build that community and shared understanding of mindfulness together.

A smaller group (8%) referred to the updating of Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and noted the potential for MP to be more widely adopted in ECE if included in the framework, where one educator noted:

> I feel if mindfulness was included in Aistear, all educators would be singing off the same hymn sheet, we would all be more inclined to use mindfulness to support the wellbeing of young children.

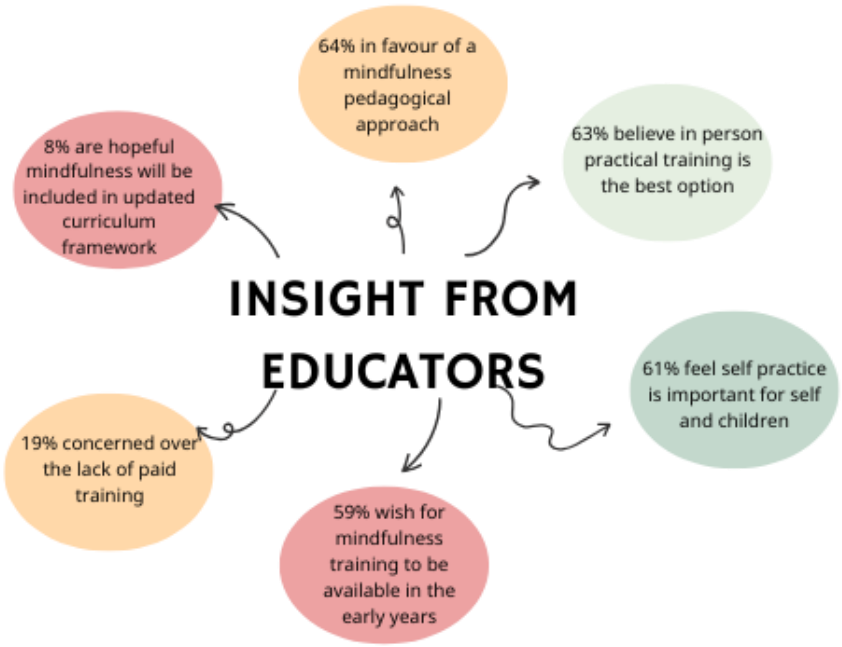


Figure 4.11 Insight from Educators

4.3.8 Section Summary:

The central aim of Phase One of this research study was to map the current landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland. This chapter has presented a comprehensive overview of participant demographics, educators' self-practice of mindfulness, the use of MP with young children, the reasons for engaging or not engaging in MP with young children, training experiences and perspectives, and their understanding and reflection on MP. The next section synthesises the data from the findings herein, discussing key themes and implications.

4.4 Introduction to Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the key findings from Phase One of the study which aimed to explore the current landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland of which no questionnaire of this magnitude has been conducted to date. The findings indicate a generally positive opinion towards MP in ECE with a diverse range of practices being implemented. Most of the discussion is novel in its crux and offers new and original insights. To contextualise the findings, the discussion commences by profiling the participants in terms of demographics, qualifications and use of MP situated within the wider ECE context. The findings will then be discussed within four key areas as illustrated below in Figure 4.12.

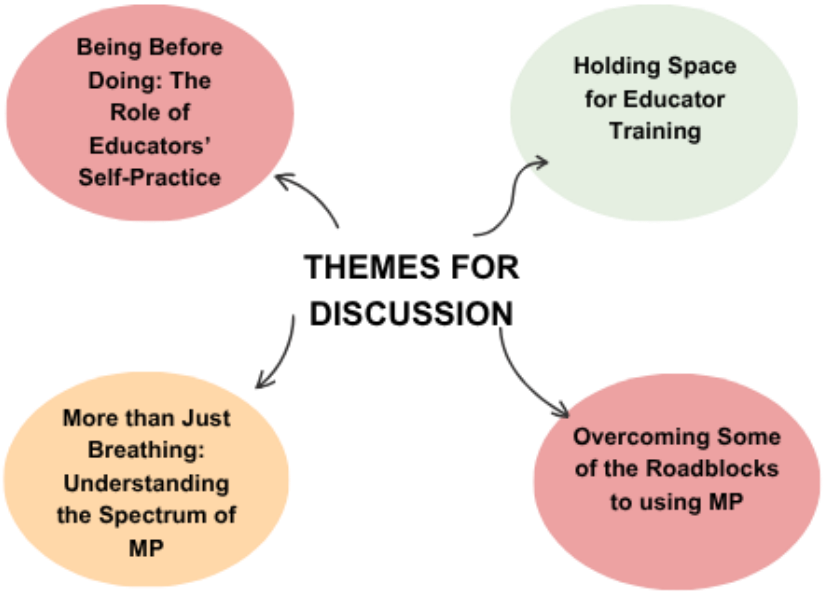


Figure 4.12 Illustration of Themes for Discussion

4.4.1 Profiling the Educators' Demographics, Qualifications and Implementation of Mindfulness Practice

National surveys conducted in both the UK and USA provide an important landscape of population engagement with MP. In the UK it was estimated that 15% of adults in 2018 have learned about mindfulness (Simonsson et al. 2021), while findings from the U.S National Health Interview Survey reported that 17% of the population use meditation as of 2022 (Davies et al. 2024). In comparison, in this present study 67% of educators reported personal MP, a significantly higher figure compared to the national studies. This variability may be due to the self-selected nature of the questionnaire, with respondents who are interested in MP more likely to participate. Furthermore, it may also suggest that educators could be more likely to use MP due to the links to stress and burnout often reported in their professional role (O'Hara-Gregan 2023). However, it remains unclear if this elevated participation rate in MP

reflects a trend in engagement with MP in the sector or due to the sampling approach.

An important contribution of this study is that it represents the first national scale study of MP in ECE. To date, no study has been conducted to characterise the educators' demographics and practice of mindfulness, either personally or professionally. By capturing data from 744 educators across the four provinces of Ireland, this study provides rich insight into current MP in the ECE sector.

The demographic profile of the sample with the majority identifying as female (96%) echoes the national patterns in ECE in Ireland, a demographic that is not unique. The high levels of qualification in the sample are also worth noting and are consistent with the ongoing wider efforts of professionalising the sector. Directives such as Nurturing Skills (DCEDIY 2021) have emphasised the importance of qualifications recognising the positive impact these have on quality practice with young children.

The study has revealed a high proportion of educators engaging in personal MP, reflecting a significant interest in mindfulness for their own wellbeing. A multitude of practices were shared, including those beyond formal meditations including nature, music and gratitude journalling, many of which are also used with young children. This dual engagement provides an interesting insight; how educators personal dispositions of MP may intersect and shape the implementation of MP with young children.

4.4.2 Being Before Doing: The Role of Educators' Self-Practice

Within this study, there was a significant association between educator's self-practice of mindfulness and their use of MP with young children in early childhood settings, with those who reported engaging in self-practice also more likely to report

engaging in MP with children. Whilst the exact reason for this association is not known from the current study, Kim et al. (2019) argue that educators having

personal experience with MP encourages a deeper understanding of mindfulness which in turn will be transferred into practice with children. It is also accepted in the literature that holding a lived experience of mindfulness and through embodying a mindful teaching approach leads to a calmer classroom environment, with educators being more mindfully responsive to children who may present with emotional regulation challenges (Jeon et al. 2022; Meiklejohn et al. 2012). In this present study, inferential statistics revealed that not only was self-practice associated with educators reported engagement in MP with children, but an association between qualification levels and MP with young children was also found. While all educators who engaged in training used MP with young children, this suggests that multiple factors may influence implementation and warrants further exploration. The qualitative data also revealed that self-practice had other benefits for educators. From their descriptive accounts it was found that developing their own MP was important to cultivate personal presence and helped combat the stress of the job itself. This suggests that educators hold value to MP as a personal and professional support strategy.

4.4.3 Holding Space for Educator Training

The findings highlight a strong appetite for educator training in MP with 79% of educators declaring an interest in undertaking professional training, a result mirrored in Kenwright et al.'s (2021) study where 77% of teachers were interested in professional training to teach mindfulness with children. Notably, in the present study when given the option to choose between accredited and non-accredited training, 91% were in favour of accredited/ certified training to teach mindfulness to

young children, highlighting a strong desire for recognised qualifications in this area. Training appeared to be strongly associated with implementing MP with young children. All educators (*n*=51) who engaged in accredited mindfulness training reported implementing MP with young children and all educators (*n*=132) who engaged in non-accredited training also implemented MP. This is significant as it emphasises that engaging in training increases the likelihood of using MP with young children, regardless of typology of training.

However, crosstabulation revealed a large cohort of educators (*n*=303) reported using MP with young children despite not engaging in any form of training. While not explored in this questionnaire, this raises critical questions. It could suggest educators may be uncertain where to access training, or be in receipt of support from other educators, or reliance on self-directed learning. It also prompts further exploration of how these practices are being implemented or embedded in early childhood, whether they align with specific programmes or are based on evidence-based approaches. This underscores a need to explore the role of training, personal characteristics and other contextual factors that may influence how MP is implemented in ECE.

There is much debate in the literature regarding whether mindfulness should be taught by external facilitators or by class educators (Amundsen et al. 2020; Bockman and Yu 2022). This question was not posed to the participants; however, it is suggested with the high interest rate around uptake of accredited/certified training that educators are motivated to deliver MP with young children themselves. Regarding what this mindfulness training could look like for ECE, in the final open-ended question, participants were invited to offer any additional insight. Of the 27% of participants who chose to contribute, 63% mentioned that future training should

be practical and delivered in person, emphasising the value of shared experiential learning. This is a noteworthy finding and may have important relevance for how future professional development in MP is designed and delivered in ECE.

4.4.4 More Than Just Breathing: Understanding the Spectrum of MP

When participants were asked to share their understanding of the term mindfulness, 32% described it specifically as a breathing meditation, a practice commonly categorised in the literature as a formal meditative practice. This suggests that some educators conceptualise mindfulness narrowly as a breathing meditation, indicating a lack of shared understanding and inconsistency about what MP is. This is reflective of the literature in Section 2.3.2, where a multitude of definitions of mindfulness were revealed. Such a multitude of definitions may lead to confusion and potentially limit engagement. From my own professional experience I have encountered this uncertainty, with different cohorts of people expressing uncertainty about the term. This reflexive account resonates with Tonga's (2020) call for a universal definition to help alleviate barriers in understanding. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of conceptual clarity to enhance understanding and implementation. Future training should incorporate not only practical activities and applications but also the conceptual foundations of MP.

All 486 educators who reported engaging in MP with children indicated they use some type of formal MP, with breathing activities emerging as the most prevalent. Educators reported using a variety of MP both formal and informal such as meditations (45%) within other activities such as yoga (61%), music (67%), creative arts (60%), stories (50%), and nature (20%). This demonstrates the adaptable and creative ways that MP can be adopted in ECE. This aligns with Bhandari and Douglas (2024), who argue that MP with young children should encompass a

playful, fun and flexible methodology whilst others offer further recommendations to consider duration and typology that is age and stage appropriate for young children (Holt and Atkinson 2022; Kim et al. 2019; Wood et al. 2018).

Despite the diversity in practices, the findings reveal a level of incongruity in why and how MP are utilised by educators. Many educators reported using it as an intervention to support children's emotional regulation (37%), in contrast, only 17% indicated using MP to cultivate present moment awareness in young children and a smaller percentage of educators (7%) linked it to nurturing children's wellbeing. This finding raises important reflections on whether MP is predominantly used as an intervention response strategy rather than a proactive approach to support children's presence and awareness.

Conversely, among the 204 educators who provided further insight, 64% expressed that MP should be embedded within their daily pedagogical practice rather than solely as an intervention strategy. This finding shows promise that some educators are leaning towards a more integrated and embedded approach of MP in ECE. Moreover, these findings indicate an openness to using MP in ECE as reflected in the significant interest in attending training, and the high proportion of educators using MP without formal training. Similarly, several authors have suggested that embedding mindfulness within a curriculum allows mindfulness to be contextually adapted for the children and develop children's transferable skills outside of the classroom (Janz et al. 2019; Kim et al. 2019; Wood et al. 2018). Taken together, the strong interest in training and lack of conceptual clarity point to a need for clearer guidance and professional training to support educators on how to implement MP with young children.

4.4.5 Overcoming Some of the Roadblocks to Using MP

While many participants reported using MP with young children, 35% (*n*=258) reported not doing so. The most cited reasons were uncertainty of how to use mindfulness within their existing curriculum (50%), lack of training (47%) and low self-confidence to practice with children (44%). These findings provide insight into some of the experienced contextual and structural challenges, however, there has been limited research conducted with educators in ECE on why they may not use MP with children. There may be other reasons or barriers that were not identified in this present study.

That said, Kim et al. (2019) found educators who implemented the mindfulness-based Open Mind Korea preschool programme also expressed uncertainty on how to effectively use MP within their curriculum alongside a lack of self-confidence. However, following training, eight out of ten educators expressed enhanced motivation to implement the programme. These findings underscore the importance of high-quality training to enhance educators' knowledge and self-confidence in the implementation of MP in ECE. Although only 3% of educators in this present study declared no personal interest in mindfulness, and while this is small, it warrants attention. Given the questionnaire was self-selected, it is more probable that those who are interested in MP could be overrepresented, therefore, the proportion of educators with no personal interest may be higher in the sector. Nevertheless, the low percentage with no personal interest, combined with educators' high interest for training implies educators may not be resistant to using MP rather, they may face systemic and knowledge-based challenges. Similarly, Holt et al (2021) recognised a lack of resources, competing demands and self-confidence may act as significant barriers to educator's practice. Taken together, these findings underscore the need

for future research to explore individuals' perceptions, beliefs, barriers and personal interest to better understand how these variables may influence implementation.

Although mindfulness and MP are not specifically mentioned in Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum framework (GoI 2024) in Ireland, several participants (8%) mentioned this absence in their open-ended responses. At the time of data collection which was conducted prior to the update of Aistear some expressed hope that the new framework may include MP as a feasible practice to nurture the wellbeing of young children. While the updated framework does not explicitly mention mindfulness or MP, there are several alignments through the use of terminology including stillness, slowness, and being present. These echo some of the concepts of mindfulness, specifically in supporting young children's emotional regulation and presence. The omission of mindfulness and MP may echo the diversity of interpretations and uncertainty with the term as discussed previously. However, the inclusion of mindfulness language signals an opportunity for educators to embed mindfulness pedagogical practices to serve as a first step in MP being implemented more widely in ECE in Ireland.

4.5 Phase One Limitations and Strengths

It must be noted there are some limitations to the first phase of this research. While there were 744 responses to the questionnaire, it is uncertain how many ECE services in Ireland are represented in the sample. Furthermore, the sample may be considered 'self-selected' where educators may have put themselves forward due to their interest in MP in the first instance. Furthermore, via LinkedIn may have added a degree of homogeneity, therefore increasing the possibility of over-representing those positively inclined towards MP.

While the sample included representation from the four provinces of Ireland, there was uneven distribution with only 8% drawn from the counties of Ulster compared to Leinster (46%). Consequently, there could be regional variations of MP experiences and professional training opportunities.

Additionally, the questionnaire did not explore how often educators are using MP with young children in their early childhood settings, limiting insight into the extent these practices are being used.

Despite these limitations, the current study demonstrated several strengths. Most notably, it provided the first national overview of MP in ECE and to my knowledge such a study has not been undertaken internationally.

The large sample size (*n*=744) ensured a broad representation from educators in ECE in Ireland. The use of mixed-methods questionnaire, including qualitative and quantitative questions enabled the collection of both descriptive statistics, inferential statistics and personal narratives. In doing so it strengthened the credibility of the findings and ensured the educators' voices remained central. These strengths emphasise the value of this phase of the study, providing both a stand-alone contribution and a valuable foundation for the next phase of this study.

4.6 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Closure of Chapter

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

As I pause at the end of this chapter, I feel a deepened insight into how mindfulness practice is being implemented in early childhood education in Ireland. I was genuinely surprised how many educators are using mindfulness with young children and the variety of practices they are using. What really caught my attention, was the group of educators who are using mindfulness with children and not themselves. It makes me wonder, do they recognise the benefits for children but possibly not for themselves? Or are there other barriers at play? These thoughts have brought me back to my values-based lens of IAA (Intention- attention- attitude.) While my intention is to understand, my attention is drawn to these potential tensions between personal and professional practice. I will bring an attitude of openness to the next phase as I interview educators who use mindfulness practice with young children and perhaps uncover their motivations for self-practice and practicing with young children.

Figure 4.13 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

This national questionnaire provided a valuable overview of the landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland. The findings point to a growing interest, with 79% *(n*=558) of educators expressing an interest in engaging in mindfulness training. However, with 41% (*n*=303) of educators using MP with young children having not undertaken any formal/informal training, there is a responsibility to provide quality mindfulness training options for educators. Based on the findings, the components of this training for educators should be practical in nature and one that allowed a shared meaningful experience of MP. Moreover, the training should provide the educators with practical ways to use MP in the classroom with young children while also allowing them an opportunity to develop and nurture their own self-practice.

The significant association between educators' own personal MP highlighted that educators are more likely to practice with young children, underscoring the role of personal experience for potential pedagogical application.

While the questionnaire provided breadth by establishing key trends, it is necessary to undertake a qualitative inquiry to explore the lived experiences behind these statistics. Notably, the findings point to the need for a deeper exploration of how MP is being interpreted, experienced and enacted in ECE in Ireland. The next phase is crucial to understand the values, beliefs and contextual factors that shape educator's implementation of MP in their settings with young children.

Chapter Five: Phase Two: How is Mindfulness Practice Taking Root in Early Childhood Education in Ireland?

> "*Creating mindful spaces and nurturing children's mindfulness skills will allow them set down their backpack full of worries*" (Nel - Educator)

5.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter marks a pivotal progression from Phase One, which provided valuable insights into the broader landscape of mindfulness practice (MP) in early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland through a mixed-methods questionnaire. While Phase One contributed meaningfully to the evidence base by mapping key trends and providing insight into current practices, conducting the literature review revealed a gap, the absence of qualitative research capturing educators' experiences and perspectives of MP.

Phase Two addresses this gap by employing one-to-one semi-structured interviews to explore the nuanced and personal ways educators use MP in ECE. This approach allowed deeper exploration of educators' personal practices, complexities of practice and other contextual factors that may not have been explored fully in the questionnaire.

This chapter is divided into three distinct sections.

Section 5.2 outlines the research design including the sampling and recruitment strategies, data generation procedures, and ethical considerations. This section concludes with the rationale for employing reflexive thematic analysis (RTA).

Section 5.3 presents the findings from the interviews, organised within four themes and eleven subthemes grounded in the educators' voices.

Section 5.4 concludes the chapter by providing the limitations and strengths of this study and the rationale for Phase Three.

The main objective of this research study was to explore *if, how* and *why* mindfulness practice (MP) is being used by educators with young children in Ireland. The research objectives were addressed through the following exploratory questions.

1. How do educators construct and personally engage with MP?
2. What are the multiple perspectives and experiences of educators using MP with young children?
3. How is MP implemented in ECE settings, including the methods, tools and training undertaken by educators to engage young children in MP?
4. What are educators' perceptions of the impact of MP on young children?
5. What are educators identified/ perceived barriers to implementing MP and are there potential solutions to overcome such barriers.

5.2 Phase Two Research Method and Design

Guided by my ontological position of constructivism and my epistemological framework of interpretivism, I adopted a qualitative research design for this phase. Qualitative research allows researchers to view the social world through the eyes of the people they study (Bryman et al. 2021) and enables a researcher to capture multiple viewpoints (Robson 2011). This approach aligned with the overarching aim of the study, to explore and understand the lived experience of educators using MP with young children.

A qualitative design, through in-depth semi-structured interviews was selected to get to the heart of the topic through the words of the participants. Both Holt et al. (2021) and Roeser et al. (2012) note taking a qualitative approach will enable researchers to gain insight into the role of the educator implementing MP. Similarly, Pascal and Marieke's (2022) scoping review of 229 qualitative studies highlight the value of

qualitative research to advance the understanding of MP. Their review included a wide variety of studies including interviews, focus groups, reflective accounts exploring individuals' perspectives and lived experiences across educational and community settings. Phase Two of this study contributes to this by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with educators to generate rich, contextual insight into their implementation of MP in ECE.

From the literature review, it was evident there are limited studies conducted with educators pertaining to their experiences of using MP in early childhood. Therefore, it was timely for me to explore educators' construction, interpretations, and enactment of MP through a qualitative lens.

5.2.1 Ethical Considerations

This research study was guided by the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al. 2025, 2016) which acknowledges the layers of ethical complexity in research involving young children, educators and ECE contexts. A central principle is for a researcher to hold an "ethic of respect" (Bertram et al. 2025, pg.4), for the participants' rights and dignity and the diversity of experiences they may bring to the study. This was particularly relevant in this phase which involved in-depth interviews with educators. I was mindful of what Bertram et al. (2025) describe as "knowing from multiple perspectives", so I created a safe space for educators to share their experiences without judgment which extended the knowledge of MP. Ethical considerations were not seen as a once- off obligation, but as an ongoing reflective process. In line with the EECERA code, I reflected on my professional competence, my values, respect for human rights, my integrity, justice and equity, and my academic scholarship while holding awareness of my social responsibility as a researcher. Formal ethical approval was granted from the

ethics committee of the School of Health and Science in DkIT in September 2023 (Appendix H).

5.2.1.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Contribution

Informed consent was a continuous process throughout the study**.** The information sheet (Appendix I) consent form (Appendix J), and location preference form (Appendix K) were emailed to potential participants four weeks in advance which outlined the aim of the study, rationale, researcher details, expectancies of the participants, potential advantages and disadvantages for participating, and data confidentiality and storage which allowed each participant to make an informed decision. The gatekeeper information sheet (Appendix M) was included for educators to share with their setting managers where on-site interviews would be taking place. Signed consent forms were returned by email prior to the interview and verbal consent was sought at the beginning of the interview prior to recording. I reiterated the purpose and features of the study while mapping out the benefits and risks (Kvale 2007) to support informed consent. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the research study up to two weeks after the interview took place. A post interview debrief sheet was also provided (Appendix Q).

5.2.1.2 Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Storage

Steps were taken throughout the research process to prioritise confidentiality by adhering to Data Protection Act 2018 (GoI 2018) and institutional requirements. As Cohen et al. (2019) noted, maintaining confidentiality preserves anonymity and prevents public identification or association with the data. To protect participant identity, I assigned each individual a pseudonym which was consistently applied across transcripts and notes.

Interviews were either audio or video recorded depending on the participant's preference. For online interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams, recordings were downloaded immediately afterwards and securely stored in an encrypted file on a password protected DkIT One-Drive account. Once saved, the original file was deleted from the Microsoft Teams platform. For in person interviews, the audio recordings were transferred from the digital recorder to the same encrypted One Drive account and erased from the recorder. Access to the One-Drive account was restricted to me alone and my laptop used to access these files was also password protected.

Once each audio/ video recording was transcribed and thematically analysed it was erased from my storage system. My field notes and reflexive diary used during the RTA analysis process were secured in a locked cabinet to which I had the only key. In accordance with DkIT and General Data Protection Regulation guidelines (GoI 2018), all data will be retained for up to two years post completion of this PhD research to allow further analysis and potential peer review of the study. After the two-years, all the data will be permanently erased, and no additional copies retained.

5.2.1.3 Beneficence and Minimising Risk

As part of the ethical process, I reflected on the principle of beneficence, especially the need to minimise any potential harm to the participants (Hennink et al. 2020). It is crucial for researchers to anticipate and plan for the possibility of unintended harm and discomfort (Creswell and Creswell 2023). I was mindful of my interactions, my tone of voice, use of verbal and non- verbal communication and the need for sensitivity and patience during the interviews. Given the nature of this study and the open-ended framing of questions, I anticipated minimal risk to educators in terms of rights, safety and welfare.

Pretesting questions ensured they were respectful and non-intrusive. I envisaged that voluntary participation in this novel study- the first of its magnitude in Ireland to explore MP in ECE would provide educators with a meaningful opportunity to share their stories and contribute to the field. I felt this potential outweighed any potential risk. Voluntary and informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was preserved using pseudonyms. No personal or sensitive data was required to participate.

Some of the interviews were conducted on site in ECE settings, thus, I was mindful of broader ethical considerations. While my primary ethical obligation was to each participant, I recognised the importance of upholding confidentiality of the service itself, the staff, children, and families (Bertram et al. 2025). If a participant was to disclose concerns about service practices, I had an obligation to navigate this sensitively while upholding my responsibility in accordance with the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017). In anticipation of any potential destress or discomfort, I prepared a distress protocol (see Figure 5.1) although it was not required in this research study.

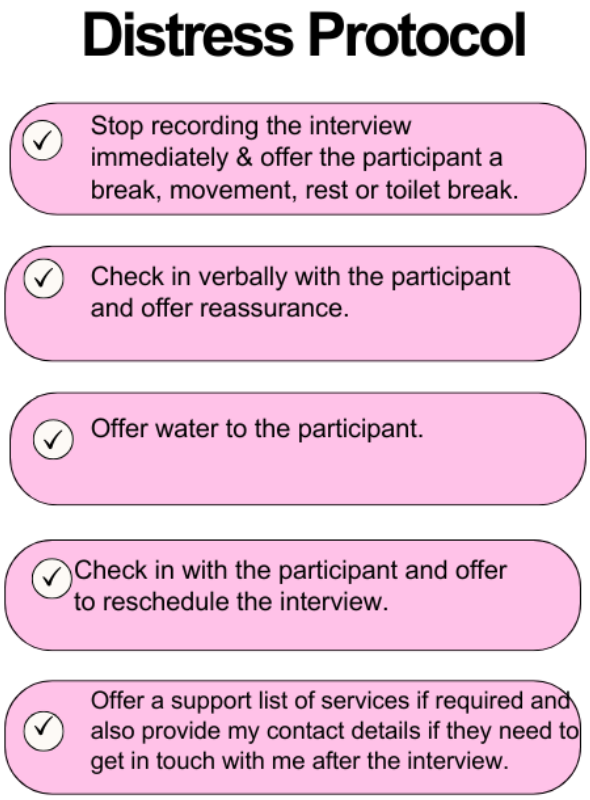


Figure 5.1 Distress Protocol

It was not feasible to give participants a monetary contribution for their participation due to DkIT's institutional policies and the volume of participants. Nevertheless, I was mindful of the fact that I was benefiting from the data generated and the invaluable information the participants were providing. Given the well documented time pressures faced by educators, most notably the lack of non-contact time and paid continuous professional development (CPD), I reflected upon how this interview could be reciprocal (Monday 2020). To honour this mutual exchange, I created a mindfulness resource pack for each participant. This included a sample of mindfulness activities that can be used with young children, a simple breathing activity, a sweet treat, notebook and pen, and a positive affirmation for the educator (Appendix R). This small gesture was a way for me to acknowledge their valuable contribution to the study.

5.2.1.4. Demonstrating Trustworthiness of the Research

As outlined in Chapter Three, validity and reliability are commonly associated with quantitative research. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose a framework of trustworthiness comprising of four key areas, credibility in favour of validity, transferability in preference to generalisation, dependability instead of reliability and conformability in place of objectivity.

In this current phase I applied these principles of trustworthiness. I took steps to ensure credibility by deeply engaging with the data and drawing directly from the statements of the participants. I supported transferability by providing thorough contextual data and sampling procedures to enable other researchers to consider the study's transferability. To establish dependability, I kept an audit trail of my methodological decision-making process. Confirmability was supported through critical reflexivity where I continuously reflected and interrogated my values and positionality. Further evidence of the application of trustworthiness is outlined in Table 5.1 below.

Braun and Clarke (2021) reminded me that no two researchers who undertake RTA will engage with data in the same manner, as each researcher brings their own unique attributes, skills, and experiences to the process. While the findings of this study are not intended for replication, they offer valuable insights into MP in ECE and advance scholarly knowledge in this field.

Table 5.1 Application of Trustworthiness in Phase Two

Credibility (in preference to validity)	Transferability (in preference to generalisation)	Dependability (in preference to reliability)	Confirmability (in preference to objectivity)
Adopted clear procedures, questions and choice of reflexive thematic analysis.	Described choice of purposive sampling and provision of thick descriptions, e.g. data collection procedures allows researchers explore the contextual factors.	An audit trail was kept by documenting all steps and procedures undertaken within this phase. This included decision making processes, coding and theme development etc.	I maintained a reflexive journal throughout this phase regarding my thoughts and ideas and the new knowledge created.
Delved deep into the literature review and analysis of questionnaire responses allowed rich descriptions.	Immersed myself in the data throughout.	I reflected on my theoretical framework, my positionality and values regarding the phenomena being explored.	Using reflexive thematic analysis allowed me to analyse and interpret the data in a robust manner.
Engaged in continuous debrief with supervisors as a sounding board and address issues that arose.	Recordings were meticulously transcribed and revisited on three occasions.	Engaged in ongoing debriefs with supervisors to discuss findings.	Continuously reflected on my role, positionality and values.
Used reflexive commentary throughout, considering multiple and different view -points, my own thoughts, ideas and interpretations.			This phase assisted with triangulation by feeding back some general consensus from questionnaires to elicit responses.
Included extracts from the participants.			

5.2.2 Sampling and Recruitment Procedure

This phase was conducted in Ireland with selected educators who had completed the questionnaire in Phase One who had expressed an interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Purposive criterion sampling was used by selecting participants who best suited the purpose of the research based on the information and insight they can provide (Bryman et al. 2021; Cohen et al. 2019). The inclusion criteria included that participants must be working as an educator in Ireland, they must have completed the questionnaire in Phase One, engage in self-practice and must be using MP (formal or/and informal) with young children.

From 101 expressions of interest, 82 participants met all three criteria. I wanted to ensure the sample would have geographical representation from the four provinces of Ireland while also increasing the potential of gaining a national ECE perspective, therefore stratified sampling was undertaken. Nevertheless, I was mindful there was a provincial imbalance in Phase One due to a considerable Munster/Leinster bias, therefore complete provincial balance was not achievable.

I first divided the population (82 participants) into the four strata (Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster) according to their location, while mindful the numbers from Connaught (*n*=4) and Ulster (*n*=7) were small, therefore all potential participants from these two provinces were invited. Random selection was used to invite 12 participants from Leinster and Munster, this ensured criterion relevance and proportional representation. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest there is no strict rule for sample size, many studies using thematic analysis have had 15 to 30 participants in a medium to large scale study. Thirty-five were invited to allow for drop out. This represented approximately 43% of the population available (82) to me.

Ultimately, 27 educators took part in the interviews. The sampling procedure is outlined in Table 5.2. Once the sample was selected, I emailed the potential participants with the documents as discussed in section 5.2.1.1. A copy of the emails sent are included in Appendix L. Recruitment took place from September 2023 to October 2023.

Table 5.2 Sampling Procedure for Phase Two

	Connaught	**Leinster**	**Munster**	**Ulster**
Initial representation of sample (*n*=82)	4	35	36	7
Invited	4	12	12	7
Accepted	1	11	12	3

5.2.2.1 The Road to Data Sufficiency

I reflected deeply on the number of participants that I would require to generate insightful data. I grappled with the idea of data saturation, described as when a researcher feels they have gained enough information and there are no new emerging themes left to be uncovered (Fusch and Ness 2015). I felt this concept was constructed through a quantitative and positivist lens and was not aligned with my constructivist and interpretivist orientation and use of RTA. Through the process of RTA, a researcher does not seek data saturation due to meaning making that is dependent on the researcher's active and interpretative role.

Consequently, the concept of reaching saturation implies a complete understanding of what is being studied and therefore misaligns with the underpinnings of RTA.

Rather than aiming for data saturation, I followed the concept of data sufficiency (Low 2019) focusing on the quality and depth of data collected that would answer my research question and lead to a robust analysis. Due to my constructivist and interpretivist approach, I saw myself as the instrument in which to reflect when I had enough data collected to answer my research question, while being mindful there was no singular truth to be discovered. After each interview, I spent time in reflection, writing notes, interpretating the educators' accounts, noting initial ideas and assessing if the responses were thick rather than repetitive. I was satisfied after 27 interviews that I had sufficient rich data to answer my research questions and enough for a robust RTA. I had variation across the provinces to give sufficient heterogeneity, consequently I did not need to revert back to the sample. At this stage, I contacted the eight remaining participants who were invited to take part to inform them they were not required to participate.

The interview questions (Appendix N) were distributed to participants prior to interview to assist in accomplishing an effective interview (Denzin and Lincoln 2018) while also ensuring informed consent and participant autonomy to withdraw if inclined. The interviews took place between October 2023 and January 2024 via two methods, online and in person. The characteristics of the sample are described in Table 5.3 and as described in Section 5.2.1.2, pseudonyms were applied to ensure anonymity.

Table 5.3 Characteristics of Sample Phase Two

Participant	Location	Ages of Children Educators Work With	Engaged in Self-practice of Mindfulness	Engaged in Mindfulness Workshop for ECE	Engaged in Accredited Mindfulness Training for ECE
BER	Connaught	3-5 years	√	√	√
GIL	Leinster	1-2 years	√		
FIA	Leinster	3-5 years	√	√	√
CAT	Leinster	3-5 years	√	√	√
YAZ	Leinster	3-5 years	√		
EVE	Leinster	1-2 years	√		
ANN	Leinster	3-5 years	√	√	√
KAY	Leinster	3-5 years	√		
ITA	Leinster	3-5 years	√		
NEL	Leinster	3-5 years	√		
QUINN	Leinster	3-5 years	√		√
ROSE	Leinster	3-5 years	√		
ADA	Munster	3-5 years	√	√	
MAI	Munster	Under 1 year	√	√	
DEE	Munster	3-5 years	√	√	√
OLA	Munster	3-5 years	√		
UNA	Munster	3-5 years	√	√	√
ZARA	Munster	3-5 years	√		
PAT	Munster	1-2 years	√		√
LEE	Munster	1-2 years	√		
JAY	Munster	3-5 years	√	√	√
WILL	Munster	3-5 years	√	√	
SAM	Munster	3-5 years	√	√	
VAL	Munster	3-5 years	√		
TONI	Ulster	3-5 years	√	√	
HAL	Ulster	3-5 years	√	√	
BELLE	Ulster	3-5 years	√	√	

5.2.3 Data Generation Procedures- the Choice of Semi-Structured Interviews

Aligning with my constructivist and interpretivist paradigm and my qualitative approach in this phase, one-to-one interviews were selected as the most appropriate data collection method. This approach allowed me to delve deeper into the lived experiences of educators.

Throughout this phase, I was guided by the metaphors of the traveller and gardener as described by Kvale (2007) and Salmons (2022). As a traveller, I walked alongside the participants, listening to their stories with an open and curious mind. Alongside this, I also adopted the role of gardener by creating space for their ideas and knowledge to take root and to be shared with me.

I felt structured interviews were too rigid for this purpose due to their standardised and uniformed sequence of questions that would not afford me flexible exploration (Mueller and Segal 2015) and risk not generating enough data to answer my research questions (Magaldi and Berler 2020).

Consequently, semi-structured interviews offered a middle ground combining structure and flexibility, which allowed me to use follow-up questions and prompts to engage in deeper exploration (DeJonckheere and Vaughan 2019). For instance, when educators were not explicit, I used prompts to encourage responses. When educators mentioned parents, I asked for suggestions on how to include parents or provide examples of practice. Each interview concluded with a wonder question inviting educators to share a wish list of three things that could make their ECE setting more mindful.

5.2.4 Data Generation Tools

The primary objective of the interview was to explore the lived experiences of educators in Ireland who use MP with children in their ECE settings. Reviewing the literature and reflecting on my analysis of my findings in Phase One informed the semi-structured interview schedule. Furthermore, throughout my professional career I have conducted semi-structured interviews with different cohorts of people. The practical planning and conduct of the interviews are described in the following sections.

5.2.4.1 Planning the Logistics of the Interviews

Throughout the interview process, I was guided by the principle of phronesis (Salmons 2022), my practical wisdom where I exercised practical judgment regarding ethical and responsible protocols that would protect the participants, secure informed consent, while also safeguarding their identities. All participants were offered a choice to partake in an interview in person or online via Microsoft Teams. This flexibility was important as I was cognisant participants were spread across the country, and that offering an online option can enhance accessibility, provide participant autonomy and contribute to a broader and diverse sample

(Archibald et al. 2019). Microsoft Teams was chosen as the online interview platform due to being secured by DkIT licensing agreement and its capacity for unlimited meeting time.

In preparation for each interview, I intentionally returned to my values-based conceptual lens of intention, attention, and, attitude (IAA) (Shapiro et al. 2006). I reflected on my intentionality, on why I was conducting this study, and the importance of creating a safe space for educators to share their experiences with me. To focus my attention, I engaged in MP prior to each interview to ground myself in the present moment and to help me to remain present and attentive to each participant. I also reflected on my attitude, by intentionally cultivating openness and curiosity to the stories being shared with me, particularly those that could be an alternative perspective to my own.

In-Person Interviews:

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) advise that qualitative researchers should locate themselves in the natural setting to study the phenomena, which will assist in seeking meaningful and contextualised understandings from the participants (Silverman 2022). Guided by this principle, I received permission from the gatekeepers which enabled 11 in-person interviews to take place. Prior to each interview, I familiarised myself with the location to ensure punctuality. I provided photo identification and a copy of my garda clearance from DkIT for the gatekeeper, in alignment with inspection compliance under the early childhood regulations. I politely requested for the interview to take place in a quiet space to minimise interruptions and asked for water to be made available for the participant. Before beginning the recording, I obtained informed consent again from the participant, reiterated the purpose of the study, how the data would be used as well as the

recording and transcription procedure. I ensured I had a good quality recorder (Sony mono-digital voice recorder) with a working microphone that was reliable and pretested (DeJonckheere and Vaughan 2019) to ensure that both voices could be heard clearly for transcription. I immersed myself in the questions before hand to ensure I was not reading verbatim from the interview protocol (Creswell and Creswell 2023). The in-person interviews ranged in length from 54 minutes to 98 minutes.

Online Interviews

Ensuring participant anonymity in the online interviews was somewhat more challenging than in person due to the video recording procedure of Teams. However, participants were informed that the recording would be downloaded from Teams and securely stored in an encrypted file on a password protected DkIT OneDrive account only accessible to me and the stored recording would be permanently deleted after data analysis. To support the educator's autonomy and comfort, they were also given the option to switch off their cameras at any stage.

Respecting the research site was crucial to allow a meaningful interview (Salmons 2022). I confirmed in advance that participants had a device with a webcam, access to the internet and Microsoft Teams. I drew on my conceptual lens of IAA to guide my approach towards the online interviews. My intention was to create space for them to share their experiences. To support attention, I encouraged educators to give their full attention by situating themselves in a quiet space free from interruptions, while modelling this myself. I adopted an attitude of openness and curiosity, remained present to their stories and resisted interruption. While social cues were harder to read in the online setting, embodying this stance helped me maintain connection and attention. In total 16 participants opted for the online interview: with interviews lasting between 41 minutes and 87 minutes.

5.2.4.2 Developing the Interview Guide

According to Seale and Rivas (2025) encouraging participant engagement requires that questions are clear and succinct. McNamara (2009) further highlights that for research questions to be effective, they should be open-ended, clearly worded, and neutral to minimise influence from the researcher. These principles influenced the construction, typology, and sequencing of questions in this phase, with the aim of enabling educators to share their understanding and experiences of MP. The interview guide was constructed to embody a conversational approach between myself and the participants (McNamara 2009). The topic guide was reviewed, constructed, and reconstructed as part of the iterative process to ensure relevant data was retrieved and to reveal new insights (Kvale 2007). As part of the iterative process, I mapped the potential interview topics to the study's research aim and research questions.

I reviewed the findings from Phase One to see what I had already captured quantitatively that warranted further exploration. For example, Phase One did not capture how often educators implement MP with young children, so that was included in Phase Two to gain deeper insight into practical applications. I reviewed the literature where I identified gaps in research including educators' perspectives and contextual factors which informed the use of open-ended questions to prompt participants to share their experiences. The interview guide started more broadly to explore educators background and understanding of MP to build trust and rapport, then onto exploratory questions to explore their lived experiences. During the design process, draft guides were discussed in with my supervisors which helped with clarity, wording and sequency. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix O.

5.2.4.3 Piloting My Interviews

Piloting the interview was an imperative step in refining the structure and delivery of the questions (Hennink et al. 2020; Majid et al. 2017). It enabled me to test the clarity, relevance, and sequence of questions while also practicing my interviewing technique. Two one-hour pilot interviews were conducted, one online via Microsoft Teams with a critical friend which allowed me to navigate the online settings, and one in person with an educator I knew. The pilots enhanced my familiarity with the questions, improved my mindful listening and attention skills, and increased my confidence in asking follow-up questions and prompts to elicit responses.

Rich discussions with the pilot participants allowed me to reflect on the pace, adjust the sequence of questions, and identify gaps in the interview guide. Participants were provided with a feedback sheet (Appendix P) to support evaluation. Based on the feedback, I made several adjustments, I added a new question, “Do you feel there is a specific attitude required to share MP with young children?”. I introduced a new prompt, “What does mindfulness mean to you?” and added a final question “As we close this interview, would you like to share any key message about MP?” A summary of these modifications is highlighted in red in Appendix O. Data from the pilots were excluded from the findings or analysis for this study. Following the pilot, the topic guide included 27 questions.

5.2.4.4 Conducting the Interviews

Setting the stage of the interview is crucial (Kvale 2007) to allow the participant to become familiar with any researcher and to seek any clarification. Prior to recording, I introduced myself, described the purpose of the study, reiterated informed consent, provided detail of the structure of the interview including possible duration and recording procedures and allow for any questions or seek clarification of terms

(Creswell and Baez-Creswell 2020). I scheduled the interview to suit the participants and confirmed prior to starting that they were happy to proceed.

Building trust and rapport is integral to encourage participation in the interview (Bryman et al. 2021). I was mindful of my emic/etic positioning. While I was building rapport with the participants, I was attentive not to become overly friendly as I did not want to increase the risk of the participants pleasing me (Bryman et al. 2021). I remained authentic and honest with the participants about the purpose of my study, my background and my interest in MP, and I remained open to the multiple viewpoints that may emerge as I continued to act as traveller (Kvale 2007) and gardener (Salmons 2022). I took a mindful approach by listening attentively to the participants, ensuring that I did not interrupt their flow of sharing their stories with me. At times I refocused back gently to the research study when the conversation was veering off topic. I remained cognisant of verbal and nonverbal cues while I encouraged responses both verbally and non-verbally by smiling, nodding, and using eye contact. I remained aware of participants' body language and cues in case they appeared to be uncomfortable with the questions being asked. I ensured they could see and hear me throughout the online interview by confirming regularly. During the interview, I was mindful of my own physical presence and the topic of mindfulness by ensuring I was situated in the present moment. Consequently, I wanted to actively listen to the participants and to embody the role of traveller (Kvale 2007) with them and limited my notetaking as best I could. I used memos to depict thoughts and initial interpretations in the moment as prompts to explore certain areas further with the educators. At the end of each interview, I ensured time was allocated for further discussion and/or clarification. I provided participants with a post- interview debrief letter (Appendix Q) for them to review and provided them with details on how to reach me if they had any queries.

5.2.5 Data Analysis

As outlined in Chapter Three, given my constructivist and interpretivist underpinnings, my aim was to understand the subjective meanings and experiences of the educators while being reflexive in the process. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and my role as a mindfulness practitioner and educator, RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) was identified as the most suitable method. RTA embraced my subjectivity and reflexivity while holding value to my experiences and interpretations to help me identify, analyse and generate patterns/ themes.

5.2.5.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

The six- phase process (Braun and Clarke 2021) was employed and applied as a cyclical, iterative and recursive process that allowed me to continually reflect on my assumptions and experiences of MP and lean into my integral tool of subjectivity in the process. Each phase will now be described in detail.

Phase One: Familiarisation

I rigorously engaged with the data by immersing myself in the data. I listened to the audio recordings three times to become familiar, so that I could recall data when needed. I critically questioned what the educators were telling me, such as “How did this educator make sense of mindfulness?” Once familiar, I transcribed verbatim and read through the finalised transcripts three times line-by-line. I took note of my knowledge, insight and interpretation while allowing ‘analytic sensibility’ (Braun and Clarke 2021, p.45) by making connections between the data set and existing research and literature. The 27 interviews generated over 251,000 words and the density of this data was not underestimated.

This immersion in the data conjured many streams of thought for me, so I began creating familiarisation doodles to allow me to reflect and interpret meaning and illustrate the data. I began to see some patterns of thought and even when the

educators explicitly said “intention” it reminded me to take time to consider my reflective lens. I reminded myself not to become too attached to the initial ideas and thoughts, and to continue to hold an attitude of openness that I would bring to the coding phase. A sample of one of my familiarisation doodles is illustrated below in Figure 5.2

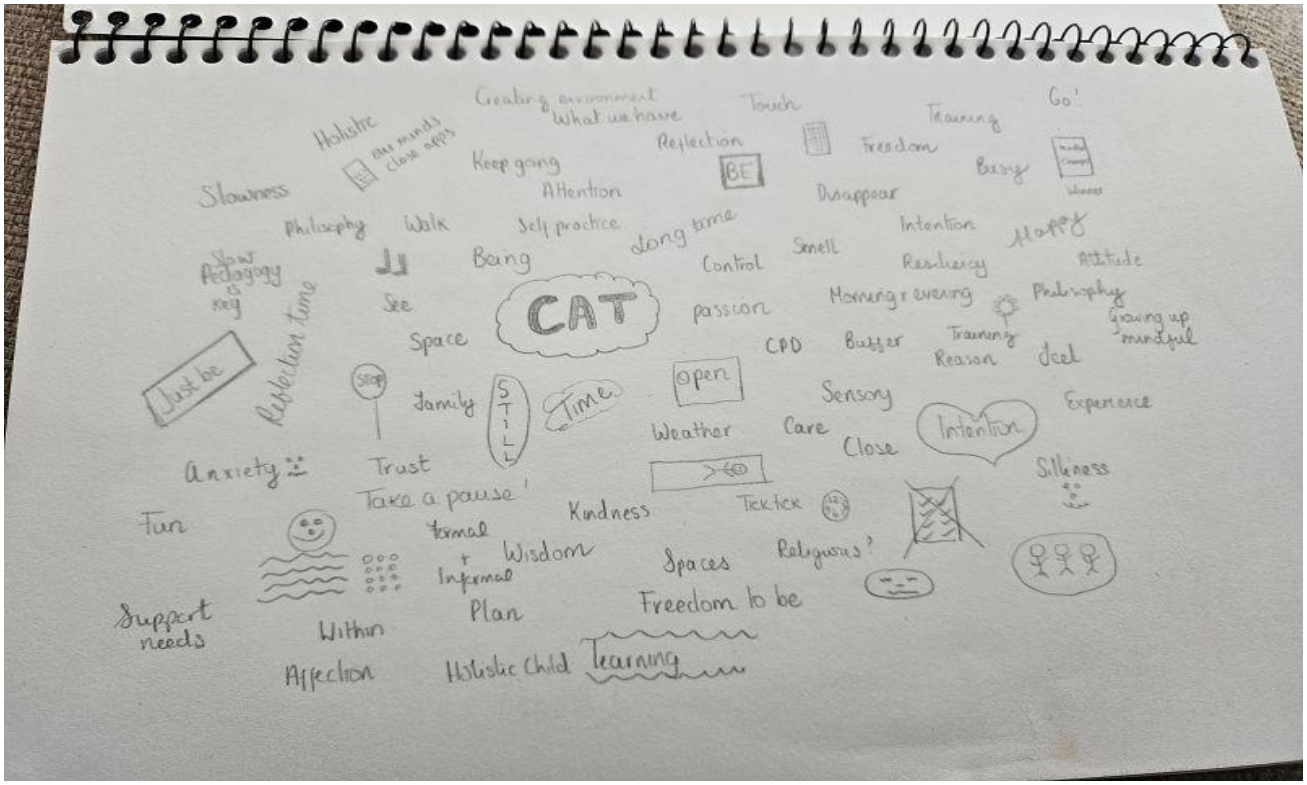


Figure 5.2 Phase Two Sample of Familiarisation

Phase Two: Coding

Codes are the smallest units of a researcher’s analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) and provide the necessary building blocks to develop themes. Coding was utilised as an inductive approach to understand the perspectives and experiences of the educators. All the data was engaged with in the same manner whereby I methodically reviewed the data, searching for interesting and relevant segments that were significant to my research questions. An example of some initial coding of a

verbatim extract is illustrated in Figure 5.3 with an additional fully coded interview excerpt provided in Appendix S.

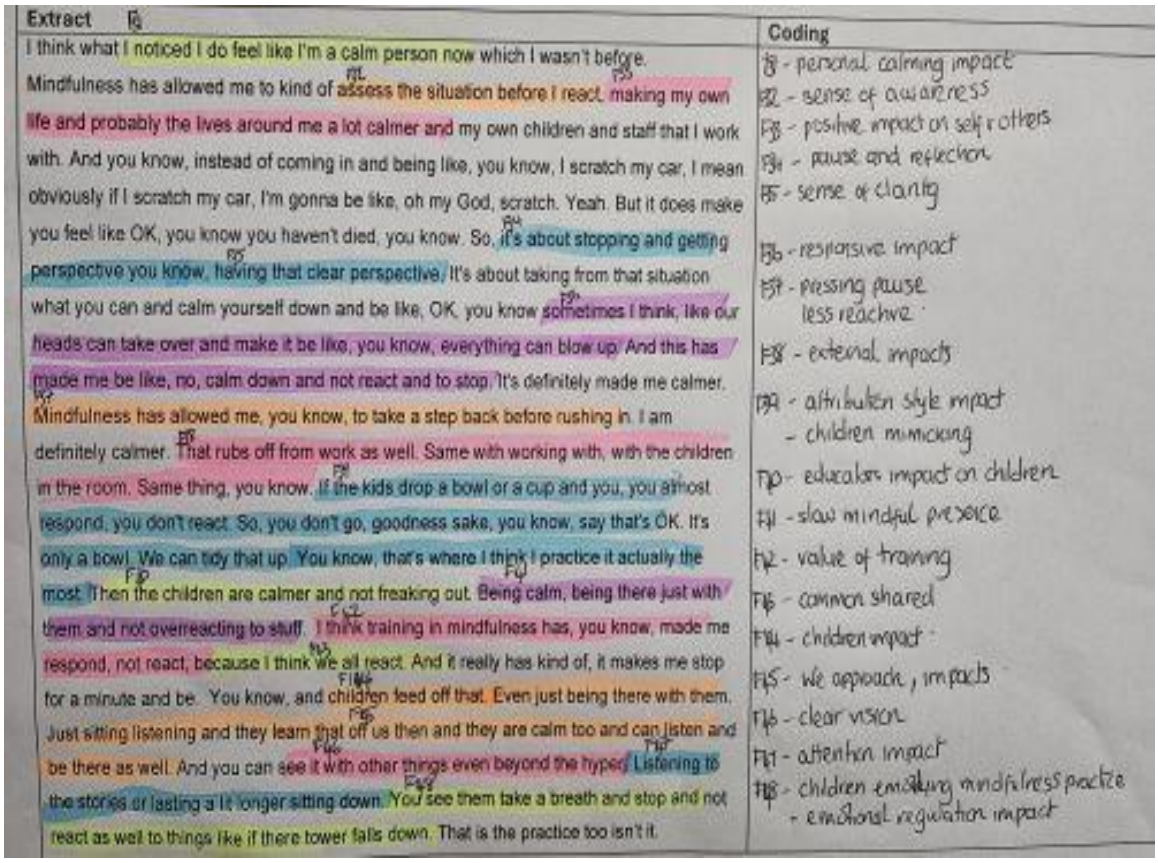


Figure 5.3 Phase Two Initial Coding Sample

I considered each line of data to capture those multiple perspectives. I initially tried online systems including the comment feature in Microsoft Word; however, I felt I was becoming somewhat detached from my data and therefore proceeded with a manual approach, with paper, coloured pens, and Post-it notes. Throughout the coding process, immersing and engaging with the data was the only way through; however, I also gifted myself some distance as breaks were needed at times. I found it a slow thoughtful process which required deep reflexivity. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that taking breaks from the data is integral in order to avoid mechanical coding and labelling text. "*Time away from the data can allow for new insights and interpretations to emerge, and supports the development of a richer, more reflexive*

engagement with the analysis." (2021, p.116). Breaks allowed me to return to the data with fresh eyes and to think critically about the data. I embarked on the iterative process to identify preliminary codes. My first round of coding resulted in over 5,000 codes which led to initial feelings of overwhelm. Embracing the systematic and reflexive process I found that some codes were too short in length to capture specific meanings, and I also applied code labels to provide the codes with more meaning and context. For example, an initial code was “mindfulness as connection” and the code label was amended to “MP as a way of connection to self, children and others” in order to provide more context. An example of the process is illustrated in Table 5.4

Table 5.4 Phase Two Application of Codes and Code Labels

Text	Code	Code label
Mindfulness is about being where you are in the moment no matter if they are loud or quiet, just being in it.	Present moment attention	Sense of awareness to the here and now
I think the word mindfulness can throw people off a bit when they aren't sure what it really means.	Hesitancy with the word	Uncertainty around the word mindfulness
While it is important to teach any child skills in early childhood and helps them with managing stress and being present now, it will help them in life, I wish I had learned it as a child.	View mindfulness practice as a lifelong skill	Belief in the value of mindfulness beyond early childhood education
My practice allows me to connect to myself and how I am feeling at the moment but it allows me to be with the children creating those moments together and even the other educators it gives us that chance.	Mindfulness for connection	Mindfulness practice as a way to connect with self, children and others.
If we had someone with expertise and experience that could offer support in our practice, I think would nurture our practice then.	Importance of mentoring	Value placed on guidance and support for implementing mindfulness practice.
Some educators are worried they will look silly or maybe not doing it right.	Lack of confidence and belief	Educators' feelings of self-doubt which may limit their ability to practice with children
You have to be open to mindfulness and the possibilities because if you aren't there is no point.	Attitude of openness	Having a receptive and open attitude to mindfulness and its potential benefits
It really goes beyond us a sector, you know, if the department and agencies held value to it and prioritised it would help us integrate it better.	Onus on external stakeholders	Feeling that leadership and policy makers have a duty to support mindfulness practice in early childhood.

Some codes were broader and some more specific; systematic coding assisted me with deep insight and engagement with the data while also adding rigour. When reading the transcripts and listening to the recordings, I was curious, open minded and present to the process. I stopped when I noticed something was relevant to the research questions, I noticed patterns and shared meaning, therefore I did not code everything.

By revisiting the coding process, I was able to identify duplicate codes, while also refining and combining codes that helped with my efficiency. This process allowed me to engage more meaningfully with my data, and I started to think across the data set as a whole. My second round of coding resulted in 1,568 codes and a sample of the coding process is illustrated in Figure 5.4 below.

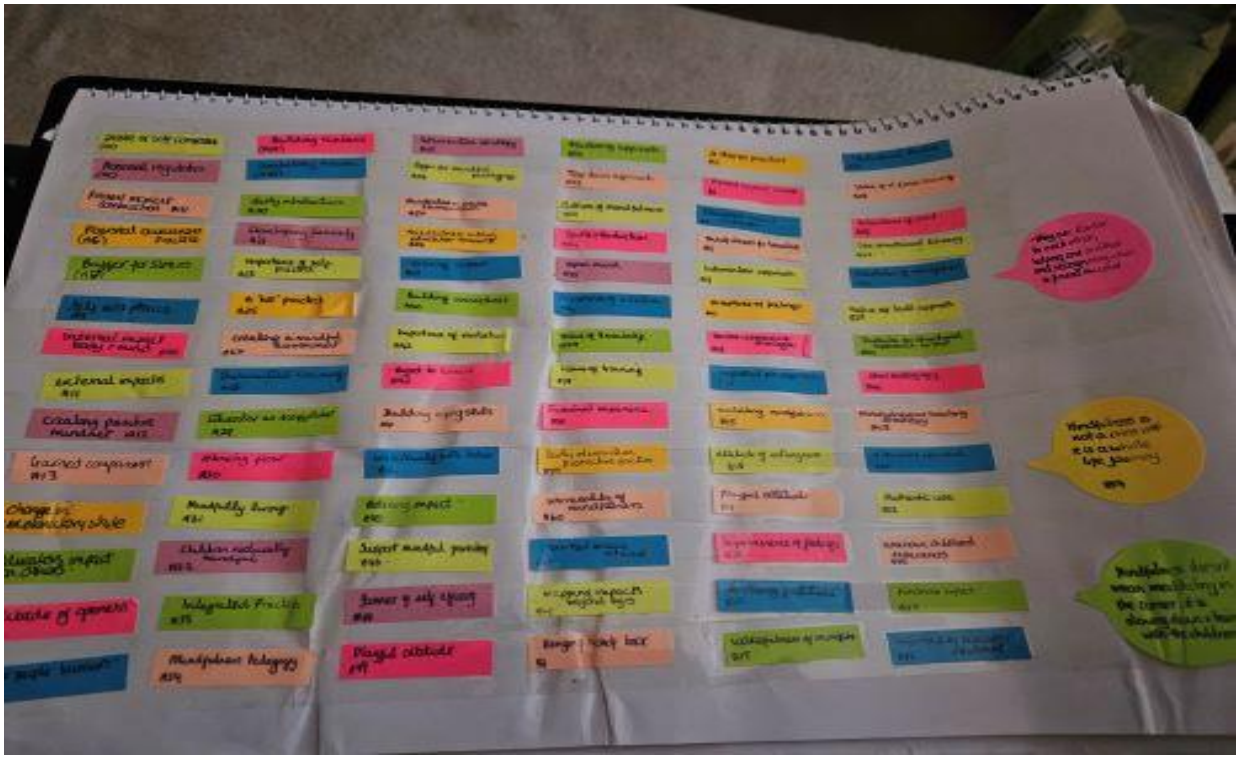


Figure 5.4 Sample of Phase Two Coding

Throughout the coding process, I navigated between semantic coding by interpreting the educators accounts from what they explicitly said, while also using latent coding where I felt poignant meaning had been implied by the educators (see table 5.5 below) without giving either priority. I found myself drawn to the positive statements of mindfulness which led to me heavily code the benefits. I took a step back to reflect on my assumptions as a researcher and ensure the data spoke for itself. I also found myself initially summarising what the educators were sharing with me, highlighting a lack of analytical balance. Navigating between semantic and latent coding was important to ensure I did not rely solely on semantics. Taking this approach allowed me to acknowledge some of the more ambiguous meanings such as educators' sense of hesitancy that may not have been explicitly stated. I asked myself critical questions including: Are there things I expect to find? Am I allowing the data speak for itself? How much of my experience with mindfulness is impacting the coding process? This allowed me to tend to the data with a more critical lens and explore the complexities of the educators' experiences with MP. As RTA is an iterative process, I also revisited my familiarisation doodles in case there was anything that I was missing from the data. This helped me stay close to the words of the educators.

Table 5.5 Phase Two Sample of Semantic and Latent Coding

Text	Semantic	Latent
It really is for everyone, you can practice mindfulness whether you are young like in preschool or even in school, even my mother uses mindfulness now.	Mindfulness for everyone	Universality of mindfulness
I think for me it has changed me as a person, I am happier, calmer and even my kids will tell you that. Yeah it has been a big change for me	Personal impacts	Personal transformation through mindfulness practice
It is important for children to know how to access it, to be able to use those practices in early childhood but also as a tool for the future, they can use it when things get a bit challenging	Mindfulness for now and for future	Viewing mindfulness as a lifelong skill
It has allowed me to realise others feel the same way as I do and to have some understanding as well. We all feel sad, angry, happy, we all have these experiences.	A way of understanding others	Mindfulness for connection
You have to look at those spaces as well how can we create those mindful moments for children to just be calm.	Importance of areas for mindfulness	Physical environment supporting mindfulness
Having a chance to deepen your own practice is important, you have to feel it to understand it and then you will use it better.	Value of self-practice	Building educators capacity
There needs to be a focus on the educators as well and our wellbeing I think that gets lost sometimes.	Prioritising educators' wellbeing	Commitment to holistic educator wellbeing
Knowing when to use mindfulness activities and practices is important too when children need that extra bit of help, but knowing this and how to do it.	Intervention approach	Strategic integration of mindfulness practice
There are so many mindfulness activities we use, yes we use breathing, but also in stories, having calming music on even for babies, allowing creative art expression, even exploring outside mindfully, there are many ways.	Variety of mindfulness practices	Flexibility and adaptability of mindfulness practices

The coding process was iterative and reflexive and resulted in multiple rounds of coding. Through the process of reviewing, refining, and merging codes, I ensured that each code was aligned closely to the data and the developing themes. The final set of 106 codes reflected this thoughtful, analytical, and purposeful engagement process. A table with my themes and codes is provided in Appendix T.

Phase Three: The Journey to Generating Initial Themes

I began this phase by cutting my codes and clustering them into groups that had a shared idea or concept. This helped me identify meaning and themes across the data set by using visual mapping. Within this process, themes did not emerge from

the data set (Braun and Clarke 2021) but were constructed through my own interpretation and subjectivity. I needed to see all these themes together to get a sense of the whole picture. My first iteration of themes included ten provisional themes (Figure 5.5).

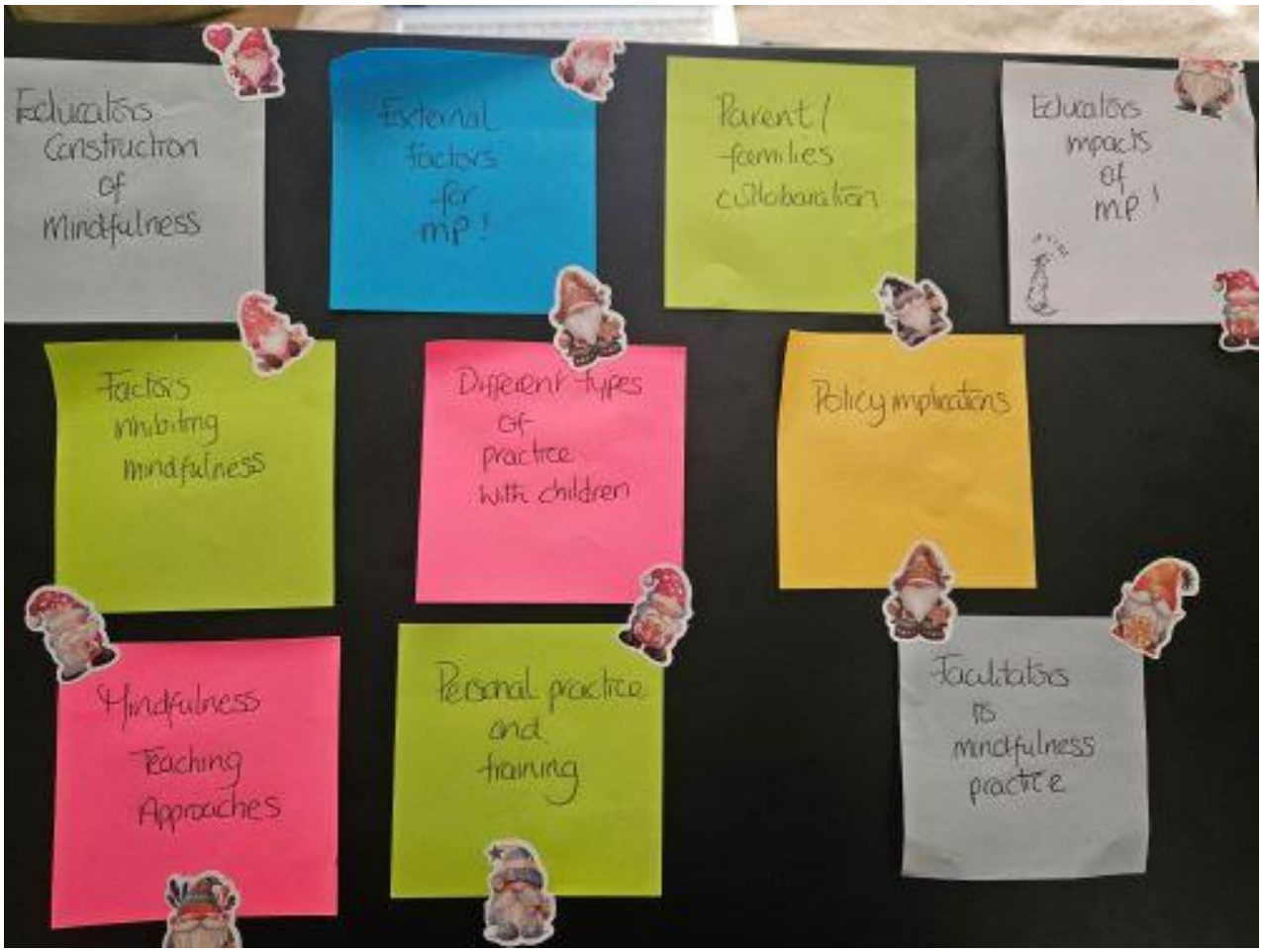


Figure 5.5 Phase Two Iteration One Theme Development

This early clustering of codes resulted in themes I felt lacked conceptual depth. For example, initially I had ‘educators’ constructions of mindfulness’- which I felt was becoming more of a topic summary, and I had to remind myself the themes should include everything about the topic. I had to remind myself that a theme should reflect the richness and complexity of the data. With this awareness, I experimented with multiple combinations, and the themes were refined by re-engaging with the data set. I noticed that these early themes were overly similar to the interview questions,

rather than organically being generated by my interpretations of the data. This prompted critical reflection: I questioned, do my provisional themes capture something meaningful and nuanced? An illustration of the iteration process moving from ten themes to six initial themes is illustrated in Figure 5.6 below.

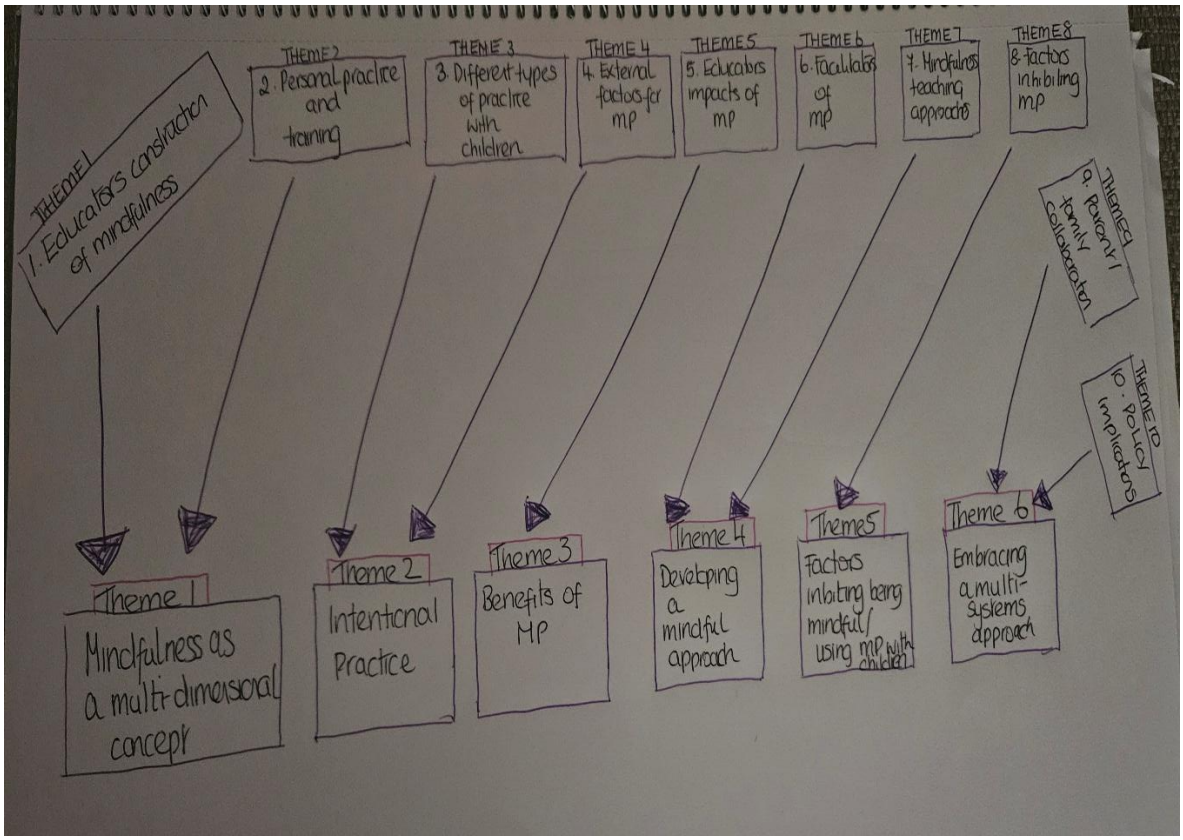


Figure 5.6 Phase Two Second Iteration of Theme Development

Phase 4: Developing the Themes

To ensure authentic representation of educators' voices, I systematically linked quotes from participants to the generated codes to demonstrate their contribution to the meaningful themes generated. This process allowed me to maintain a close and reflexive engagement with the data. An illustration of this process is presented in Figure 5.7 below.

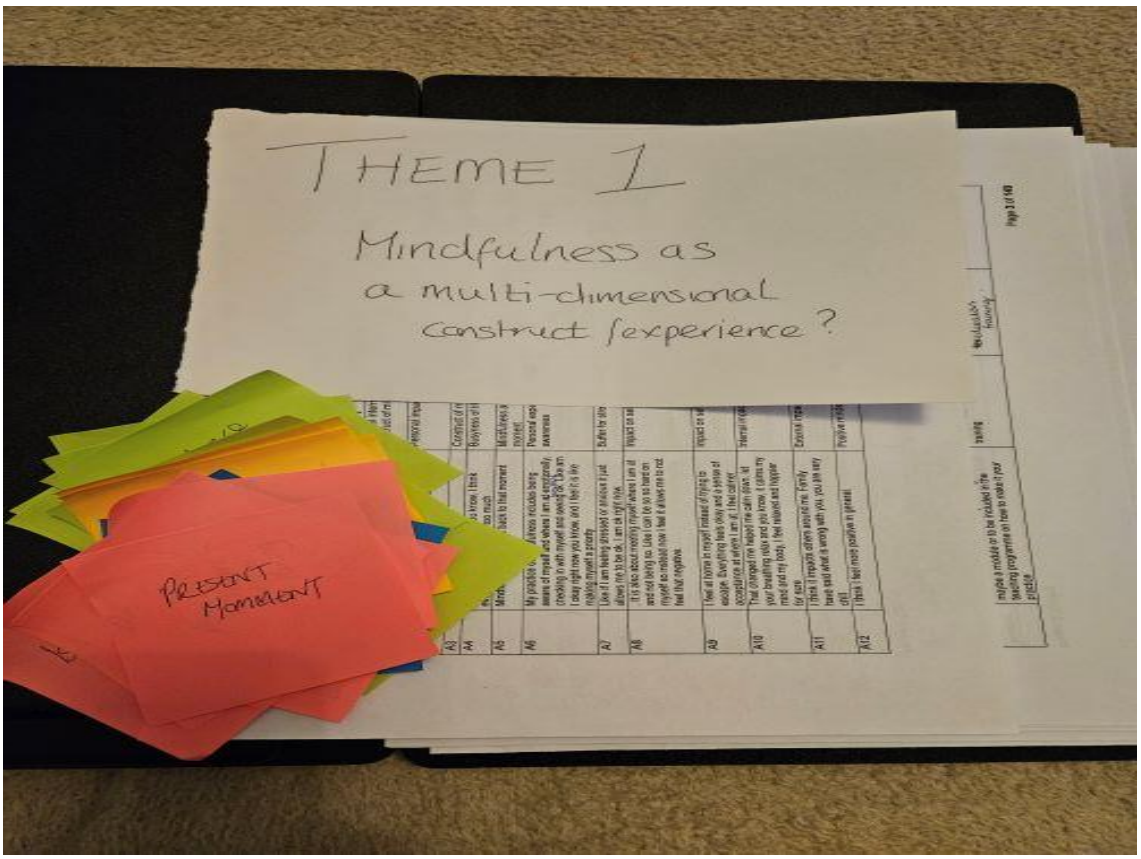


Figure 5.7 Phase Two Sample of clustering codes and themes

As part of the iteration process, I entered this phase with six provisional themes which I still felt was too many, and they risked being more of a topic summary rather than a theme. I reviewed each theme for alignment with the research questions while assessing the coherence of codes and overall dataset. At times, I discovered some initial themes were ‘too thin’ and were best integrated as a sub theme. For example, ‘factors inhibiting using mindfulness with children’, became a sub theme of ‘cultivating a mindful teaching approach’. Additionally, the benefits of MP were renamed to the effect of mindful moments with children and became a subtheme of practicing with intention. This third iteration resulted in four themes and eleven subthemes. This third iteration is illustrated in Figure 5.8 below.

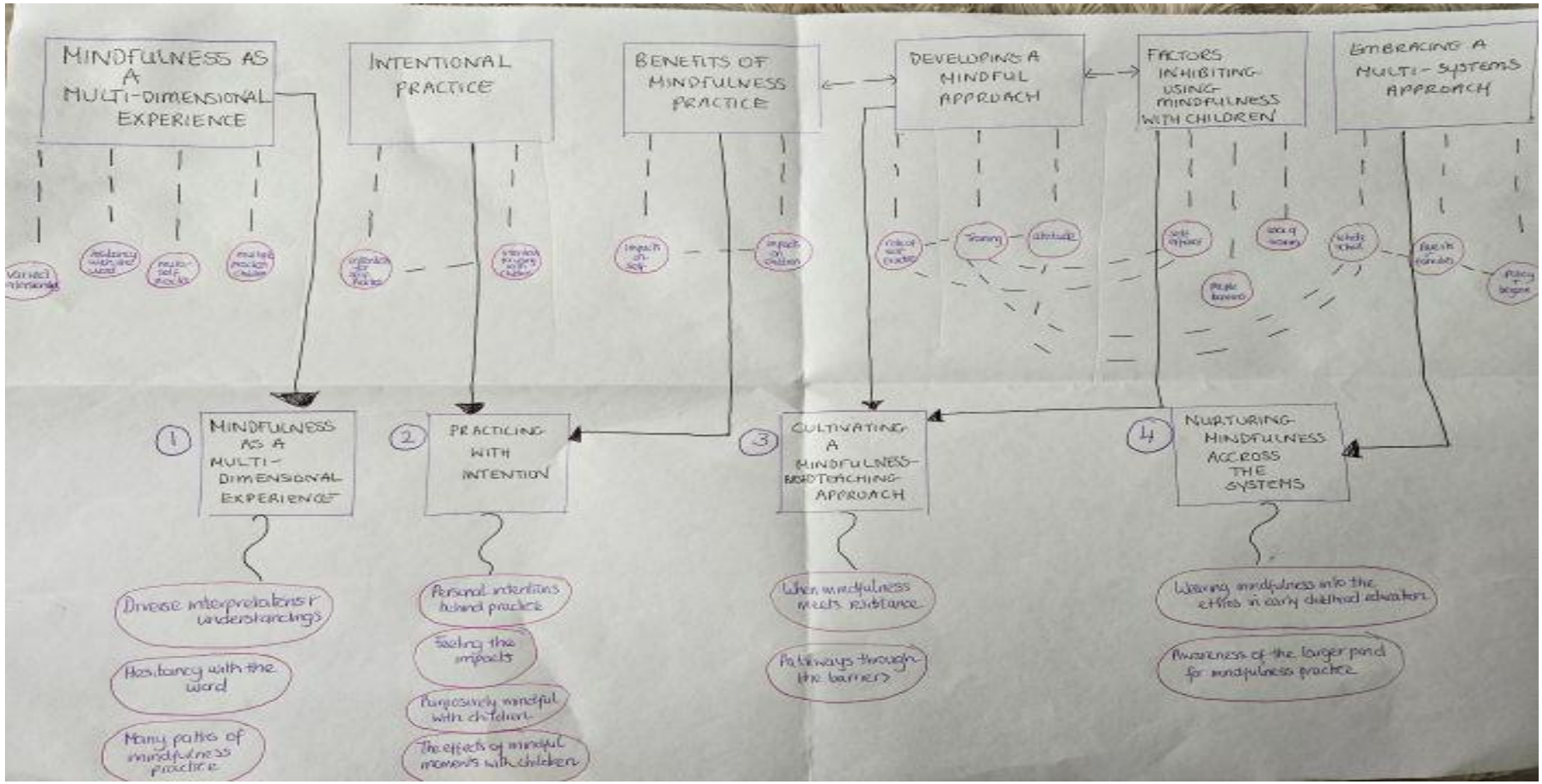


Figure 5.8 Phase Two Third Iteration of Theme Development

Phase 5: Naming Themes

Approaching this phase, I felt content with the names of my four themes, I reverted to my reflexive diaries and familiarisation doodles from Phase One and reflected on my thoughts, interpretations and quotes from the participants which demonstrated my conceptual thinking. I wanted to ensure that the voice of the educators was connected to the words and the analysis used. Braun and Clarke (2021) recommend that a good theme name should be informative, concise, and catchy in a manner that represents the analysis for the reader. An illustration of my second theme with subthemes and codes is presented in Figure 5.9 below.

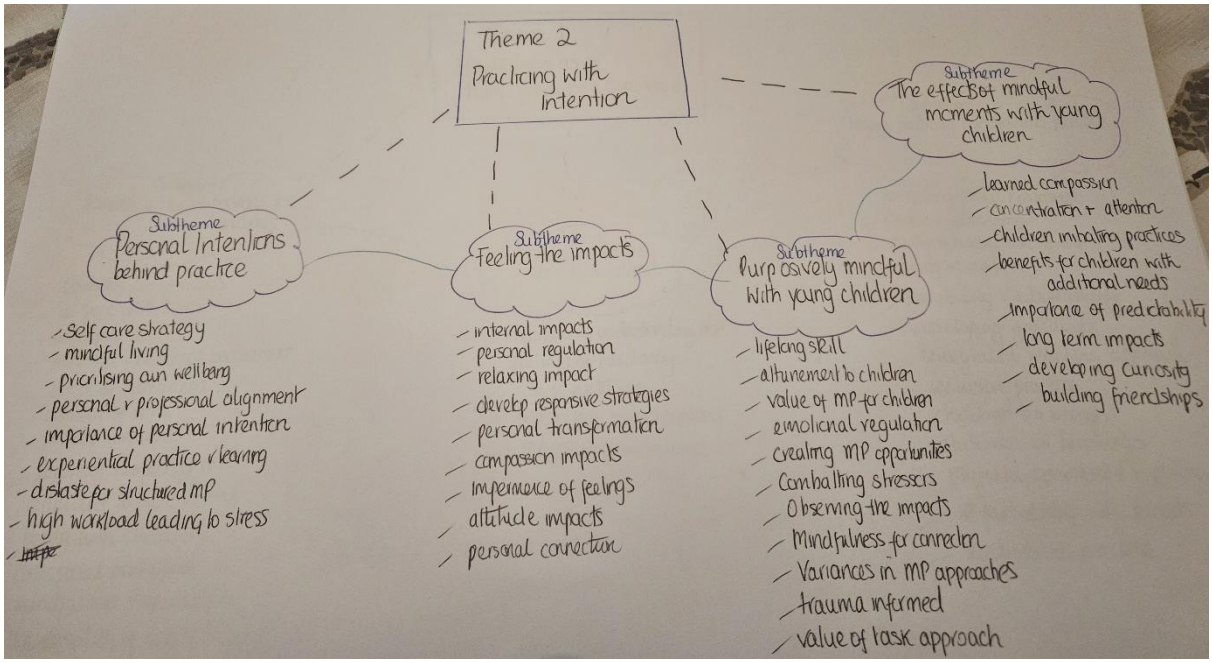


Figure 5.9 Sample of Theme Two Development

Once I had defined and named the themes as per their recommendations, I wrote a short descriptive abstract for each theme to ensure the reader could follow my train of thought while also solidifying for me that my themes were robust and not a topic summary.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

At this final phase, the list of themes was explored again to ensure applicability to the data set, additionally I reflected on my writing throughout the analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2021) to ensure the production of robust findings that were representative of the educators' stories. I looked back at my reflexive journals to see the iterative process of my thoughts and theme development. I reflected on my constructivist and interpretivist approach and my mindful reflective lens of IAA. Taking time to do this allowed me to reflect on the importance of my own attitude to the writing process acting as a reminder to stay open and curious to the different perspectives from the educators and by providing rich contextual data (quotes) to add to the trustworthiness of this study. After a rigorous, reflective, and iterative process of coding and thematic development I arrived at four overarching themes each of these grounded in the voices of the educators and supported by 106 codes. An illustration of these final themes, subthemes and codes is presented below in Figure 5.10 to illustrate the depth of analysis with final themes and codes outlined in Appendix T.

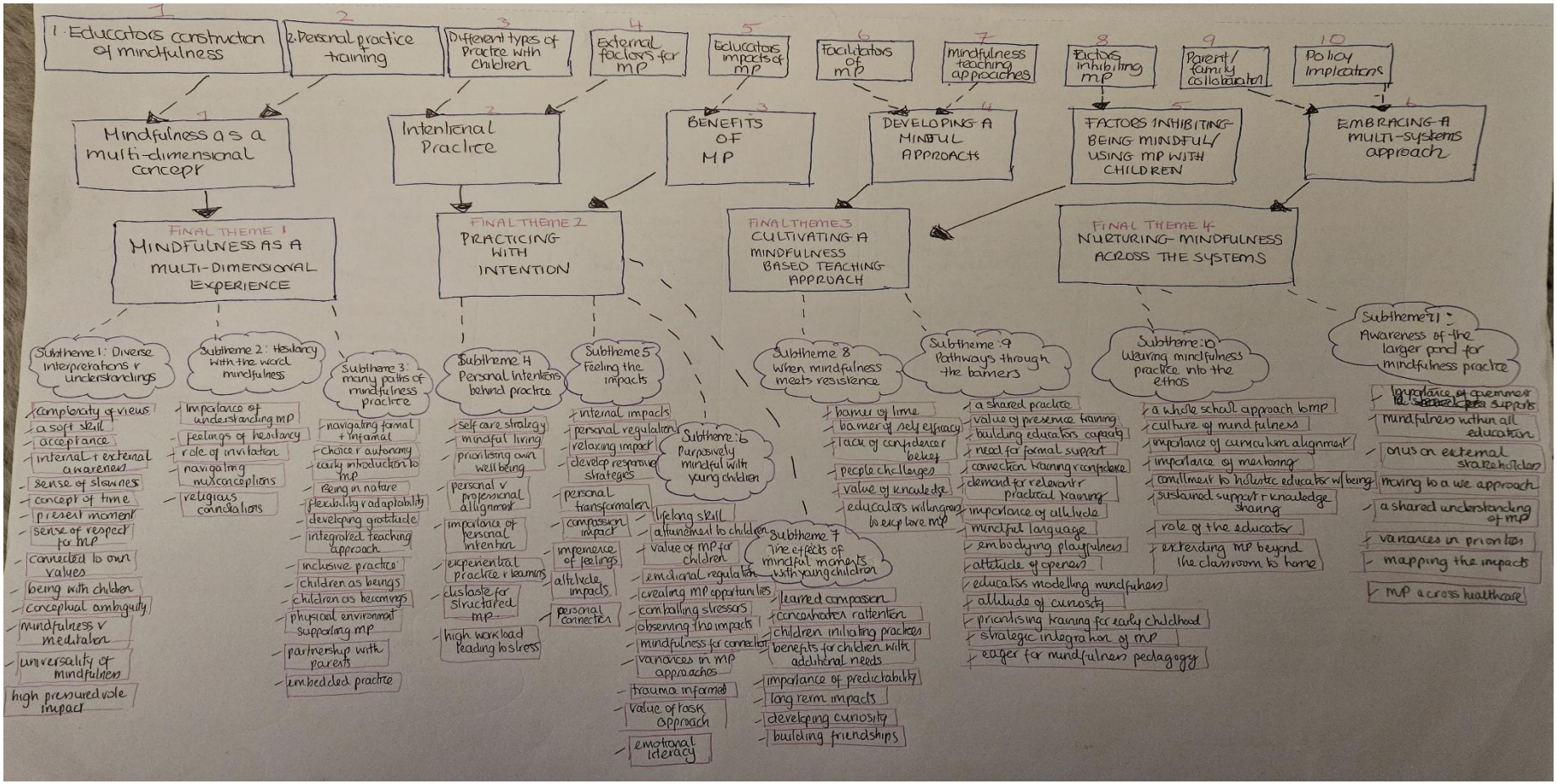


Figure 5.10 Phase Two Final Themes, Subthemes and Codes

5.2.6 Section Summary

This section has outlined the methodological foundations that shaped this phase of my study. Guided by my constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, I opted for an inductive and qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of educators. I also described the sampling and recruitment processes that supported this process. Using RTA allowed a flexible and thorough approach to analysing my data that honoured subjectivity, reflexivity, and interpretation. Throughout this phase, I remained mindful of my role in shaping the knowledge being produced, reflecting on how my values, and lived experiences influenced the meaning making process. In the following section, I present my findings organised within four themes and eleven subthemes which were generated from a deep, meaningful engagement with the educators' stories.

5.3 Introduction to Findings

This section presents the findings generated through RTA guided by Braun and Clarke (2021). The process was reflexive and iterative where the themes were formed and guided by my engagement and interpretations of the data. My analytical sensibility was shaped by the data, exploration of the literature and ongoing reflection of my own subjective experience. As such, the themes do not reflect an objective summary of the data but a meaning making process. The findings are presented with four themes and eleven subthemes as illustrated in Figure 5.11. While presented separately, these themes are interconnected with some concepts spanning multiple themes. Therefore, multiple concepts were found under different themes. This fluidity reflects the rich complexity of the educators' experiences and recognises that meaning does not always fit into thematic boundaries.

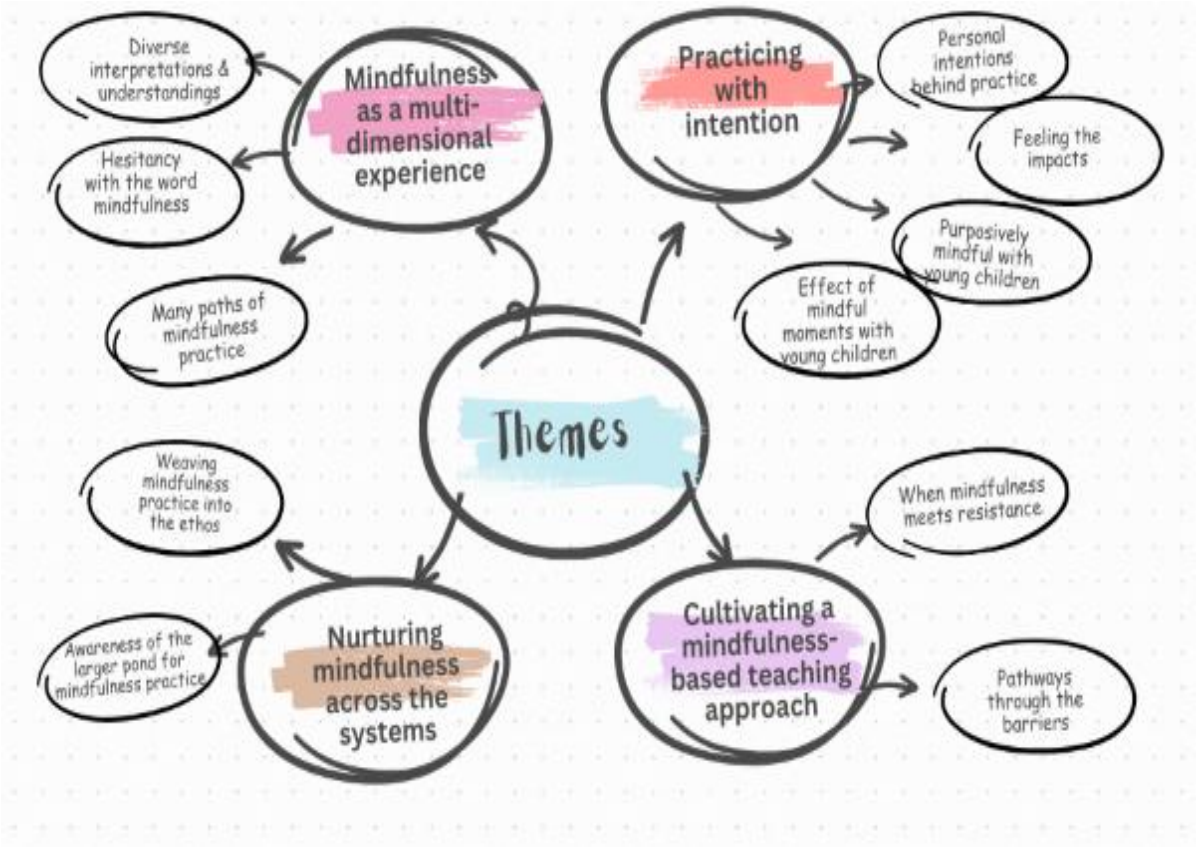


Figure 5.11 Phase Two Themes and Subthemes

Background to the Sample

The demographic profile of the sample mirrored that in Phase One. Out of the 27 participants, 25 were female and two were male. The majority (*n*=23) worked primarily with preschool age children (3 to 5 years), three worked with children aged 1 to 2 years and one with under 1's. In terms of professional experience, 25 educators have worked in the sector for over ten years while seven had less than five years' experience. All participants engaged in personal MP. Regarding training, seven completed non-accredited training (online webinars) and two engaged in accredited training, a further seven had undertaken both accredited and non-accredited training.

5.3.1. Theme One: Mindfulness as a Multi-dimensional Experience

Introduction:

I interrogated this theme on multiple occasions to capture the dynamic essence of mindfulness that educators shared. I first titled it ‘a multidimensional concept’, but it became evident that it was much more than a concept for educators, but a real, felt, lived experience, with a sense of complexity around mindfulness. The first subtheme ‘Diverse Interpretations and Understandings’ captured the layered ways in which educators conceptualise mindfulness. While educators shared the multitude of meanings, they often shared their reluctance with using the word mindfulness which is explored in the second subtheme ‘Hesitancy with the Word Mindfulness’. The third subtheme ‘Many Paths of Mindfulness Practice’ describes educators’ experiences and engagement with MP with the educators’ sharing practices used personally and with children. Overall, this theme provides insight into mindfulness as an adaptive and fluid process rather than a prescriptive practice.

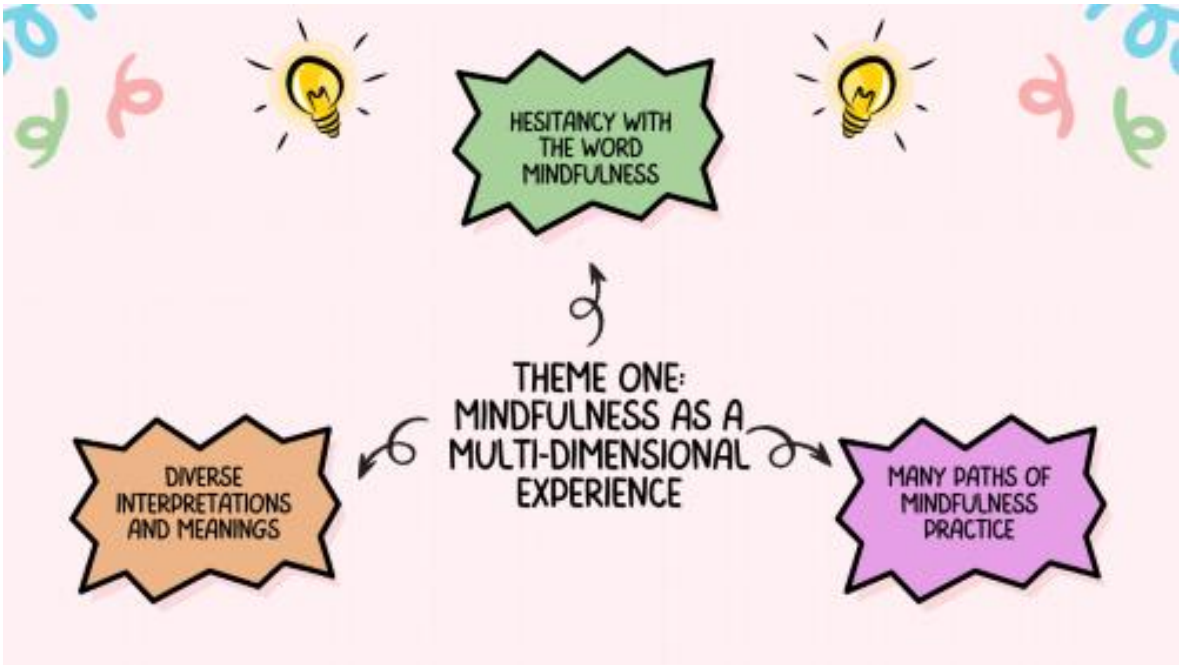


Figure 5.12 Illustration of Theme One and Subthemes

5.3.1.1 Subtheme One: Diverse Interpretations and Understandings

There was noticeable disparity amongst educators' understanding of mindfulness, whereby several educators described mindfulness as forms of meditation practices including breathing, and formal meditations, while some educators conceptualised mindfulness in a broader sense of being present and attentive in daily life. Despite the variance, there was a collective sense that having a shared definition may alleviate some of the uncertainty surrounding mindfulness. Ita expressed:

> Everyone has a different idea what mindfulness is and that is confusing, some people think it is meditating in the corner, and it really isn't, we need to demystify it for sure. People might think you are a hippy dippy in the corner but if we show that mindfulness is about being present in your life… you can be mindful through walking, writing, music, talking will help.

The importance of attention to the present moment was referred to consistently Many conveyed that being present in what they were doing in the context of home or work contexts. As Dee expressed, this was the "*essential of mindfulness*" and Ber reflected:

> You really have to be, really be present in your life, stop thinking about all the things you could have done differently, we miss so much of life and its beautiful moments by not being present.

The concept of time came to the forefront with three contrasting views. While some educators mentioned the challenge of making time for mindfulness, others associated mindfulness as offering the "*gift of time*" (Lee). However, several educators referred to the importance of intentionally creating time and space to support mindfulness. Jay shared:

> You need to carve that space and time for mindfulness whether that is a meditation or a walk, because mindfulness gives you that gift of time in the moment, nothing else in life does that.

There were several references to "*pauses*" (Quinn) and "*slowness"* (Sam) which the educators used in both personal and professional capacities that allowed them time to "*ground*" (Ann) themselves back into the present moment. Similarly, many

educators expressed that mindfulness and engaging in MP offers a form of reset for them, enabling them to approach situations in a calmer way. Pat expressed that:

> Mindfulness is about stopping in that moment where I am and nearly feels like a reset where I can approach things in a calmer way than I usually would, like a computer rebooting itself.

Educators' awareness and acceptance featured significantly as part of their understanding of mindfulness. Some educators emphasised the importance of having an awareness of their internal thoughts and feelings in addition to cultivating an awareness of "*external distraction*s" (Toni). Lee shared:

> Mindfulness is being aware of myself, aware of life's distractions and say to myself, ok this is where I am right now and just be there and sit with it and you will be ok, it is I am aware and then I can be present again.

There was a sense that acceptance of internal and external experiences without judgment were equally important. Having such acceptance was seen as enabling presence and reducing overthinking and allowing educators to be "*present*" (Mai) and the ability to "*not living in your head*" (Sam). Kay shared a similar sentiment:

> I have learned to sit with the feelings, mindfulness has allowed me the space to sit and go ok this is what is here, the good, the bad, the ugly, they all will come and go and once you crack that, you can move forward.

Educators firmly agreed that while mindfulness may be misunderstood at times and seen as a soft skill, it is in fact a learnable cognitive skill. They spoke about the universality and accessibility of mindfulness and the potential of mindfulness for everyone. Una expressed:

> The magic about mindfulness, it is for everyone, it doesn't matter about your age, gender, language, religion, it is a skill of presence we can all share, we all have it within us, we just need to know the tools on how to tap into it.

Despite the variances in understanding, there was a shared sense of value and acceptance of mindfulness and the use of MP as they highlighted its adaptability and accessibility for all people.

5.3.1.2 Subtheme Two: Hesitancy with the Word "Mindfulness"

While many educators defined mindfulness as being in the present moment, some noted the term itself could be perceived as abstract and may be challenging to understand. Nel shared:

> People have misunderstandings of what mindfulness is, to simply put it, mindfulness is about humanity, it is about waking up and being with your life, it is not religious but that needs to be explained properly.

There was a sense of reservation from some educators around using the word mindfulness with young children. For some, mindfulness is a "*complex topic*" (Rose) that may not be age appropriate for children to understand. Some spoke more specifically that mindfulness is an internal construct which can be challenging to visually explain to children. Eve commented:

> I don't tell the children it is mindfulness, because for me mindfulness is a presence you inhabit and they won't understand that at their age, it is a little bit complicated to explain to them.

When probed for a solution of how to explain mindfulness to children, there was a clear desire to find ways to explain mindfulness more clearly to children and to their parents. Ber stated:

> It even goes beyond explaining it to children, we need to be able to explain it in simple terms to parents as well as they don't get it …. there isn't one definition and that makes it a bit hard to get your head around.

Hesitancy also extended to using the word 'mindfulness' with parents, due to concerns it might be misinterpreted as religious. Dee recalled a situation when a parent objected to children's yoga due to perceived religious connotations. Rose shared:

> I don't ever use the word mindfulness, I think parents would think it is religious, so you have to be careful. I think some people think mindfulness is Buddhism and the parents might think we are trying to make the children like little Buddhas.

Despite this hesitancy, some educators suggested potential ways to overcome parental hesitancy. Some solutions included using mindful language with parents such as "*slowing down*" (Fia) and "*being present*" (Wil) and inviting parents into settings to observe MPs in action. Sharing practical tools and resources to try at home and sharing research were seen as valuable tools to increase understanding. Quinn expressed:

> I think starting slow is important, invite parents in and show them what we are doing, so they see it is not religious, maybe give them tip sheets, share the research with them so they understand this is real and there are huge benefits, I think once they know they will be more open.

Across the interview, the educators expressed a strong desire to include parents in the practices they use with children. Many indicated that sharing research could support parents understanding and help reduce misconceptions about MP.

5.3.1.3 Subtheme Three: Many Paths of Mindfulness Practice

The educators shared the multiple ways in which they personally practice mindfulness, with breathing most commonly referenced. These were appreciated for their flexibility, ease of use and the ability to provide a moment of pause to reset in multiple contexts, such as in the car before work, the classroom, a busy supermarket, and at home. They remarked breathing meditations can be used as both a preventative tool to build resilience and as a response strategy in moments of stress. Hal explained:

> Taking a few breaths in the car before work just sets me up for the day, it really grounds me. I also use it at times of stress, and it allows me to just take a moment before I react to something.

Rather than opting for a formal scheduled MP most educators described an informal and embedded approach to their personal practice. They described how MP was weaved into daily life, by slowing down and being more in the moment and by

"*pressing pause*" (Ber), which they suggested resulted in greater levels of continued practice. Ann shared:

> The magic about mindfulness it doesn't have to be those big meditations, it can just be within your daily life, take a pause, take a breath, take time to listen, to walk, to make a coffee, to weave it in, it is in everything and makes me more likely to always embrace it.

Many educators shared that "*being present in nature*" (Una) was an important part of their MP, where they could pay attention to the sounds and sights and connect with nature. Many educators recalled how they were introduced to MP in childhood through family experiences in nature. Cat observed:

> Being outside allows us to be naturally mindful, just listen and see the nature around us ensures we stay in the present moment state.

While the educators appeared to favour an informal approach for self-practice, some educators shared they have used formal meditations, typically in the morning before work or in the evenings to relax. They recognised MP was a useful support at times of stress while recognising there was scope for further integrating of MP within their daily life. Frequency of practice varied as several found it difficult to quantify how often they practice, viewing it more as a way of being.

Similarly, when the educators described how often they used MP with young children, the consensus was mindfulness was typically embedded into their daily routine rather than a set day, time, or formalised curricula approach. The majority of educators felt having a "*set mindfulness time*" (Belle) could be detrimental to children and risk mindfulness becoming "a *tick box*" (Lee) activity. Wil echoed this concern:

> It is not mindfulness hour, we need to be living a more mindful life with the children, there are no time limits, it should just be your way of being and living every day in everything.

The preference for an embedded approach over formalised approaches was referred to throughout. They described such an approach as more natural and

meaningful for the children, rather than "*another activity to be slotted in*" (Nel). There were concerns raised that a prescribed approach could set mindfulness up to becoming a "*fad*" (Pat), "*left on the shelf"* (Ola) or "*similar to having an "Aistear hour*" (Fia) which they believed has happened historically in primary schools in Ireland.

While educators typically sought adopting an embedded approach, MP was also used as an intervention or support for children who appeared upset or anxious. The educators drew on several examples where they used MP as a "*calming tool*" (Cat) for children when they observed a child "*becoming dysregulated*" (Dee) or "*needing support*" (Ada). The educators highlighted the importance of having these mindfulness activities and interventions in their "*educator's toolbox*" (Jay). Val expressed:

> I think where mindfulness has helped most is when I see a child becoming upset or stressed, I can step in with my strategies, even some breath work or mindful music and it really works and bring them back to a sense of calm and safety.

The educators described a variety of ways they use MP with young children including yoga, breathing cards, mindful music, mindful colouring, and gratitude practices. These were available freely throughout the day where children had autonomy to engage with them. Breathing was identified as the most favourable approach to use with young children seen as accessible, low cost and easy to model by the educators that could be woven throughout the day. Belle explained:

> I find the breathing the best activity to do, I make sure to find many moments to do a hot chocolate breath, a star breath, they are easy for me to show children, and they love it a way for them to connect to what is going on for them in their bodies.

There was some convergence of views; while breathing practices were deemed as an informal practice, the educators acknowledged there is an element of formality associated with it. It required clear instruction and modelling from the educators and

allocation of set times to practice in order for it to become as Dee expressed "*second nature*" and a natural part of their day. Cat stated:

> I think there is a good bit of instruction at the beginning, because that is how children learn, we need to show them and keep doing it, only when they keep practicing does it become part of the routine.

Melodic music played a key role to support mindfulness and children being present. It was used by many educators to support times of transition, allow children to unwind and create a calm nurturing environment to support children's learning and concentration. Toni expressed a similar sentiment, "*Even if they are painting or building something, I find having the calming music on keeps them engrossed*."

Many educators shared the magnitude of gratitude practices used with young children, with a firm consensus that teaching gratitude to young children was important. These included creation of a gratitude tree, gratitude jars, thank you cards and kindness boxes in their settings. Fia expressed:

> We ask the children who are they grateful for, you can see their little minds ticking over, it is lovely to listen to them share who is important to them in their lives.

There appeared to be agreement from the educators that young children responded positively to these practices and saw them as ways to foster kindness, compassion, and connection with others. It was seen as a way to support a "*positive mindset*" (Ola) in early childhood. Jay remarked:

> You can see how much they love the gratitude tree, shouting out their friends' names or mam or dad, it is lovely to see the kindness for others oozing from them.

The educators reflected on the visible impact of these loving kindness practices, describing how some children have internalised the language and turn it into action. Una observed:

> We use loving-kindness practices, and I've watched children take those words and stories that we share with them and turn them into hugs, helping hands, and gentle words in real moments.

Creating a mindful atmosphere and providing opportunities for MP was shared by many educators as an integral part of connecting with children with Fia highlighting the crucial role of "*mindful spaces*" to allow children to be present and relaxed. Ola remarked:

> I think it can be magical for young children to allow them space and time to just be mindful, be truly deep in what they are doing. We can create more of those chances for them to slow it all down by setting up cosy corners, relaxation spaces, and mindfulness resources.

The educators often described children as "*naturally mindful*", highlighting their present moment awareness within play throughout the day. They raised concerns that some educators could be diverting children away from those mindful states. Ita expressed:

> Children are naturally mindful, engaged in the present moment of play, we need to support that and not interfere as much and taking them out of those states of play

This sense of "*slowness*" and "*being with children*" manifested at different levels from concrete examples to more implicit statements. Belle commented

> I think mindfulness is nothing and something at the same time, it doesn't have to be all organised it can be just in how you are with the children.

The term slow pedagogy was specifically linked as a foundation for MP with Cat explaining it as *"one of the ingredients of mindfulness practice*". There was a sense that slowing down, modelling presence and being with children were fundamental in order for children to learn how to be mindful. Sam expressed:

> I feel being able to slow down and be present with children is one of the magic moments, it allows you to stop and just be there with them. They love that and that is important for me to show them what mindfulness looks like.

However, practical, and contextual barriers such as paperwork and staffing issues, were referenced as challenges in their ability to slow down and be with children. Rose reflected:

> I want to be able to sit and be present with the children, but I have so much paperwork to do, observations, assessments, and sometimes educators aren't in, so all that takes me away from the children and allows takes me from a calm state.

The educators highlighted having a slow pedagogical practice was their favoured approach to "*being mindful with children*" (Dee) rather than to "*do mindfulness*" (Quinn) and required few resources. Nevertheless, there was a sense that MP goes beyond those slowed moments, and presence can equally be expressed in the livelier moments such as dancing and movement. Una shared:

> Letting them move and dance to the flow of the music, I never realised until now that this is mindfulness as they are truly present and engaged, even if they are jumping about.

There was an indication that many educators viewed slow pedagogy as being both related and distinctive from MP. While both approaches emphasised presence, the educators viewed slow pedagogy as the way of engaging with children, as mindfulness was framed as a broader way of being. Jay shared:

> This is where the difference is slowing down being responsive is our approach, like how we engage and interact, you have to be slowed down and present with them and mindfulness can help you get there, but mindfulness is beyond that ,does that make sense, it is your sense of being, being present in all life not just in the room.

There was consensus that MP can be adapted for use with children of all ages, with agreement that "*it is not a one size fits all approach*" (Jay) It was suggested by the educators that adapting practices for young children in "*a fun way*" (Dee) based on children's interests, will allow more educators to use MP more meaningfully and ensure it isn't prescriptive. Wil echoed this sentiment:

> Not all children respond the same way to an activity, so the same goes for mindfulness, we must adapt and be flexible with it and find what works for each child.

Adaptations were discussed around young babies and children with additional needs. Some expressed feelings of uncertainty of how to adapt MP for young babies. However, Mai expressed the potentiality of using MP with young babies:

> I have used music and light with babies, just lying there with them it is so calming to see, allow them time to wonder and gaze, that is giving them a sprinkle of mindfulness.

Several educators mentioned the value of adapting MP for children with additional needs. Educators described using a breathing ball as a visual calming tool, mindful colouring based on individual interest areas, personalised breathing cards, and child chosen calming music.

The concept of invitation appeared to be central for many educators where they expressed that children were always invited to take part in the formal practices with their autonomy respected. Dee expressed:

> When I am using any formal mindfulness practices, like the breathing ball or making a gratitude tree, I always ask the children if they wish to join in, great if they do and if they don't want to that is ok as well.

Overall, there was a strong consensus that children were seen as "*rights bearers"* (Wil) who could say yes or no to mindfulness activities or any other activities throughout their day and the importance of being attuned to children's verbal and non-verbal cues. Kay thoughtfully expressed:

> Allowing them choice is important and respecting their choice, I invite them to participate and do some breathing, most of them want to but if they don't that is ok too, I am very aware of their signs and expressions.

Throughout the educators' accounts, MP was not viewed as a rigid set of activities but as a fluid and responsive part of their pedagogical practice, one that is deeply connected to presence and relationships.

5.3.1.4 A Mindful Reflexive Pause on the Significance of This Theme to the Research Questions

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

When writing up this theme, I reflected on my research questions and the significance of this theme. I deepened my understanding of educators' construction of mindfulness (RQ1) through the variety of definitions and thoughts they shared. Their reflections revealed their personal practice of mindfulness (RQ1) and their practice with young children (RQ1) while also uncovering some barriers (RQ5) including religious connotations and hesitancy. What amazed me most, while many described mindfulness as an abstract concept and challenging to define, most referred to it as present moment attention and showed an eagerness for one definition to reduce ambiguity. I was moved by their teaching young children gratitude and how adaptable mindfulness practices are for all children irrespective of needs and abilities and how inclusive mindfulness practices can be.

Figure 5.13 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

5.3.2 Theme Two: Practicing with Intention

Introduction

Building on the previous theme which explored educators' understanding and practice of mindfulness, across the data set the educators highlighted the importance of intentionality in their MP, both on a personal level and that with children. Throughout the interviews, the educators recognised that MP should not be viewed as an "*outcomes focused process*" (Dee) but rather as "*a direction of the heart*" (Zara) and a "*wish*" (Yaz) for their practice, which they attributed to an authentic practice with a shift away from focusing on achieving a particular result.

In Subtheme Four 'Personal Intentions Behind Practice' the educators shared the reasons why they personally practice mindfulness. Some of the personal experienced impacts are incorporated in the next subtheme, 'Feeling the Impacts'. The third subtheme 'Purposively Mindful with Young Children' focuses on educators'

motivations for using MP with young children. The sixth subtheme ‘Effect of Mindful Moments with Young Children’ explores educators perceived impacts of MP on young children. Overall, this theme highlights the role of intentionality in MP, in addition to the positive impacts on their own wellbeing and the holistic development of young children.

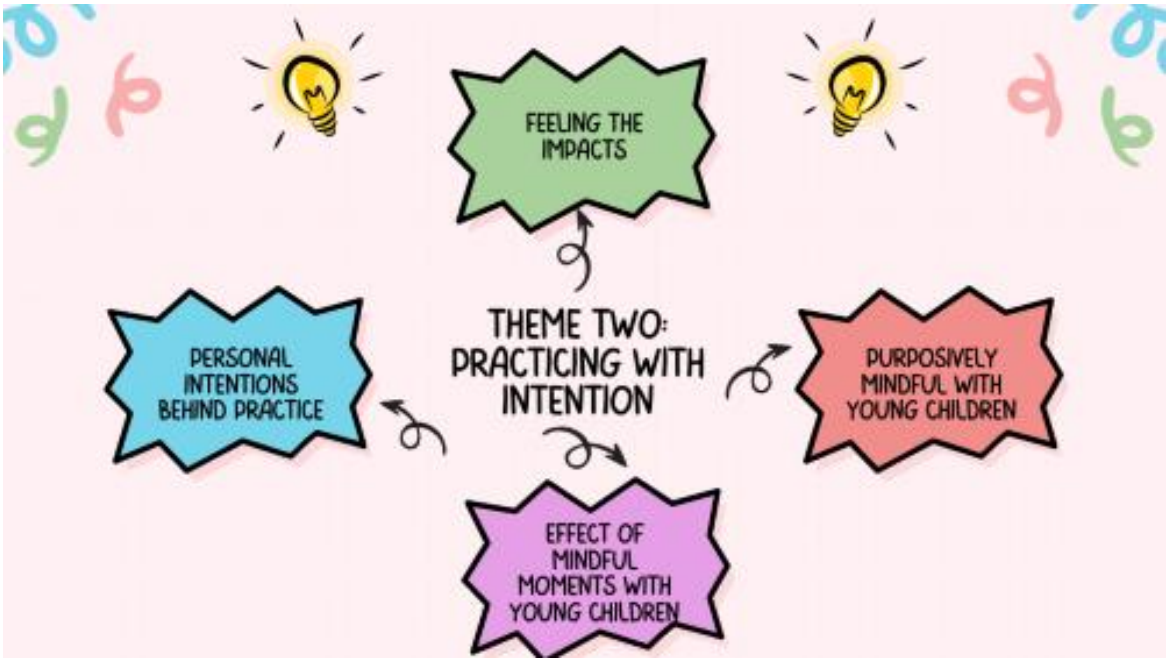


Figure 5.14 Illustration of Theme Two and Subthemes

5.3.2.1 Subtheme Four: Personal Intentions Behind Practice

Educators expressed that the role of an educator is often stressful and emotionally challenging. One of the primary reasons for engaging in personal MP was to help cope with these demands as a response strategy at times of stress and as a preventive tool to prevent burnout and nurture wellbeing. Jay described MP as a way to “*stop the clogs*”, which Fia echoed by expressing:

> One of the main reasons I lean into mindfulness is when things are spiralling, allows me press that reset button, but also being mindful throughout my day stops that implosion, so I use it in both ways.

Beyond coping, many educators described deeper personal intentions for engaging in MP including cultivating a sense of harmony, happiness and gratitude in their lives. Gil referred to MP as a "*vehicle to happiness*" while Dee expressed:

> Sometimes we forget the simple things, happiness is under rated for sure, at the end of the day that is all we hope for is to be happy, and mindfulness allows me time and space to say ok this is what is good in my life.

The educators noted that much of their professional and personal life involves caring for and prioritising others, however, MP allows intentional time to turn inwards and to "*engage in some self-care*" (Mai). Sam similarly expressed:

> Mindfulness allows me time to prioritise my wellness, where I can put myself first and I have time to think about my wellbeing and not always about others.

Throughout the stories shared, MP was viewed as essential self-care, enabling educators to centre themselves, reconnect, and reclaim their wellbeing and happiness amidst the stressors of their daily roles.

5.3.2.2 Subtheme Five: Feeling the Impacts

The educators made several references to positive physical and psychological benefits from their MP, and often these benefits interconnected. Some educators described physical changes during MP, most notably feelings of relaxation in their shoulders and back, the release of pressure from the chest area, and a reduced heart rate. Jay shared "*my body is less tense and looser; I can feel that release of tension from my body even my chest is relaxed*."

The educators spoke of the embodied nature of MP between heart, mind, and body, describing how their physical state impacted their mental state and vice versa. Sam thoughtfully expressed:

> I feel it in my heart, it really flows between my head, my heart, and my body. I can't really explain it, but they all are impacted together. When I am meditating or breathing, I feel my shoulders drop down and loosens everything in my body and then my mind feels calm.

In addition to physical benefits, there were several references to psychological benefits, such as the "*uncluttering of the mind*" (Ann), "*not living in my head as much*" (Una) and greater "*mental clarity*" (Nel). However, across their accounts, there was a sense that the experienced impacts on body and mind could not be separated with Dee echoing the sentiments of many:

> Mindfulness practice really releases the tension from your body and mind; I am not sure how you can do one without the other really. It is a little bit of magic really isn't feeling that calmness in your physical body and internal self.

A key impact was the shift from being previously reactive to a new sense of responsiveness. MP allowed them to press pause, regulate, and respond. Belle commented:

> I find that since I have held space and time for mindfulness practice each day, I am less reactive to things, before I would just react straight off the bat, now I take a second before reacting… I have a cooler calmer head.

Many educators articulated similar sentiments to Belle, that their MP has fostered positive response skills by giving them space to "*take a breath*" (Lee) and respond in a more appropriate manner. There was a consensus that these "*states of calm*" (Belle) developed through self-practice and noticeably had a ripple effect on the children. Educators believed that children mirrored their energy and their own regulation as educators impacted the emotional environment of the classroom. Kay reflected:

> Because I am calmer, the children feed off that calming energy, the days I don't practice mindfulness and not feeling calm, the children feed off that as well and the room is not so great.

Many educators described how their MP has nurtured feelings of acceptance and self- compassion in their lives. The educators described feeling less self-critical and more forgiving. Across their accounts, the educators shared words such as "*kindfulness*" (Dee) and "*self-compassion*" (Mai).

Eve captured that:

> Practicing mindfulness allows me the time to check in with myself, investigate what is going on for me without judgement, I am kinder to myself.

This sentiment of self-compassion was echoed by many educators, as they highlighted how MP has created the space to connect to themselves as Fia described learning "*to befriend myself".* Mai shared:

> It took me ages with the gratitude journals, at first, I was criticising myself, but over time it allowed me to go ok this is what is good about me, and I learned to accept me for where I am at that time.

5.3.2.3 Subtheme Six: Purposively Mindful with Young Children

Educators shared one of the reasons for using MP with young children as being tied to their own values and beliefs. Many expressed a deep personal conviction in the benefits of MP for their personal and professional life. As such, MP was not just viewed as "*another practice*" (Ola) but as a way of being for them that naturally extended to their work with young children. Una expressed this sentiment:

> I really believe in mindfulness as it is an important practice for myself for my own wellbeing and why wouldn't I share that with children because I know it works for me; it will work for them.

There was a strong sense of responsibility to foster children's emotional wellbeing which underpinned their intention for implementing MP with young children. There was a strong sense of agreement that educators have been implementing MPs with young children in the wake of the pandemic to support children's wellbeing as they observed an increase in emotional dysregulation, symptoms of anxiety and behaviour challenges which they attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pat shared

> Since Covid we have seen more children than ever before present with anxiety, anger and other disorders, in preschool last year, I could see the covid babies they were so anxious and stressed and a lack of social and play skills, it was sad to see.

Many educators shared concerns of the negative impacts of the pandemic on young children, noting that some of these impacts may not yet be visible. Una stated:

> Like we don't know yet the negative impacts on young kids, I have seen the changes in behaviours but down the road who knows the long-term impacts

A significant proportion of educators recognised that children may be experiencing adverse childhood experiences such as poverty, family bereavement, parental incarceration and parental separation. They believed MP may help children assuage some of these stressors by offering moments of pause and regulation. Nel shared:

> We need to realise early childhood is critical really, more and more children facing adversity these days and what will happen to this future generation if they don't learn how to be present and calm now… now is the ideal time.

There was a strong sense that all children should have access to MP and acknowledgment that educators should remain mindful that some children may struggle internally and may not visibly display challenges. Dee expressed:

> Sometimes children need that extra support, they don't know how to ask for it, so this is where the educator comes into play, finding ways to integrate mindfulness into play and daily practice would be beneficial for all children because we can't forget about those children who don't appear to be in crisis.

Some educators highlighted the importance of trauma sensitive practices when implementing MP. There was a shared concern that some MP, specifically closing the eyes could risk re-traumatising children. They acknowledged their responsibilities as educators to ensure MPs are developmentally appropriate, ethical, and sensitively approached. Sam reflected:

> You have to be careful and know how to use mindfulness practice safely because I would hate to traumatise the child all over again if they had something happen.

Educators often referred to MP as a lifelong skill and the importance of providing a "*toolbox*" (Nel) that they can use throughout their life course. Ann shared:

> I think the younger they learn mindfulness, the greater impact it will have on their life…. having that bank of resources that you can tap into later in life is important, going through education, becoming a teenager, dealing with adversity, life can be hard, and mindfulness allows you that relief to press pause.

Toni echoed this point, saying:

> We have this wonderful opportunity in early years to teach this skill of mindfulness that can have a positive impact for life… there aren't that many transferable skills that can have this huge impact.

Nevertheless, some educators cautioned about MP being viewed solely as a skill for the future and recognised MP as equally as valuable for children in their present lives in early childhood**.** Val shared:

> Mindfulness is also a way of being in the world for them right now at this time, sometimes we get too focused on the future and how it benefits them then, but it is for right now, it is just being in the right now.

This concern also extended to the 'schoolification' of MP. Educators reflected on the pressures to show school readiness and the importance of not reducing MP in this manner. Jay shared:

> I think we need to stand our ground with mindfulness practice, yes you can't really measure it, and we need to be like hold on look how happy, calm and relaxed your child is, surely that is more important than why can't my child write his name at 3 years old.

Many educators used MP as a pedagogical tool to support the development of children's emotional literacy by providing them with the skills to recognise, name and respond to their emotions as they arise. Gil mentioned:

> Children have so many feelings going on but don't necessarily have the vocab to match, so we talk about how we feel, label the feelings and then use mindfulness activities such as breathing to help the children manage, that is how their emotional vocab really grows because we are giving them words to big feelings and they learn how to respond.

Circle time was often used to explore emotions together and have a collective space for MP. Cat shared:

> When we pause and breathe together children begin to really understand that their feelings are okay and mindfulness practice allows them the space to recognise what they are feeling and that is the first step for them expressing their feelings in a healthy way.

Educators highlighted the importance of teaching children the impermanence of emotions helping them to understand all feelings are valid and impermanent. Some of the metaphors they used with children included "*visitors"* (Ann) and "*clouds that come and go*" (Toni). Fia shared:

> We teach them about how all feelings belong, good and bad, that all our feelings are like clouds that come and go, so they understand don't stay forever and I think that is important to know it will pass.

Overall, the educators expressed a deep commitment to supporting children's emotional literacy through MP. Mai described:

> Teaching mindfulness practices to young children is so important as it is like we are planting seeds of emotional awareness, like it may start with simple breathing but turns into being in tune with their inner world and to help them understand what is going on for them

5.3.2.4 Subtheme Seven: The Effects of Mindful Moments with Young Children

Educators shared a range of positive effects of MP on children, particularly attention, focus, emotional regulation, and compassionate behaviours. These impacts of attention and focus were most notably visible during breathing practices and mindful music activities. Ber stated:

> You can see the children are really engaged with the breathing practices, they are sitting there completely immersed in it, and even when they are lying there listening to the piano music, they are still as anything, I thought they would be jumping about, but the stillness is amazing, these are three-year-olds.

The educators reported how MP positively impacted children's attention to other activities including creative arts, construction and story time directly following a MP. Fia expressed:

> I have seen the children a lot more focused after our breathing practices you can see them sitting with an art activity for 20 minutes and before our breath work, they wouldn't have been able to do that. After we do our mindful music, they move onto construction or some planned learning and you can visually see the focus and calm in their bodies, something has shifted inside them.

The idea of "*being in the flow*" (Pat) manifested at different times for the educators both explicitly and implicitly. It was remarked that children have been absorbed in different activities when calming mindful music was left on the background. Zara commented that

> I can see them sometimes in the zone building or creating something and having that music on creates that calm, they can't hear a word we are saying, they are just in it.

Educators agreed that MP was foundational to children's learning, supporting children to be present, focused in the moment and feel more relaxed which has positively impacted their levels of concentration. Hal expressed:

> Learning mindfulness in early years builds that foundation for learning… if they are calm relaxed and present that is when learning takes place, if you don't have that, you have nothing.

Several educators mentioned while MP is not an outcome focused approach, it does have specific knock-on effects on learning including language development, STEAM activities and the creative arts. Quinn commented:

> I opened my eyes to mindfulness and how it can be the basis for different activities, even slowing down when we do experiments with water and ice, taking a moment to take in all the sounds.

Several educators shared numerous positive impacts of MP for young children with additional needs, including those who are autistic, non-verbal or experiencing emotional dysregulation. MP was seen to provide calming sensory supportive tools with some educators finding this initially unexpected. Eve shared:

> To be honest, I didn't think the mindfulness breathing or music would work with a child who becomes so distressed and overwhelmed, but it is the opposite it is like magic for him, it is so soothing and calms him in that moment even the smallies.

Val shared a similar sentiment:

> I didn't think mindfulness breathing or music would work for a child with additional needs, I was so wrong with this, I think he enjoys it more, he is autistic and nonverbal, and it is calming and relaxing for him.

The importance of predictability for some children with additional needs was highlighted by the educators as crucial to help engagement and foster interest. Zara expressed:

> I have three children with autism in my room, and I was surprised to see the positive impact of the formal yoga and breathing we do every Friday, they are completely engaged, I think they enjoy the predictability of the routine of it as well

Some educators described how mindfulness tools such as the breathing ball or yoga mat offered autonomy for these children and supported some who were non- verbal to communicate their needs. Jay expressed:

> One boy who is severely autistic and non- verbal grabbed my hand and brought me over to the mindfulness breathing ball and the mat and he lies down, so he was really seeking it, how amazing is that.

Overall, there was a strong belief that MP is for all children regardless of ability or need. Pat shared:

> I think the main lesson to learn is that mindfulness is for everyone, it does not discriminate and can benefit every child, any age and any stage, you just have to know how.

Many educators shared observations of small and meaningful random acts of kindness such as a child offering a tissue to another, recognising when a friend is upset and offering a hug. They shared accounts of children acting with compassion in natural free play activities where Zara commented: "*Sometimes when you are passing, you hear them in the cozy area chatting and asking each other if they are ok, isn't that compassion at its core."*

Educators expressed that teaching children gratitude and kindness practices was important and emphasised these practices have increased children's awareness of others where kindness has become embodied and enacted by the children without instruction. Gil stated:

> One little girl could see another boy was very upset in the class and she went over and grabbed the breathing ball and brought it to him, she could see he needed it and didn't even ask me.

Fia shared a similar sentiment:

> I've seen children stop what they are doing notice a friend in distress and say do you need a hug, that is mindfulness in action…our mindfulness practice has helped children recognise when others are upset and they are responding with kindness.

Educators shared that MP not only promoted compassion toward others, but also in acts of self-compassion. Cat observed:

> It has allowed them to meet themselves with kindness when something goes wrong, even when they drop something, instead of getting mad you see them smile and give themselves a bit of grace really, we can learn from them.

Some educators recalled young children extending compassion to the educators, quite an unexpected event and moment to be cherished. Toni reflected:

> I think the biggest moment for me was when one day I was feeling overwhelmed and a child looked at me and said I think you need to take a deep breath, that was something else and I knew our mindfulness practices were taking root not as individuals but between us all.

Educators were particularly struck when young children choose and initiated MP without educator instruction. They described children using "*mindfulness language"* (Yaz) such as *"breathing in breathing out"* (Fia) within play and some children recognising when they need to be regulated. Quinn commented:

> This was a wow moment for me, seeing an autistic boy in our class seek the mindfulness cards himself and go into the cozy area and take his breaths. I was not expecting to see that, it was a real heartfelt moment.

Some mentioned children gathering in small groups and engaging in MP without educator instruction. Nel shared:

> I saw three children last week in the cosy corner in preschool, breathing in and out together, I mean I couldn't believe it.

Educators shared that children will randomly seek mindfulness activities throughout the day, even in the middle of another activity. Wil commented:

> We could be in the middle of any type of activity, and you will see a child pull out a mat and lie down and start deep breathing, I guess they know when they need it themselves.

Educators celebrated these moments of self-initiation, while recognising the important role they play in offering initial instruction and modelling MP. Nel commented:

> It really starts with showing them how to be mindful, practicing together and the giving them all the tools they need such as breathing, music, any mindfulness activities and allow them to take it from there.

The educators expressed that these instances of self-initiation served as an indicator of the internal positive impacts of MP showing how young children are learning and living mindfulness. Fia reflected:

> When a child says I need a breathing ball or a breathing moment, that is when I know mindfulness is giving them the tools for emotional strength.

5.3.2.5 A Mindful Reflexive Pause on the Significance Theme Two to the Research Questions

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Within this theme I deepened my insight into educators' reasons why they use mindfulness practice personally (RQ1) and with young children (RQ2). Their accounts revealed their perceived personal impacts and effects they have observed with young children which they attributed to mindfulness practice (RQ4).

One of the areas that resonated with me was the value educators placed on intention, viewing it as a direction for their practice rather than a goal focused approach. I was particularly struck by their strong emphasis on mindfulness fostering their compassion and self-compassion for themselves, while also sharing their accounts of the depth of compassion young children displayed. Listening to them speaking about their intentionality and practices they have used has deepened my respect for the educators and the crucial role they play in early childhood. I am inspired by the idea of mindfulness as a universal practice for everyone and every child, and could we consider mindfulness practice as a universal language of connection to support the wellbeing of all children?

Figure 5.15 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

5.3.3 Theme Three: Cultivating a Mindfulness- based Teaching Approach

Introduction

This theme builds on the previous theme that captured the intentions, motivations, and perceived impacts of MP. There was a broad pattern expressed of adopting a mindfulness-based teaching approach that consists of "*weaving mindfulness*

throughout the day" (Una) rather than using a formularised or curricula approach. Educators also mentioned there could be some barriers to this approach while also identifying some pathways to overcome those barriers.

Subtheme Eight 'When Mindfulness Meets Resistance' focuses on the barriers to adopting a mindfulness-based teaching approach such as educators own self-efficacy, colleagues' doubts about mindfulness, and the lack of training and supports available. Subtheme Nine 'Pathways Through the Barriers' explores educators' solutions to the barriers, where they highlighted the importance of developing their own self-practice of mindfulness, engaging in mindfulness training, and modelling an open, willing and playful attitude in early childhood. All of these were seen as essentials for cultivating a mindfulness- based teaching approach.

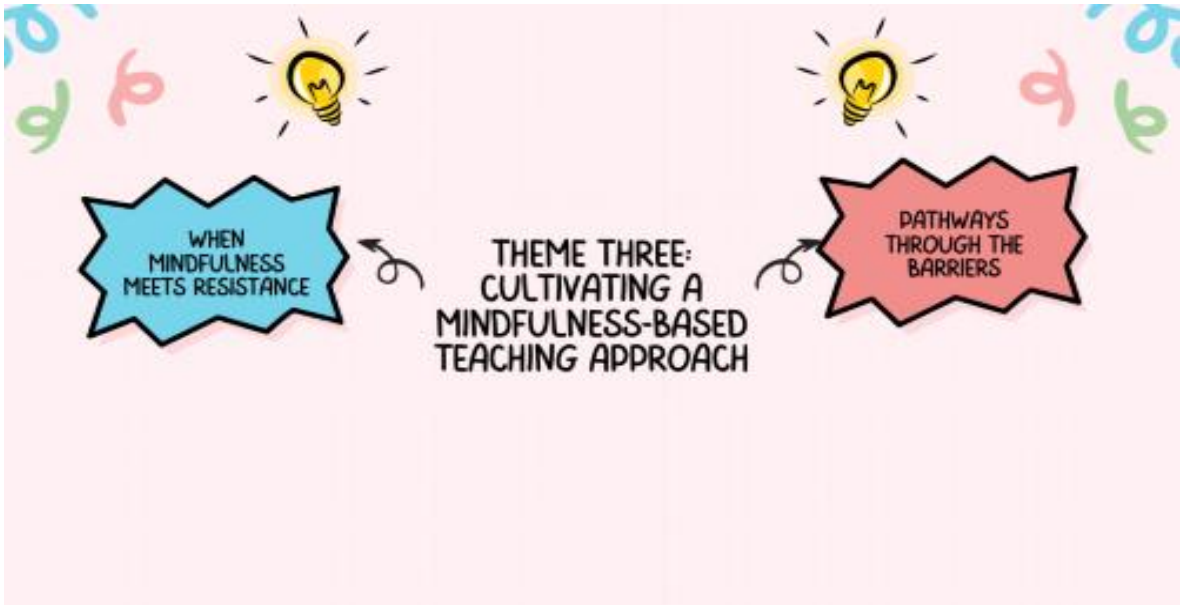


Figure 5.16 Illustration of Theme Three and Subthemes

5.3.3.1 Subtheme Eight: When Mindfulness Meets Resistance

Many educators described experiencing a lack of confidence when they initially introduced MP to young children often questioning if they were doing it correctly. Una expressed:

> I think having that self-confidence is huge, that belief in yourself, at the start I was questioning myself, am I doing it right or wrong, like I know I am a good educator with strong values.

As educators observed the positive responses from children such as increased engagement and requests for MP activities their feelings of self-efficacy grew. This shift in thinking towards their abilities with MP encouraged them to continue. Ann reflected:

> Once I could see the children engaging and doing the practices, my confidence soared, and I knew this was the right fit and this is an important practice to share.

The visible benefits they observed such as greater calmness and emotional regulation, strengthened their motivation to continue using MP with children and embed MP more consistently. There was a sense of initial uncertainty with most expressing that witnessing the outcome outweighed those early feelings of doubt. Sam expressed:

> I think for me I was unsure at the start but once you see those positive results with children being calmer and happier, you know it is worth it.

Many educators mentioned they experienced a variety of "*people challenges*" (Jay) when they first introduced MP in their settings. Some recall colleagues vocalising MP as a "*waste of time*" (Belle) or dismissing MP without trying. However, this resistance was from a minority of colleagues and in most cases, attitudes began to shift once they observed the benefits of MP and the calmness in the room. Dee shared:

> While some educators were against mindfulness at the beginning, I never gave up with it and they could see the benefits and slowly slowly they are using mindfulness now, that was amazing to see the change.

There was a sense from the educators that some of their own hesitation was partly shaped by fear of judgment or critique from their colleagues. Belle expressed:

"*although I knew what I was doing I was afraid others would judge me or laugh at me".* Over time many colleagues who were initially hesitant became more open and even joined in. Nonetheless, they acknowledged the mentoring role they play as experienced mindfulness educators in supporting their colleagues. Fia stated:

> I think as someone who practices mindfulness, I have a role to play to introduce and support my team with mindfulness, show them the multiple ways and just plant that seed for them.

Some noted that educators may value MPs for children, however, may not engage in their own personal practice. Una commented:

> While I think mindfulness is absolutely crucial for children to learn to slow down and be present with what they are doing because life is too much go go go, for me I don't know if all educators would believe in it for themselves.

When explored further with three educators, they noted that educators may miss an opportunity to foster their own wellbeing and to deepen their pedagogical practice and connection with young children. Nonetheless, there was an expression of hope and optimism that once educators witness the positive impacts on young children, they might be encouraged to try it for themselves.

The educators highlighted there was a lack of paid CPD training available in early childhood noting the expectation to complete training in their personal time. Nel stated:

> I think it is hard to do CPD as we don't get paid for it and we have to do it on our own time, very different to other educational contexts for sure.

They emphasised current offerings of CPD were often focused on compliance with little emphasis on wellbeing or MP. Jay explained:

> I am not sure if mindfulness is a priority for training which is a shame really as being present and calm is the foundation needed for all learning for children.

While they noted a shift in policy in ECE regarding CPD, they expressed there was a lack of transparency on what CPD training would look like. Toni shared:

> CPD is non- existent for educators, I am always hopeful with core funding and all that, but it is not clear on what training we can do.

Educators raised concerns over the lack of specific high-quality mindfulness training available for ECE. Educators felt uncertain on how to access the "*right training*" (Val) and uncertainty if the programmes were suitable and evidence-based with a lack of recommendations from policy makers. Eve stated:

> It is a huge challenge how to know what training to do, we don't get any recommendations from DCEDIY or any other groups, so how do you know which is the right fit.

5.3.3.2 Subtheme Nine- Pathways Through the Barriers

Throughout the interviews, the educators continuously emphasised nurturing their own MP was essential to be able to transfer mindfulness effectively to children, colleagues, and parents. The idea of embodying mindfulness of "*being with mindfulness*" themselves before sharing practices with others was strongly recognised. As Mai shared: "*It comes back to that saying, would you teach someone to drive if you can't drive yourself? You need to experience it first."*

They linked their personal MP to increased self-efficacy to share practices with children, describing that the more they practiced the more confident they became. Ber mentioned:

> For me the more I practice, the more experienced I became, and I am much more confident I am to share mindfulness with the children and the parents.

When educators spoke about barriers to practice, training and education were identified as integral pathways to developing a mindfulness informed pedagogy. Notably, educators highlighted training as a key solution to help overcome collegial resistance as it provides educators with the knowledge and tools of MP. Toni

mentioned: "*Training is the key; it gives you the two essential ingredients of knowledge and practice."*

Moreover, most of the educators who engaged in both accredited and non-accredited training highlighted the importance of understanding the foundations of MP including its history and evidence base as well as guidance and support on how to use MP with children. Some raised concerns that accredited training could be problematic if delivered online if not paired with authentic practice, mentoring and ongoing support. A small number remarked that accreditation alone risks becoming a stamp of approval if not combined with meaningful practice. Una expressed: "*While the qualification is important, it means nothing without the practice of mindfulness or if you have a bad teacher."*

When exploring what effective training could look like, they provided various suggestions. The majority of educators advocated for accredited training with an in-person training element, noting than online was the only choice. The accessibility of online training was acknowledged; however, they emphasised that in- person practical workshops would allow a shared experience without online distractions. Hal shared:

> I understand the accessibility of online training, but I think in person training, practical training all together would be much more beneficial to have that shared experience, too many distractions if you are online.

Educators who had not participated in any training called for practical workshops as an ideal starting point, specifically for settings or educators new to mindfulness. Some who had participated in training raised a concern that these workshops could be delivered by facilitators with no mindfulness training or qualification. Jay shared:

> The worry is the qualification and experience of some of the trainers; I did one before with someone who knew very little and that wasn't good
>
> .

However, beginning with practical workshops was viewed as a way to spark interest and curiosity from educators, and the important role of invitation rather than a forced approach to mindfulness was highlighted. Ita expressed:

> Start with a practical workshop to create that interest in mindfulness and once the educators experience the benefits, it could be a clear path then to rolling it out.. it is important to respect those who don't want to do it as well.

Educators had a strong sense of value to teach MP to pre -service educators in third level institutions as they prepare for a career in ECE. They believed MP should be taught as a strategy to enhance educators wellbeing due to the demands of the role, and to nurture young children's wellbeing. There were differing opinions on whether MP should be taught as a stand-alone module or integrated within all modules. Wil shared:

> I am not sure the best way to approach it, if it needs its own module to explain how to be mindful and how to teach mindfulness or if it could be within wellbeing, it is a tricky one to think about.

Attitude was consistently mentioned by the educators as one of the foundations for practice, where they emphasised the importance of having an open, curious, playful, and patient attitude. They spoke about the importance of being open to the possibilities of MP for both them and for the children. Belle shared: *"You have to be open- minded to what it can bring in the classroom, although it may be new to you, being open to it is key."*

Likewise, having an attitude of curiosity was highlighted as central for MP, where they described the importance of being curious to explore the variety of MPs would increase the likelihood of using MP with young children. Kay commented:

> As an educator if you are curious about mindfulness and all the different types of practices, I think you would be more likely to use mindfulness then with children as you will be open to new and different practices. I think you have to be open to it, be willing to try, be curious to all the ways you can be mindful, embrace it and begin.

Alongside openness and curiosity, educators highlighted the importance of a playful and fun attitude especially when implementing MP with young children. Jay shared: *"You have to be fun and playful yourself with it to get their attention, if you are all serious it just won't work."* They noted that children are naturally playful and if educators have a "*serious and abstract mindset*" (Ann) to MP, it will not benefit the children and potentially reduce the children's engagement with MP. They remarked being "*fun and silly*" (Gil) was the way to gain the children's attention. Ita expressed: "*You need to be silly and let it all go with the children, breathing like lions and birds, they love it, it is how they connect with it."*

However, some educators commented that having a silly attitude may feel awkward at times or bring forth fears of being judged by colleagues. Nonetheless, others felt modelling playfulness could positively encourage others to try that approach. Pat echoed this sentiment: *"While being silly can feel a bit out there but when other educators see you having fun, it encourages them to try it too."*

The educators noted at times MP with young children haven't gone to plan, with children losing interest, where they stressed the importance of patience and persistence. Ola expressed: "*Just because the children aren't interested in it one day, be patient as there are many ways of mindfulness, and you just need to find what works for them."*

They acknowledged the temptation to quit when a practice seems to not work, but they highlighted the importance of patience and persistence in these moments. Dee shared that "*It is important not to quit with these practices with the children, with everything good takes time, so be gentle and just give yourself grace and try again the next day."*

The educators acknowledged that modelling these attitudes of openness, patience, curiosity and playfulness, can support children learning those important attitudes. Kay stated:

> We are trying to teach children to be mindful, to be present in what they are doing and that takes patience and openness, it takes time to practice, so it is essential we show those attitudes as children learn from us.

5.3.3.3 A Mindful Reflexive Pause on the Significance of This Theme to the Research Question

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Within this theme I gained insight into educators perceived and experienced barriers to using mindfulness with young children (RQ5) and their thoughtful solutions to overcome barriers (RQ5). They provided me with a deeper understanding of the role of attitude in having a mindfulness- based teaching approach. As I listened multiple times to the recordings, what struck me was how the educators were advocating for a mindfulness-based teaching approach, not as an add on but as an embedded practice. Interestingly, educators appeared very confident in their capabilities as an educator however, they had a more task specific, lack of self-efficacy in their belief that they could share mindfulness practices with young children. This belief was both internally and externally constructed, a lack of self-belief and also perceived perceptions from other people. Despite this, they provided deep insight on how they have and can overcome those issues including self-practice, modelling practice to children and availing of training. The role of attitude shone through, as they made powerful links on how their attitude impacts the children's engagement with mindfulness practices. The educators had an eagerness for training to deepen their understanding and support their personal and professional development.

Figure 5.17 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

5.3.4 Theme Four: Nurturing Mindfulness Across the Systems

Introduction

Thus far, the themes have primarily focused on the lived experiences of educators and children, and this theme shifts focus to the future hopes for the educators and the role of the wider systems in MP in supporting a more collective "*we approach*"

(Sam) to MP. A common pattern expressed across the data set was a shared sense of acceptance and desire for MP to be accepted beyond individual practice and the importance of engaging with the wider systems for young children.

Subtheme Ten ‘Weaving Mindfulness Practice into the Ethos’ explores educators’ ideas of embedding MP into the whole setting, the role of mentoring, involving parents and what this could look like. The final subtheme ‘Awareness of the Larger Pond for Mindfulness Practice’ explores the wider system around the child whereby educators suggested MP should be acknowledged and supported at multiple levels including government policy and across the wider educational systems.

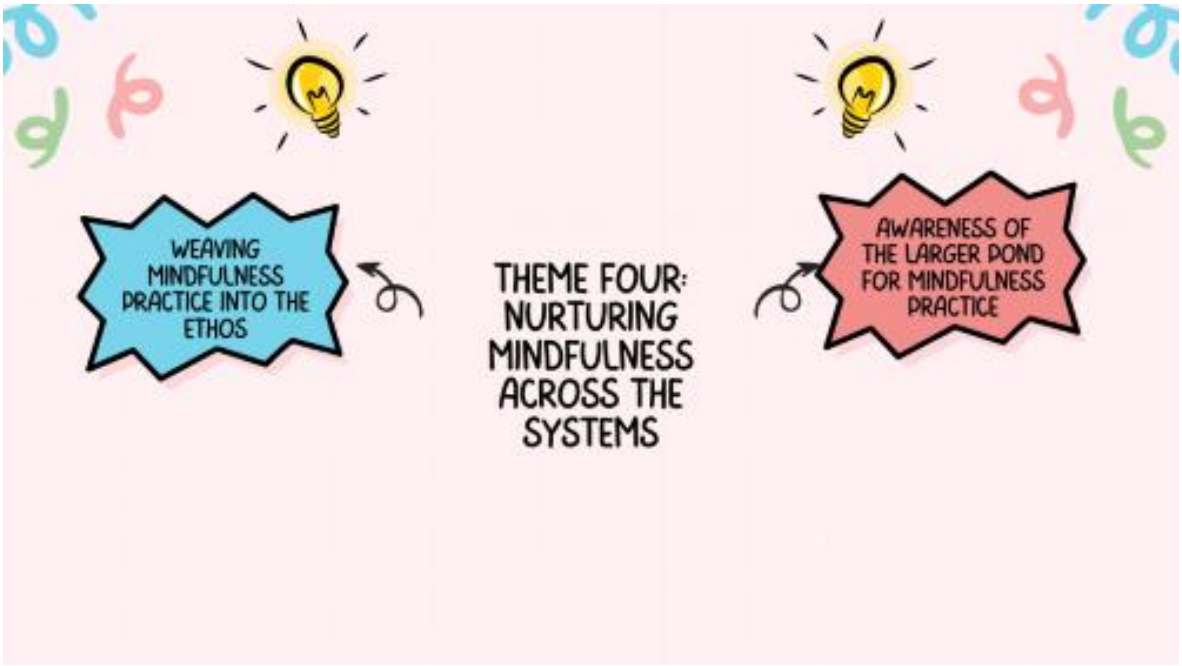


Figure 5.18 Illustration of Theme Four and Subthemes

5.3.4.1 Subtheme 10: Weaving Mindfulness Practice into the Ethos

Educators shared insights into what an embedded or whole service approach to mindfulness could look like, one that would foster a “*cultural mindset*” (Jay), and support a shared ethos of MP amongst staff, children and parents. The educators

emphasised the important role of leadership and mentoring that would be a driver in cultivating a collective commitment to MP and wellbeing into ECE.

A recurring thought was that MP should be encompassed across all levels of a service including boards of management, educators, auxiliary staff, children, and parents. For MP to become part of the ethos, it must be integrated into daily practice and interactions as a "*way of being together*" (Pat) which would lead to synchronicity between everyone with a sense of "*this is how we do things* "(Ola). Ann reflected:

> It has to be in your philosophy of how you do things from the manager to the educator to the cook to the parents to the children, it is in every part of the service within everyone… It is how we interact with one another.

The role of the manager was consistently highlighted to support, mentor and model MP and "*drive*" (Una) MP as a tool for wellbeing. They felt if managers adopted a mindfulness approach, that others would be more inclined to do so. Wil expressed: "*I feel staff would respond better and be more open to using mindfulness if they saw the manager and leaders using the practices."*

Some shared similar stories of managers integrating MP into staff meetings, through breathwork, gratitude practices and shared reflection, which was reported to improve relationships with their manager. They further recommended for managers to weave MP into their role in the setting to support the wellbeing of the educator, which may help alleviate some of the inherent stress. Jay commented:

> I think if managers used mindfulness practices with the team in meetings or even in supervision to de stress, it would really help the educators as well, they show yeah this works for us, like it is important for all our wellbeing and it would make a difference for sure.

Despite strong enthusiasm, some educators noted challenges in adopting a whole service approach including a lack of available training, support from higher management, and a plethora of trainings and responsibilities placed upon them. Sam expressed:

> I would love mindfulness to be seen as a priority for everyone in education, but there are so many things at play such as available training and support, it goes back to the higher ups having value of it.

For MP to "*trickle into all rooms*" (Mai) many educators recommended appointing a "*mindfulness champion*" (Val) or a "*wellbeing coordinator*" (Gil), recruited from within the setting. This person would support the integration of MP across the service and provide guidance and encouragement. Ber shared:

> I think you need someone like a champion who will make sure mindfulness doesn't fall by the wayside and motivates others to keep going with it.

This role was viewed as specifically important given that it was not feasible for all educators to avail of training due to time and funding constraints. Having a dedicated lead would support the integration of MP into the curriculum, increase longevity and act as a mentor to others. Pat explained:

> Having that one person to show and lead by example and be like this is how we can be mindful that would be such a support for the educators and the children to really nurture all our wellbeing and align with what we are doing.

Many educators highlighted involving parents as fundamental for a whole service approach. They described parents as the most important people in a "*child's nest*" (Lee) and felt that sharing knowledge and MP with parents would strengthen the ethos of the service and support their children's learning and experiences. Lee expressed:

> Finding ways to share with parents, sending home mindful activities, inviting them in for specific activities and getting them involved is important so they know what we are doing and a lovely way to build our relationships and they know what we are about.

There was a strong sense of compassion for parents, with educators acknowledging the stress parents and families are experiencing. Several educators mentioned

sharing MP could help parents to "*slow things down*" (Una), support their own wellbeing and nurture their connection with their children. Ann shared:

> Information and knowledge are key, once we can share with parents as maybe they need the skills to be present and slow things down for them, it will definitely help the parents as well with being with their children and maybe even use those skills then in their own work life or personal relationships.

5.3.4.2 Subtheme Eleven: Awareness of the Larger Pond for Mindfulness Practice

Building on the previous subtheme of weaving mindfulness into the ethos, educators recognised the importance of supporting MP beyond the walls of the ECE setting. They hoped for a broader systemic approach one that supports continuity across all educational stages and is integrated into the fabric of life. Lee reflected:

> Mindfulness should be taught in early years, schools, universities, workplaces, it is a way of being present, we have to learn this throughout life… The magic is, you can begin mindfulness at any time of your life, you can choose to be present in the moment, it is a skill we all have within us, isn't that amazing, you can learn it at any stage of life, there isn't much you can say that about.

While educators agreed that weaving MP across all education systems is optimal, they felt this requires a wider societal discussion of MP and its use in education and society as a whole. There was a sense of collective appreciation that MP not only benefits children but all people in society. Wil mentioned a "*society wakefulness"* and Belle commented:

> I think it goes beyond early childhood, there needs to be a societal shift to value the role of mindfulness in all education, workplaces, policy, world leaders. It is for everyone and why wouldn't you want something that can help you feel less stress and add more happiness into the world? Mindfulness goes beyond yourself.

There were specific mentions of the value of including MP across different healthcare structures including pre-natal care, mental health support and within occupational settings that would prove beneficial for all. Gil shared:

> It really goes beyond us, mindfulness needs to have value in education, in society, in the workplace, in health care, mental health support, even at pre-natal, imagine the positive impacts for society then, we need to think wider, and policy makers need to wake up and make it a priority.

The educators agreed that having a "*top down"* (Nel) approach from government level was required for MP to be valued and legitimised as a tool to foster the wellbeing of children in early childhood. There was recognition that having a "*policy approach would demonstrate to educators and society that the powers that be hold value and merit to using mindfulness*" (Dee). Having policy support would assist with educator buy-in and increase the perceived value of MP. Toni expressed:

> It has to begin with policy makers and government bodies to understand and have value in mindfulness in order for everyone else to wake up to it, and I think everyone would take more heed then of mindfulness practice and what it can do.

Government policy makers and curriculum planners were described as "*layers of influence*" (Sam) with the capacity to make a difference if they embraced MP as a life skill which could lead to societal change. However, there was an acknowledgment that government structures may have different priorities and could be a challenge to overcome. Una shared:

> It it is hard though because I think the powers that be don't see the value or importance of mindfulness, maybe they need to practice themselves to understand it.

Some educators noted there could be potential within the updating of Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum framework in Ireland, suggesting including MP as a way of fostering children's wellbeing. However, they felt there was no active discussion regarding this and "*maybe policy makers feel mindfulness is too fluffy*" (Ada). Wil expressed:

> You know mindfulness could be included in Aistear as it would be really adaptable for all children to enhance their wellbeing, I just don't know if people or the powers that be think it is too soft.

While recognising the need for a top-down approach, the educators highlighted the importance of grassroots influence. They believed educators have a role to provide policy makers and stakeholders with the evidence of how MP is being used and the

impacts experienced in early childhood. While they were not in favour of adopting a measurement approach with MP, they felt educators and settings who are using mindfulness should "*advocate and support that evidence base*" (Toni). They suggested through reflective practice, documenting and sharing the practices and benefits could contribute to both policy and research development. Dee stated:

> I think it is important to also document what we do and the positive strategies and impacts we have seen because when it comes to policy change, they need to see that evidence, and it is a perfect way of showing evidence-based practice to inform change.

5.3.4.3 A Mindful Reflexive Pause on the Significance of Theme 4 to my Research Questions

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Within this theme I gained insight into educators' aspirations for mindfulness to be adopted as a whole service approach to nurture the wellbeing of the children, educators, and families. Their stories added significant insight into the implementation of mindfulness practice (RQ3). I was particularly inspired by the novel ideas for a broader cultural shift, for education and policy makers to align with mindfulness practices. Their stories prompted me to reflect on the importance of including children's voices and parents' voices when it comes to mindfulness practice as there is a lack of critical exploration to date in the research. Overall, this theme reinforced the idea that for meaningful change to happen, we need it to be individual, collective, systemic, and inclusive.

Figure 5.19 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

5.3.5 Section Summary

In this section, through RTA, four key themes were generated from my interpretations. The first theme 'Mindfulness as a Multi-dimensional Experience' explored the variations in understanding and a sense of hesitancy to use the word mindfulness. Moreover, the educators shared the multitude of practices they use for

personal practice and with young children. The second theme ‘Practicing with Intention’ focused on their intentionality to reveal why they engage in self-practice and practice with young children, moreover they provided rich insight into their experienced impacts and their perceived impacts on young children. The third theme ‘Cultivating a Mindfulness-based Teaching Approach’ explored some of the factors that inhibited their MP with young children while also offering some pathways to navigate such barriers. The final theme ‘Nurturing Mindfulness Practice Across the Systems’ considered educator’s suggestion of embedding a mindfulness ethos in ECE in addition to consideration of the broader systems at play.

5.4 Phase Two Limitations and Strengths

While this present study has generated valuable insights into educators’ experiences of MP in ECE in Ireland, there are several important limitations that need to be acknowledged.

Firstly, selection bias may have been present as participants volunteered for the interview after already taking part in the first phase of this study. As a result, I cannot assume that these MPs are representative of all ECE settings in Ireland.

Secondly, the sample was highly representative of the regions of Munster and Leinster, with minimal representation from Ulster and Connaught. This imbalance reflected the regional representation in Phase One. Furthermore, the sample was selected from those who volunteered from Phase One who use MP with young children (*n*=87) excluding those who also volunteered who do not use MP with children (*n*=19). Including alternative perspectives may have added more depth to the study by exploring alternative views of MP and potentially explore experienced barriers in more detail.

Thirdly, methodologically I employed RTA, which afforded flexibility where I rigorously embodied a mindful and reflexive approach. My positionality, professional background, and experience shaped my interpretative approach and the lens through which I analysed the data. As such, another researcher may generate different patterns of meaning. However, I am not aiming for my work to be replicable, instead my intention is to contribute to existing knowledge and fuel further discussions of MP in ECE in Ireland.

Despite these limitations, Phase Two represents the crux of the overall study. This phase extended the breadth of the findings from Phase One, by allowing me to explore educators' experiences and perspectives more deeply. The 27 semi-structured interviews generated rich, insightful, contextualised accounts of educators' implementation of MP in ECE which addressed the overall focus of the study. Building on the questionnaire data from Phase One, conducting interviews allowed exploration, clarification and expansion of the findings from the previous phase.

Centring educators' voices, provided me with more depth into MP in ECE; by revealing what MP they use with young children, but also the why and how educators implement MP in their settings. Shapiro et al.'s (2006) Intention- Attention-Attitude (IAA) model of mindfulness was not used as an analytical tool, but rather functioned as my conceptual lens that supported my interpretative approach throughout. In this way, it guided my reflexive approach to educators' motivations, attitudes and engagement with MP, without testing the model.

Significantly, Phase Two, played a key role in addressing the research questions by providing rich insight into their daily experiences, motivations, perceived benefits, barriers, and solutions, which could not have been captured through the

questionnaire alone. The use of RTA supported a reflexive, mindful and in-depth engagement with the data, allowing me to generate patterns of meaning and interpretation, that moved beyond descriptive accounts.

Finally, Phase Two generated new insights which directly informed the development of Phase Three. The unplanned focus group in Phase Three with a panel of thought leaders was decided upon it response to the findings from the interviews. Therefore, Phase Two provided a bridge between educators lived experiences and wider professional conversations.

5.4.1 Planning the Next Phase

This present study provides deep insight into the lived experiences of educators in Ireland demonstrating how and why they use MP with young children. The educators explored the potential for a multi systems approach to MP, one that includes policy makers and educational settings, extending beyond early childhood. There was a sense that such an approach could shift the societal narrative of mindfulness. After completing the interviews, I began to ponder how we can consider this larger pond of people and systems that could help reduce the ambiguity and transition mindfulness from what may be viewed as a surge of hype to a more nuanced practice. I decided to pursue another phase of data collection before writing my discussion chapter. This next phase allowed me to share some of the findings with individuals who have influence and expertise in policy, education and research in ECE in Ireland whom I refer to as thought leaders and provided an opportunity to gain a broader perspective.

5.5 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Closure of Chapter

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

As I pause in this moment, my intention was to listen mindfully to each educators' story and hold space for the different narratives that may unfold. They shared meaningful insights as I was attuned to the warmth in their voices Each interview felt more than data collection but an opportunity for shared intentional presence. As they shared their experiences, I was inspired by their vision for mindfulness practice beyond early childhood education. This pause is for me; to share a moment of gratitude for all these educators. I move forward with their insights with a heart full of hope and care to the next phase.

Figure 5.20 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

This chapter marked a meaningful deepening of my exploration of MP as I moved from the broad national questionnaire to more textured narratives from the one-to-one interviews. In Section 5.2 I described the methodological choices in this phase, rooted in my intentionality to listen to the educators' stories. I described the process of RTA as I mindfully engaged with the data. In Section 5.3 I presented my findings through four main themes and eleven subthemes, ones that were rich and in-depth and expanded upon the previous questionnaire. Finally, in Section 5.4 I presented a close to this chapter with a reflection of the limitations of this phase while outlining the value of deepening the conversation further with a focus group of thought leaders in policy, education and research in ECE.

Looking ahead the next chapter brings together the findings from the educators' interviews into dialogue with the focus group for a collective discussion.

Chapter Six: Phase Three: How can Mindfulness Practice Grow Wings? Considering the Voices of Policy, Research and Education in Early Childhood Education.

> *"It is about the normalisation of mindfulness beyond an intervention but as a life practice and imagine the global impact if everyone of us grew up with those skills" (*Kay-Educator*)*

6.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the findings from Phase Two, where I conducted one-to-one interviews with 27 educators in Ireland to understand their lived experience of mindfulness practice (MP). The educators offered insightful perspectives and valuable recommendations for policy and practice, which form the basis for Phase Three. A strong recommendation emerged which was the need for top-down systemic support to facilitate educators' integration of MP in early childhood education (ECE). This echoes literature which calls for systemic support in both government and policy to successfully integrate mindfulness into education (Weare 2013; Meiklejohn et al. 2012). Phase Three consisted of moderating a singular focus group with a panel of thought leaders in ECE in Ireland. For the purpose of this study, I used the term 'thought leaders' to describe individuals with recognised influence and expertise across policy, education, and research within ECE in Ireland. While not a formal category, this term was intentionally used to reflect the participants' active role in shaping practice, policy and discourse within ECE. It is acknowledged that these participants were not specialists in MP, however, their professional positioning enabled them to offer valuable insights into the topic. The purpose of the focus group was to share key findings from the educator interviews and to explore how these perspectives might be addressed or implemented. This final phase offers a broader multidisciplinary perspective on the findings from Phase Two. The main research questions in this phase included:

- What are the panel's perspectives on the role of MP in ECE?
- What is the panel's view that MP could support children's present moment experiences in early childhood while also serving as a life skill for their future?
- What are their opinions on MP as a slow pedagogical approach?
- How could MP be included in pre-service educator third level training and what might this look like in practice?
- Is there potential for a leadership role for MP in ECE?
- What are their perspectives on a top-down or whole systems approach to MP in ECE?

This chapter is divided into three distinct sections.

Section 6.2 outlines the rationale behind my research method and design and describes the sampling and recruitment processes undertaken. I discuss the data generation method, specifically my use of a focus group. I describe the steps I took which includes my ethical considerations. To conclude, I present an overview of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as my chosen analysis tool, while illustrating how I navigated through the process.

Section 6.3 presents my findings from the focus group where two themes captured the collective voice of the participants.

Section 6.4 outlines some of the limitations and strengths to this phase and concludes by setting the stage for the final discussion in Chapter Seven.

6.2 Phase Three Research Method and Design

Reflecting on the knowledge I seek and my paradigm of constructivism and interpretivism, a qualitative research design was chosen for this phase. This approach enabled me to add breadth to the research study by including collective

and diverse perspectives from individuals in leadership roles from policy, practice, and research in ECE in Ireland.

Firstly, this phase aimed to complement Phase Two by having a collective discussion of the findings which could allow levels of agreement, disagreement, and resonance.

Secondly, I sought to create a space in order to generate new insights regarding MP in ECE. The specific questions asked were shaped by the findings from Phase Two.

Thirdly, the educators in Phase Two emphasised the importance of bringing the discussion of mindfulness in early childhood to a broader context, which this phase hopes to achieve.

This phase involved a focus group discussing the topic of interest, MP in ECE. Gibbs (2021) highlights that focus groups are an ideal method to complement other methods being utilised. Moreover, a focus group differs from one-to-one interviews as it allows a collective opinion that is both interactive and dynamic. Both Howitt (2019) and Lune and Berg (2017) state group interactions as being central to the focus group and that they can reveal shared understanding and differences in opinion. My hope was to encourage multi-dimensional conversations, drawing on the participants' expertise in policy, research and education to gather new knowledge that would contribute to the present study. A focus group was suitable for the aim of this phase as it allowed rich dialogue about the implications of the educators' insights at a systemic level. In contrast, conducting one-to-one interviews would not have allowed that collaborative approach and sharing of ideas. Pragmatically, a focus group allowed me to bring together a group of leaders offering systemic insight and collective meaning making.

6.2.1. Sampling and Recruitment Procedure

Recruitment was conducted in Ireland during December 2024 and January 2025. In Phase Two the educators highlighted a desire for meaningful change to occur in ECE, where a multi-layer approach and the inclusion of leaders is required. Therefore, this phase was initiated in response to suggestions from the educators in Phase Two. I considered both homogeneity and heterogeneity when choosing the composition of the focus group. A degree of homogeneity was maintained by inviting participants who held leadership or advocacy roles in ECE in Ireland. This shared context in ECE was intended to nurture a sense of comfort and familiarity within the group to engage in free flow discussion. There was a small degree of heterogeneity in relation to the participants' roles (policy, education, research) which was intentional to bring multiple perspectives. Consequently, expert purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate strategy, as it allowed me to intentionally select participants who would best suit the purpose of the research study (Nyimbili and Nyimbili 2024). I selected these participants based on my judgment as a researcher, with the hope that they would provide informed and meaningful perspectives on the potentiality and broader implications of MP in ECE in Ireland.

The inclusion criteria consisted of participants having experience of a leadership/ advocate role in one of the following areas:

1. An ECE organisation in Ireland
2. An ECE advocacy group in Ireland
3. A programme lead/ director in ECE in a third level institute in Ireland
4. ECE policy in Ireland

I carefully considered the number of participants. I wanted to ensure the group was small enough to allow time for each participant to meaningfully contribute, yet large

enough to stimulate discussion (Moser and Korstjens 2018; Morgan 2019). I planned on recruiting between 4-8 participants, eight were invited with seven successfully recruited and ultimately five participants participated in the focus group.

Access to the sample was generated through my network of professional contacts and relevant organisations. I made a list of eligible participants and organisations that could make meaningful contributions, and I discussed these with my academic supervisors. I initially had a list of eight potential organisations/ individuals that would meet the inclusion criteria. Out of the eight potential participants, I knew of four through my professional role as an educator, and I was able to contact them via email to assess their interest in participating (Appendix U). For the remaining participants, I sourced their contact details through their organisation's publicly available information. I attached the participant information sheet (Appendix V), consent form (Appendix W), and a date preference form (Appendix X) for consideration. I sent a follow-up email ten days later to confirm people's availability (see Appendix U) and communicate when the focus group would take place. I sent a third email two days prior to the focus group, to remind them of the date and time, and the link to Microsoft Teams while inviting them to contact me if they had any queries (See Appendix U).

Following the recruitment process, seven participants consented to take part in the focus group, however two participants withdrew the day before resulting in five people participating. Nevertheless, the five participants were representative across policy, practice and research in ECE in Ireland. The focus group took place in February 2025 online synchronously via Microsoft Teams. I made the decision not to distribute the topic guide to participants to preserve the spontaneous group processes and avoid shaping their perspectives beforehand (Howitt 2019).

6.2.1.1 Characteristics of the Sample

In reporting the participants' characteristics, limited demographic detail is provided. This decision was made to protect participant anonymity, particularly given the relatively small and interconnected nature of ECE in Ireland, where individuals in positions of leadership may be easily identifiable. Care was taken to balance the provision of contextual information and the ethical responsibility to protect the identity of the participants.

The five participants represented leadership and advocacy in ECE in Ireland. Participants were drawn from different provinces in Ireland, and they held professional roles in higher education, policy, and support organisations, with all participants involved in research. One participant shared they engaged in formal mindfulness training, while the others described using it informally as part of their personal practice.

6.2.2 Data Generation Procedure

I was mindful of the skills required to moderate a focus group, which could differ significantly to conducting interviews. My aim was to have a dynamic interaction between participants and to generate a collective discussion (Hennink et al. 2020; Howitt 2019) of MP in ECE. At the beginning of the focus group, I provided the participants with a brief overview of the findings from Phase One and Phase Two to provide context and centre the discussion. I emphasised the key topics which were selected from my deep reflection on the data.

6.2.3 Data Generation Tools: The Focus Group

From reviewing the literature on focus group protocols (Morgan 2019; Krueger and Casey 2015), and to ensure robustness, I developed my own six-step process as described below.

Step 1: Determining the Logistics of the Focus Group

I gave careful consideration to the most suitable method to use. I was mindful that individuals are bound by time and may be widely geographically spread across the country. Microsoft Teams (Teams) was chosen as the online interview platform due to being secured by DkIT licensing agreement and its capacity for unlimited meeting time. Moreover, hosting the focus group online via Teams eliminated the logistical problem of having a fixed physical location. This option also reduced travel costs, enabled broader participation that may not have been possible if in person, while also providing convenience and comfort for the participants. Nevertheless, I was mindful that conducting a focus group virtually may have negative drawbacks, for instance, I may not be able to pick up on nonverbal cues or be able to sense the atmosphere of the room. Furthermore, Hennink et al. (2020) suggest that online focus groups often lack the visual contact with participants, making moderation more challenging for the researcher and distractions more frequent. Ensuring participant anonymity was somewhat more challenging than conducting an in-person focus group due to the video recording procedure of Teams. However, participants were informed following the recording that the data would be downloaded from Teams and securely stored in an encrypted file on a password protected DkIT One-Drive account only accessible to me. Once the file was securely saved, the original recording was permanently deleted from Teams. Additionally, the stored recording would be permanently deleted after data analysis. I ensured a mutually suitable time for the participants through the date preference letter as to not impede on anyone's prior personal or professional commitments.

Step 2: Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing this phase of my research study, I sought ethical approval from the ethics committee of the School of Health and Science in DKIT in December 2024.

The following steps were taken to ensure informed consent remained a continuous process:

- The participant information sheet (Appendix V) and consent form (Appendix W), were emailed to potential participants four weeks in advance which outlined the overarching aim of the study, rationale, researcher details, expectancies of the participants, potential advantages and disadvantages for participating, and data confidentiality and storage which allowed each participant to make an informed decision.
- Consent was an ongoing process and was obtained on two occasions. Firstly, participants were required to sign the consent form and email it back to me prior to the focus group. Secondly, consent was sought at the beginning of the focus group prior to recording to ensure they understood the purpose for this study.
- I ensured there was no coercion to participate by offering opportunities for the participants to withdraw from the research study up to two weeks after the focus group took place. Additionally, I provided the participants with a post focus group debrief letter (Appendix Y)

Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Storage

Measures were taken throughout the research process to ensure confidentiality. When participants shared their name and where they worked prior to recording, I kept this data confidential. Due to the group nature of the discussion, confidentiality can be a challenge (Acocella and Caitaldi 2021). To help overcome this challenge,

at the beginning of the focus group, I reiterated the importance of confidentiality and asked everyone to respect the privacy of each member. To support the participants autonomy and comfort, I reassured them they had the option to switch off their cameras at any stage if they wished to do so and I gave them due notice before the recording commenced. Research indicates it is important for the researcher to set the tone and set expectations which creates a supportive environment for the running of a successful focus group (Billups 2022). A summary of my ground rules adapted from Billups (2022) is displayed in Figure 6.1. These were presented to the participants at the beginning of the session via screenshare prior to recording and all participants agreed to them.



Figure 6.1 Focus Group Ground Rules

To protect the anonymity of the participants I used coding and pseudonyms (Braun and Clarke 2013). Once the audio and video recording of the focus group was transcribed and analysed it was permanently erased. All notes, recordings and

transcripts were securely stored on DkIT's One Drive which was password protected on my password protected computer which ensured no unauthorised access. My handwritten notes and reflexive diary used during the RTA analysis process was secured in a locked cabinet to which I had the only access.

I strictly adhered to the policies of DkIT and GDPR guidelines, where data will be retained up to two years post completion of this PhD research study to allow further analysis and potential peer review of the study. After the retention period, all the data will be destroyed/ permanently erased, with no additional copies retained.

Beneficence and Minimising Risk

I anticipated there to be minimal risk of harm to the participants in terms of rights, safety, and welfare, moreover, the benefits of contributing to this research study outweighed any potential risk. The discussion was conducted in a safe, respectful virtual environment where participants had the choice to withdraw at any stage. As established professionals, the panel engaged in rich insightful dialogue that posed no emotional or physical risk. The focus group provided an opportunity for knowledge exchange, professional dialogue, and collaboration. Nonetheless, the Data Protection Act 2018 (GoI 2018) was adhered to, to ensure safeguards were in place to protect the participants' data. Voluntary and informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality of potentially identifiable data was coded as highlighted in the section above. While no personal sensitive data was required from participants to carry out this study, I was conscious that participants may disclose intimate information or become uncomfortable with the research process, therefore I considered the distress protocol as described in Chapter Five however, this was not needed in this phase of the research study.

I was mindful that the participants were gifting me their time and contributing to the present study. Similar to Phase Two, following the focus group and as an act of reciprocity, I invited participants to email me their postal address if they wished to receive a small mindfulness resource pack.

This included a combination of a notebook, a pen, positive affirmations and a wellness treat (see Appendix Z).

Step 3: Developing a Moderator Protocol

I considered how I would prepare for moderating a focus group and to increase participation. Adapted from Howitt (2019) I developed a moderator protocol to give me direction, help sequence my questions, and arrange my time as illustrated in Figure 6.2 below

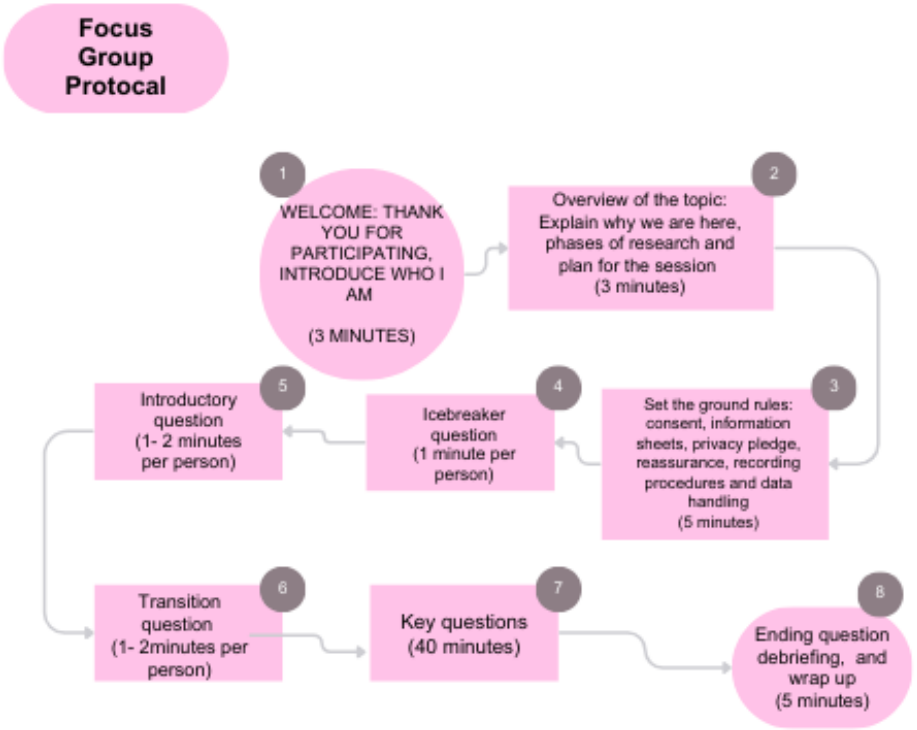


Figure 6.2 Focus Group Protocol

Step 4: Developing the Questions

The questions were carefully constructed to ensure I would answer the research question and reveal nuances of varying perspectives (Hennink et al. 2020). While there were a multitude of insightful findings from Phase Two, through critical reflection of the data and research questions, I narrowed these down to five key areas for discussion. These topics represented prominent novel insights from the educators.

First, educators placed value on introducing MP in early childhood to nurture children's wellbeing in the present and also for their future. Second, educators emphasised slowing down and being present and I was eager to explore if the panel viewed mindfulness and slow pedagogy as mutually exclusive. Third, training was emphasised by the educators noting the importance of training for pre-service educators and I was keen to explore the feasibility in higher education programmes. Fourth, one of the most novel findings was the educator's suggestion of a "*mindfulness champion*" within the service to lead and advocate for mindfulness, and I was interested in the panel's opinions of the practicalities of this suggestion. Finally, the main rationale for this third phase was shaped by educators' desire for systemic support to meaningfully integrate MP into ECE. Engagement in a focus group provided an opportunity to explore new insights, possibilities, and challenges from policy, leadership, and advocacy perspectives. As a result, the following questions were asked, as illustrated in Table 6.1

Table 6.1 Typology of Questions Asked in Phase Three

Icebreaker	Would you like to introduce yourselves and share one fun fact about yourself?
Introductory	Could you share what comes to mind when you think of mindfulness practice in early childhood education.
Transition	Educators mentioned that early intervention is key for young children and that teaching young children the "skill of mindfulness" will benefit them not only in the here and now, but throughout their life course, what are your thoughts on this?
Key question	Educators shared that having a slow pedagogy, being present with children is the most important skill. They expressed if educators and children are not calm and present, how can any learning or development take place? What are your thoughts on this finding?
Key question	The educators shared for mindfulness to be an integrated practice and not just an ad-hoc intervention, that educators should be learning this skill of mindfulness within their own education. Some suggested that in 3rd level it should be taught so preservice educators to have that skillset going into practice. What are your thoughts on including mindfulness within third level education, what could this look like in education?
Key question	Educators spoke about a whole school approach to mindfulness, whereby the wellbeing of educators, children and parents are key. They suggested having a similar role to the Linc coordinator within each service, perhaps a mindfulness champion or mentor to support the wellbeing of all and keep wellbeing as a priority, what are your thoughts on this role?
Key question	Educators felt that a top-down approach was also warranted; if policy makers and agencies held value and priority to using mindfulness, it would be more likely to be embraced in early childhood and remove some of the barriers to practice, what are your thoughts on this suggestion?
Closing question	If you could share one key idea/ thought in one sentence what would that be?

Step 5: Reflecting on My Role as Moderator

I spent time reading and engaging in training regarding how to moderate a focus group. From moderating a focus group in the past in a professional context, I entered into this with some prior knowledge. I reflected on my role as gardener (Salmons 2022) in this phase, as I wanted to plant the seeds of information and support the participants to have a group discussion.

Prior to beginning the focus group, I spent time engaging in mindfulness meditation by focusing on my senses to ground me in the present moment. I spent time reflecting that my role in this phase would differ from the interviews, knowing I am a moderator and somewhat separate from the conversation. I was mindful of the

skilled role required to be a moderator that differs from being an interviewer, therefore I ensured the following.

- I exhibited an open and friendly demeanour.
- I used a mixture of listening and leading.
- I engaged in mindful listening to what was being said.
- I posed clear questions and had follow up probes ready if necessary.
- I summarised what was heard and asked for commentary/ clarification for accuracy.
- I encouraged contributions from those who appeared to be participating less.
- At times I stopped conversational drifts and reverted the participants back to the topic, while remaining mindful of being open to new and evolving ideas.
- I did not involve myself in the debate, however at times it was tricky for me not to interject, but I reminded myself of the intention of the focus group.
- I prepared for conflict and interruptions by preparing phrases such as “Could you hold that thought?”, however these were not needed.
- I opened and closed the focus group in a timely manner, it lasted 92 minutes.

Step 6: Systematic Analysis Procedures

As the focus group data is raw data being collected, I took preliminary steps prior to engaging in the RTA process as recommended by Billups (2022), Lune and Berg (2017) and Krueger and Casey (2015). I carried out the following:

- I gave myself 24 hours to process and reflect on the focus group while organising my notes and recordings.
- Although Teams provided a transcription, I opted to transcribe the entire discussion verbatim, noting any probes used or pauses.

- I looked for areas of consensus, the points of agreement within the group, and recurring ideas. I looked at points of dissensus, the ideas the group could not agree on, and examined the topics of disagreement. I also examined resonance, discovering there were ideas posed by one member that suddenly united the remainder of the group.
- I was interested in the intensity of agreement/ disagreement within the group, asking myself was it minimal or tense?
- Through the process of RTA, I looked at how often something was mentioned and the interpretation of what was being said- however, my aim was not to quantify results or make any assumptions about the sample.
- I was interested in the extensiveness of how ideas were being conveyed by the group.
- To enhance specificity and to ensure trustworthiness, quotations were included to support my interpretation of the various trends and patterns of discussion. How trustworthiness was applied is illustrated in Table 6.2 below.

Table 6.2 Application of Trustworthiness in Phase Three

Credibility (in preference to Validity)	Transferability (in preference to Generalisation)	Dependability (in preference to Reliability)	Confirmability (in preference to Objectivity)
• Adopted clear procedures, questions and choice of data analysis methods. • Phase 3 used as a method of triangulation. • Provided direct quotes and thick descriptions from participants. • Co-constructed meaning with participants consistent with constructivist-interpretivist approach • Used reflexive commentary throughout and use of mindful reflexive pauses	• Used purposive sampling and provided clear descriptions inc. collection procedures which will enable future researchers explore the contextual factors. • Expanded understanding from Phase 2. • Used a different context to share insights and exploration of the phenomenon. • Recordings were meticulously transcribed.	• Phase 3 as a multipronged strategy. • Reviewed data 3 times to ensure I was immersed and understood what was being said. • Documented all steps and procedures undertaken within study and kept audit trail of changes. • Ongoing debriefs with supervisors to discuss findings.	• RTA allowed me to analyse and interpret the data in a robust manner. • Continuously reflected on my role as moderator, my positionality, my theoretical lens and values. • Maintained a mindful presence by engaging in MP before focus group and reflecting afterwards.

6.2.4 Data Analysis

As described in Chapter Three, RTA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) was a suitable method of analysis to allow me to identify, analyse and report patterns/ themes while accepting my active role in knowledge production. For this phase it also allowed me to explore the relational dynamics of the focus group.

6.2.4.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and the Present Study

Within this phase, I undertook similar RTA processes as outlined in Chapter Five. How I considered and navigated the four dimensions of RTA (Braun and Clarke 2021) for the focus group is illustrated in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Application of the Four Dimensions of RTA in Phase Three

Orientation to data	**Focus of meaning**	**Qualitative Framework**	**Theoretical Framework**
Inductive ↔ Deductive	Semantic ↔ Latent	Experiential ↔ Critical	Realist, essentialist ↔ Relativist, constructionist
While I was taking a more inductive approach by ensuring the codes and themes were driven by the data and what the participants shared with me. I was cognisant that I may be using a deductive lens as the findings, codes and themes from phase two informed this phase of the study.	I navigated between semantic coding and latent coding. I considered what the participants explicitly said to me while also reflecting and interpreting any underlying meaning or ideas.	I adopted an experiential approach as I was hoping to uncover the participants viewpoints on mindfulness practice in early childhood, however I was also wearing a critical hat to unpack meaning and responses to the research findings from phase two that I posed to the focus group for discussion.	I journeyed within a constructivist and interpretivist approach. I was looking to capture the experiences and realities of the focus group by sharing their insight on mindfulness practice in early childhood, while respecting that each participant may have different and multiple understandings and lived experiences.

I employed the six-phase process of analysis, accepting it as a cyclical, iterative and recursive process (Braun and Clarke 2021). To ensure rigour in this phase, I continually reflected on my assumptions and my positionality and maintained a reflexive journal throughout (see abstract Appendix A). I was mindful of my role as

‘moderator’ and not ‘interviewer’ in this phase and reflected on the difference this would make. I documented my analytical processes of codes and theme development. I will now describe the six phases of RTA.

Phase One: Familiarisation

When I began this phase, before I transcribed, I listened and watched the recording twice to develop a closeness and familiarity with the data (Braun and Clarke 2021). I transcribed the focus group verbatim, opting for manual transcription to immerse myself in the data. Following the transcription, I read the transcript on three occasions alongside listening to the recording, which fostered my analytic sensibility as I gained a deeper understanding, and I noticed initial ideas and patterns. To close, I watched the video recording again which enabled me to note the non-verbal communication of the group, such as nods, smiles, silences and pauses. This rigorous process allowed me to consider potential codes. Similarly to Phase Two, I created a familiarisation doodle for my own edification, which allowed me to maintain a connection to my data (Figure 6.3).



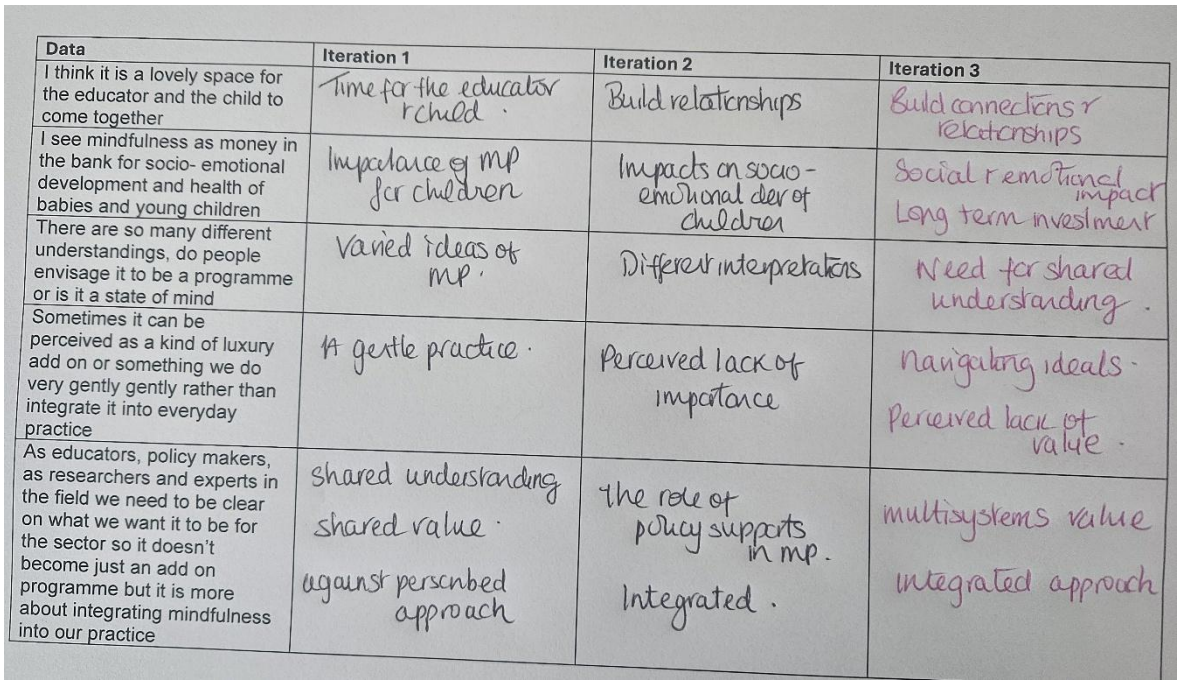
Figure 6.3 Phase Three Familiarisation Doodle

Phase Two: Coding

Upon entering this phase and building on my experience of using RTA in the previous phase, I felt this phase was more organic and evolving as I looked for repetition in codes. I worked systematically through the transcript to help identify relevant segments of data that aligned with my research questions. While I did not follow systematic procedures such as open coding or line- by- line coding, I used a more interpretive approach where I generated codes freely while considering my research questions. As described in Chapter Five, Section 5.2.5.1, I recognised that an online system for coding was not a suitable option, so again I opted for manual coding. Within this phase, I acted as a miner (Salmons 2022) to dig out ideas and patterns across the data set that were specifically relevant to the research questions. A copy of the partial coded transcript is available in Appendix BB. While I began with 153 codes, throughout the process some codes were consolidated, merged, and renamed, resulting in 48 codes (Appendix CC) For instance, when the

group mentioned there could be pressures associated with third level modules, I initially coded this as ‘curriculum pressures’ which I then refined to ‘institutional demands’.

Throughout the process I navigated between semantic and latent coding, and between purely descriptive codes to codes that were more interpretive (Figure 6.4). For example, when the group were discussing perceptions of MP, one participant stated that “*Sometimes it can be perceived as a kind of luxury add on or something we do very gently gently rather than integrate it into everyday practice*”. My initial code was “mindfulness is seen as a gentle practice”. My second iteration I labelled “perceived lack of importance” and in my final iteration I refined it to two distinct codes “navigating ideals and perceived lack of value”. Throughout the coding process, I was mindful that I was not trying to quantify anything but rather approach this phase with the intention of generating nuanced understanding of the data.



Data	Iteration 1	Iteration 2	Iteration 3
I think it is a lovely space for the educator and the child to come together	Time for the educator r child.	Build relationships	Build connections r relationships
I see mindfulness as money in the bank for socio- emotional development and health of babies and young children	Importance of MP for children	Impacts on socio-emotional dev of children	Social r emotional impact Long term investment
There are so many different understandings, do people envisage it to be a programme or is it a state of mind	Varied ideas of MP.	Different interpretations	Need for shared understanding.
Sometimes it can be perceived as a kind of luxury add on or something we do very gently gently rather than integrate it into everyday practice	A gentle practice.	Perceived lack of importance	Navigating ideals. Perceived lack of value.
As educators, policy makers, as researchers and experts in the field we need to be clear on what we want it to be for the sector so it doesn't become just an add on programme but it is more about integrating mindfulness into our practice	Shared understanding shared value. against perscribed approach	The role of policy supports in MP. Integrated.	multisystems value integrated approach

Figure 6.4 Phase Three Coding Iterations

Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes

After coding all the data, I initially grouped similar codes into broader themes to aggregate the data. I looked over the codes again to decipher what had similar meanings to help me decide on potential themes and subthemes. My aim was to have themes that were distinctive and thoughtful, and reflective of the collective discussion while also drawing on my positionality and knowledge that I gained from conducting the interviews in Phase Two. Consistent with my constructivist interpretivist lens, the focus group was a vehicle where meaning was co-constructed between the participants and myself as moderator. I was cognisant that good quality codes and themes resulted from the dual process of engagement and distance from the data set (Braun and Clarke 2021), therefore I took a few days to step back from my data. This time allowed me to actively consider what should be situated where, moreover, the space provided me with a sense of acceptance that the themes I choose do not have to capture everything in the data set, albeit it does require a central organising concept. At this stage I generated six themes and placed codes underneath to ensure I was capturing the depth required as illustrated in Figure 6.5. I recognised I had too many themes, with some lacking depth which warranted further exploration.

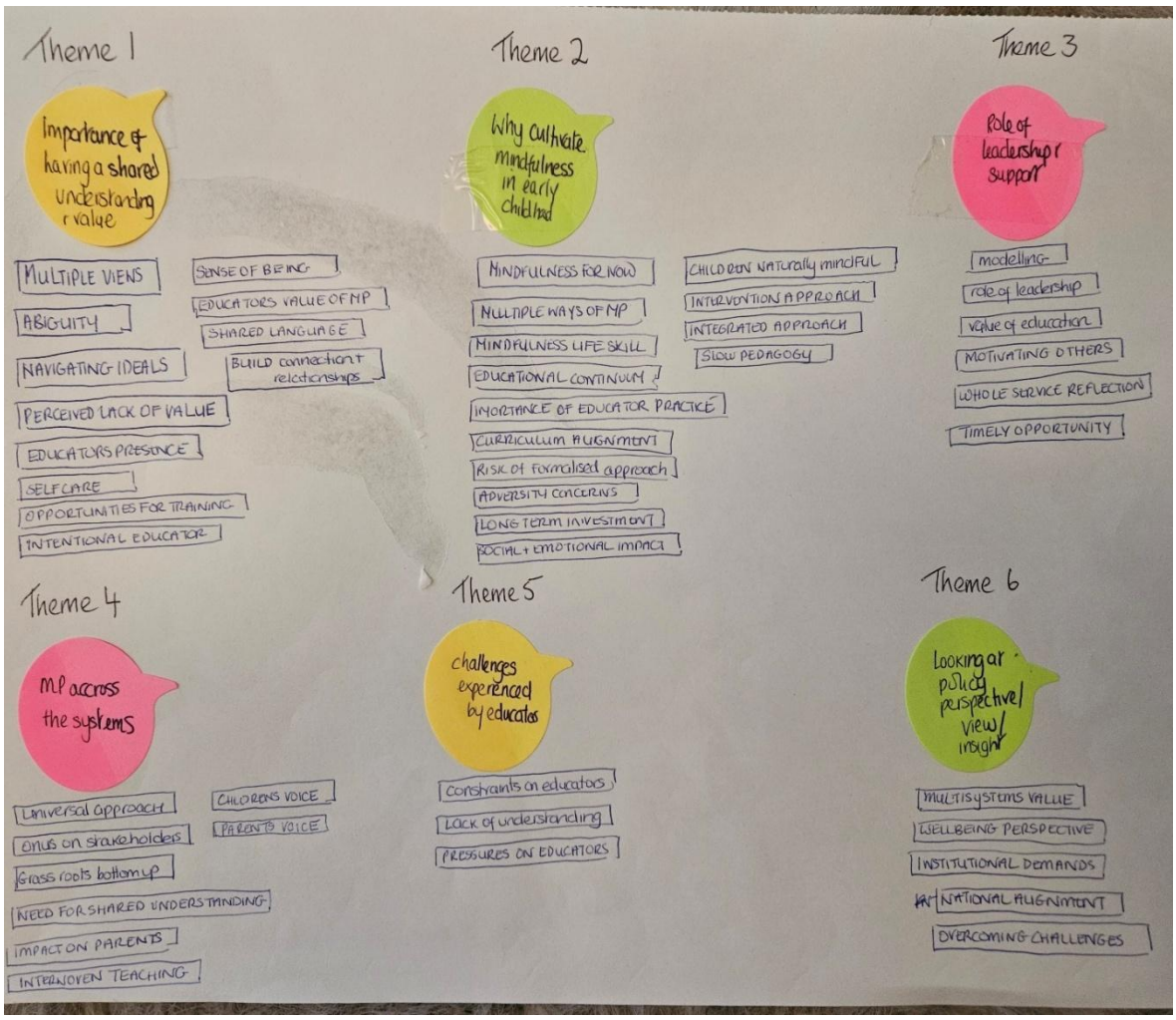


Figure 6.5 Phase Three Theme Development

Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes

As an extension of Phase Three, I reviewed the data set and coded extracts to ensure my themes were not disconnected from the words of the group. My aim was to generate robust themes that would provide rich, nuanced information from a broader context which included a panel of thought leaders, individuals with influence and expertise in policy, education, and research in ECE that would address my research question. I reviewed the themes using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, I ensured I was able to categorise and answer the research questions to add breadth to this study. I embraced an inductive approach ensuring that the data was driving the themes being created. I spent time reflecting on the different themes considering if they accurately reflected the data

and whether they told a compelling story? I recognised some themes were too thin and would be better placed as a subtheme. For example, I initially labelled the ‘role of leadership and support’ as a theme, however upon reflection this was better placed as a subtheme to capture the essence of threading mindfulness across a child’s system. I particularly lent into my analytical sensibility in this phase where I reflected on my research questions - I revisited what the data was telling me by looking at the excerpts and seeing where they were best placed, while reflecting on my own interpretations of the findings. At this stage I moved from six themes to two themes with 48 codes as illustrated below in Figure 6.6.

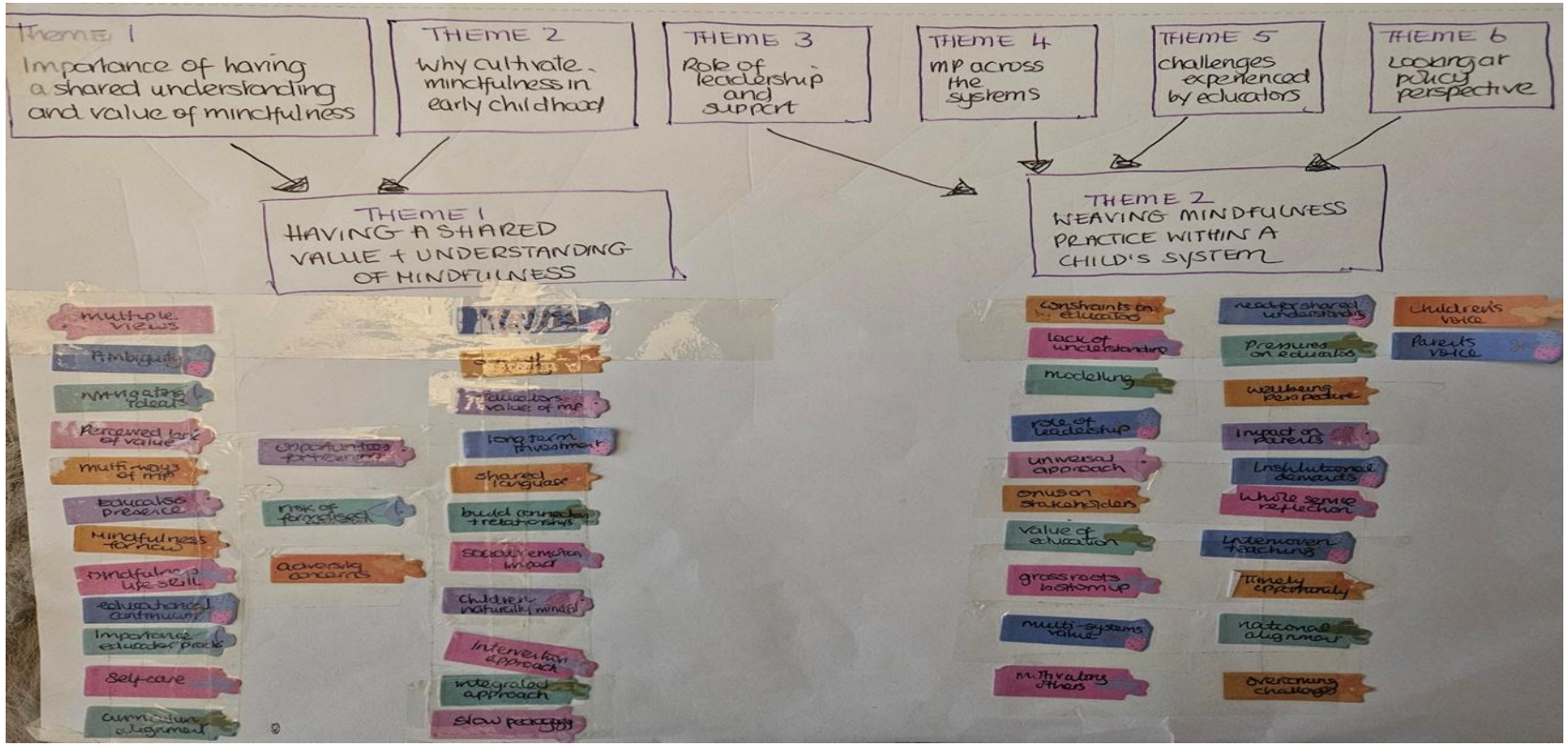


Figure 6.6 Phase Three Iteration of Themes

Phase Five: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

Entering this phase, I now had two themes, however, I felt they needed to be reshaped to ensure I captured the depth of data from the collective discussion. Moreover, I wanted to ensure my themes were not too broad, so they would provide meaningful insight into the complexity of the discussion. For this final iteration, what I initially labelled as 'having a shared value and understanding of mindfulness', I reshaped to 'tensions between the ideal and reality of MP in early childhood'. This new name allowed me to capture the collective desire for a shared understanding of mindfulness and MP, the significant value of MP for children in early childhood and as a life skill, and the constraints that impede educators being able to be mindful in early childhood. An illustration of the iterative process of theme development and subthemes are illustrated below in Figure 6.7.

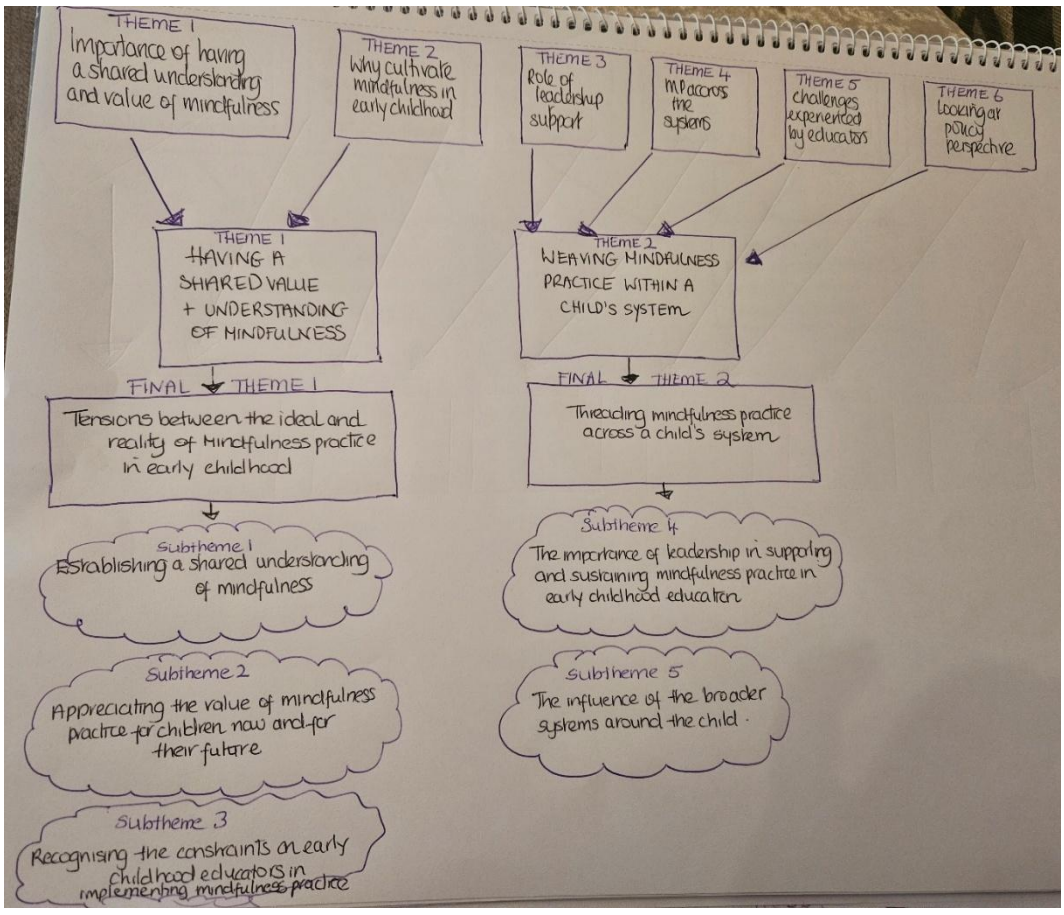


Figure 6.7 Phase Three Final Theme and Subtheme Development

An illustration of my final two themes, five subthemes and 48 codes are presented below in Figure 6.8.

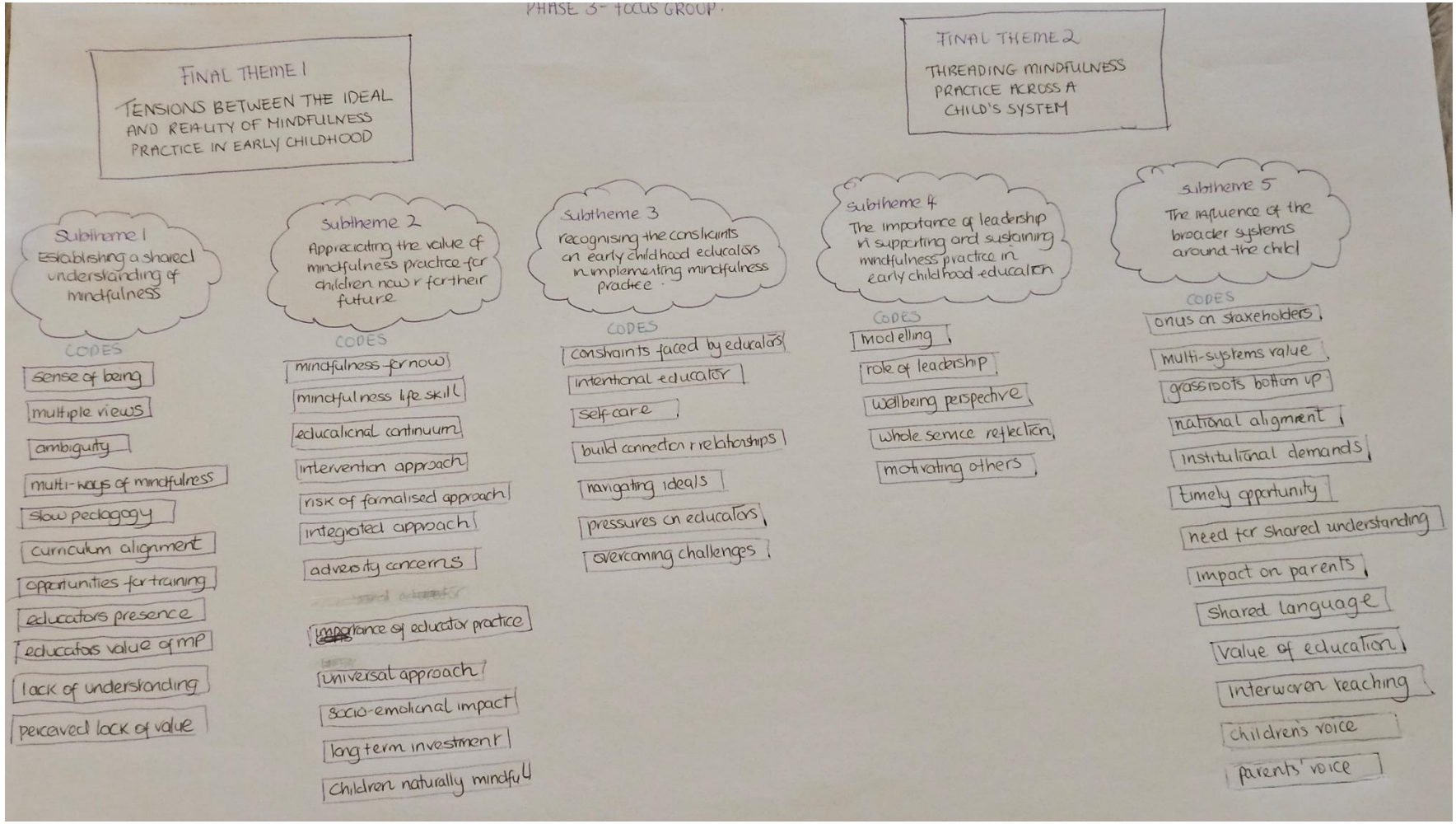


Figure 6.8 Phase Three Final Themes, Subthemes and Codes

Phase Six: Writing up the Findings

At this stage, after a rigorous analytical approach, I felt confident that I had generated rich, contextualized, compelling insight into the group's perspective on MP in ECE. Similarly to Phase Two as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021), I opted to provide a brief abstract of the two themes that would succinctly capture their essence.

This write up phase of my findings will be presented in Section 6.3.

6.2.5 Summary of Section

In this section, I outlined the objectives of this phase of the present study and detailed the methodological decisions that shaped it. Choosing a qualitative focus group approach allowed for rich, interactive, in-depth dialogue with a panel of thought leaders that illuminated collective insights often not captured in interviews. Additionally, the decision to engage a panel of thought leaders was both a strategic and reflective decision to explore a broader context. RTA afforded a flexible and thorough approach for analysing data, which was iterative and reflexive and enabled me to remain attuned to the participants' accounts while respecting the complexities of meaning making considering my own subjective experiences. This phase allowed a deeper engagement with collective voices, inviting me to reflect on the diversity of views. In the following section, I present my findings derived from my interpretations of the collective discussion including extracts of the rich contextual data. These findings are organised into two themes and five subthemes.

6.3 Introduction to Findings

In this section findings are presented within two themes (Figure 6.9) to gain insight into the feasibility of MP in ECE from a broader perspective. The discussion focused on six key areas identified from the findings from interviews in the previous phase.

1. To explore the panel's perspectives on the role of MP in ECE.
2. To explore the perspective from the findings in Phase Two that revealed MP could support children's present moment experiences in early childhood while also as building a life skill.
3. To explore their opinions on mindfulness as a slow pedagogical approach.
4. To consider how mindfulness could be included in pre-service educators third level education and what this could look like in practice.
5. To discuss the potential of a leadership role in mindfulness in ECE.
6. To explore their perspectives of a top-down approach or/ and whole systems approach to mindfulness in ECE.

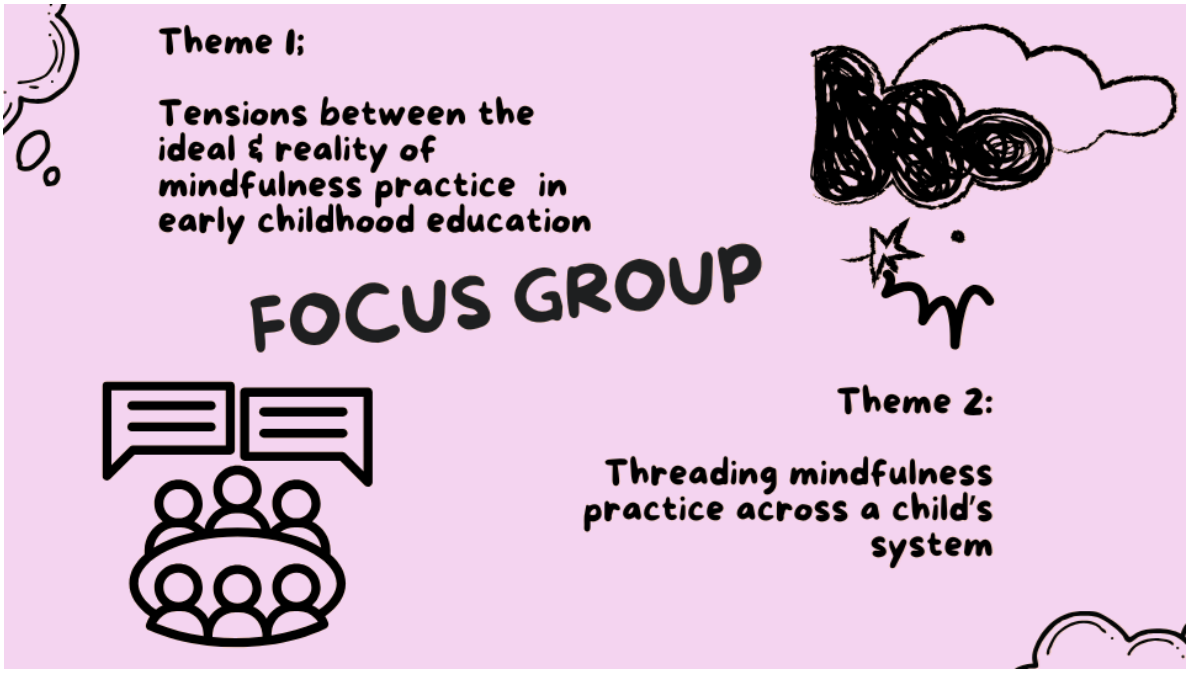


Figure 6.9 Illustration of Themes for Phase Three

6.3.1 Theme 1: Tensions Between the Ideal and Reality of Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education

This theme explores the tensions that appear to exist between the values/ beliefs individuals may hold and the reality of using mindfulness in early childhood. When the participants were asked to share their thoughts on educators using mindfulness with young children, there was a strong consensus that having a shared understanding of what mindfulness means was pivotal. There were collective discussions about using mindfulness as a tool for children in the present moment but also as a "*life skill*" to be learned in early childhood. Further dialogue revealed the constrictions facing educators while the importance of overcoming these barriers was emphasised. The following three subthemes as illustrated in Figure 6.10 will be explored in more detail below.

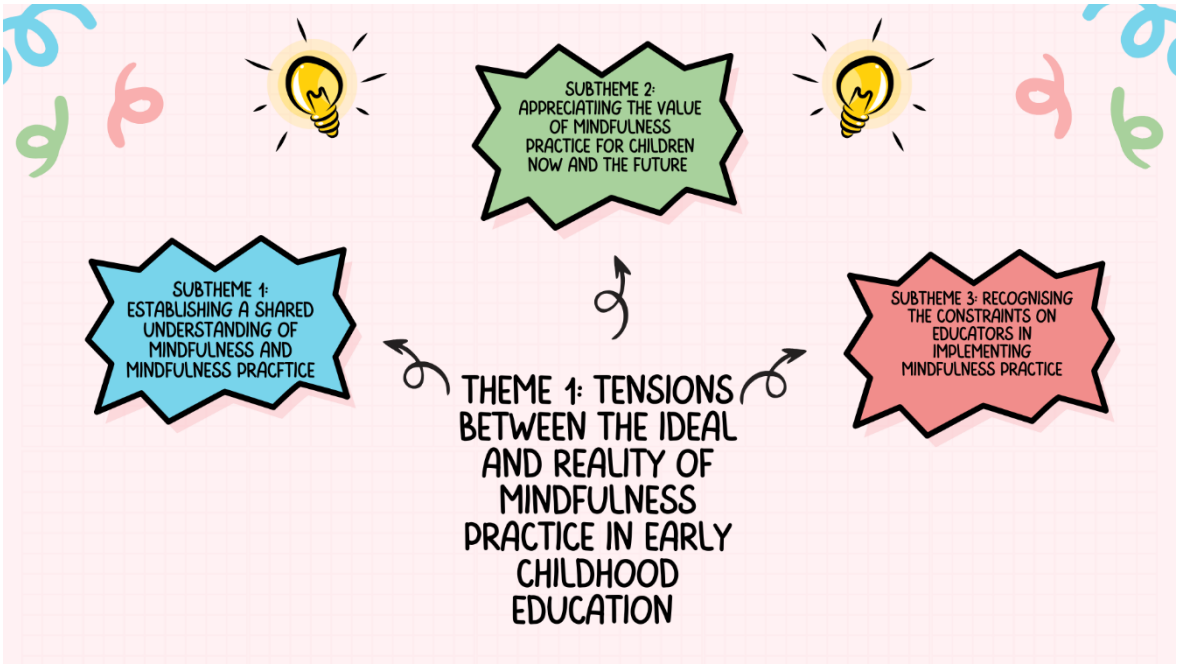


Figure 6.10 Illustration of Theme One and Subthemes

6.3.1.1 Subtheme One: Establishing a Shared Understanding of Mindfulness and Mindfulness Practice.

The group collectively recognised the importance of having a shared understanding of what constitutes mindfulness and MP. While there was some agreement on the meaning of mindfulness as "*being in the present moment"* (Abi) there were different interpretations shared. For example, mindfulness was associated with calmness, connection with oneself and others, a sense of stillness, and a sense of being and not doing. There were further discussions of how there could be a variety of interpretations and possible feelings of uncertainty on how to use MPs in early childhood. Flo expressed:

> Do people envisage it to be a programme and what does that look like or is it actually a state of mind that is something you have … there's a lot of different perceptions and how people perceive what it looks like in early childhood so that can be tricky.

Participants consistently echoed that mindfulness itself in early childhood is associated with "*educators being present*" (Sue), "*slowing down*" (Dot), "*creating emotionally warm and safe environments*" (Flo) and *"being responsive to children*" (Abi). The connection between mindfulness and embodying a slow pedagogical practice was discussed with references to slow relational pedagogy as emphasised in the updated Aistear. There was majority consensus that mindfulness could be equated to slow pedagogy where Flo noted that the words of stillness and curiosity are described in Aistear which may support educators understanding the meaning of mindfulness and how to be mindful in practice. Dot shared:

> Mindfulness is so relevant particularly at the moment with the update of Aistear getting us into that space of slow relational pedagogy and nurturing relationships.

However, Ria shared that some MP may not have to equate to slowness and stillness, that states of mindfulness could also be within the "*louder moments of music and dance*". This contribution evoked reflexive responses and dialogue from other participants, as they shared the multitude of ways educators can be mindful in both quiet, still moments and busy ones, Sue shared "*it can be in nature taking a walk without interruptions*". Flo expressed "*even when dancing with children it can be in those movements of expression and focus*". There were further discussions that mindfulness should be viewed as more in line with a way of being rather than something to simply be done with children, although the particular practices of mindfulness will support a mindful disposition. There were shared references on the importance of educators intentionally being present with children irrespective of the type of activity.

The group appeared to be unified in their thinking that having a shared understanding of mindfulness was pivotal in order for MP to be embraced in education, and if educators could have a lack of understanding that may impede their practice. Abi stated:

> I think it's the lack of shared definition and thinking around it. I would imagine will cause problems and confusion for implementation.

6.3.1.2 Subtheme Two: Appreciating the Value of Mindfulness Practice for Children Now and the Future.

There was a strong recognition of the importance of children having opportunities to be present and in the moment within their daily lives, with a shared acknowledgement that some children may be experiencing adversity and stress when they attend early childhood settings. There was a shared recognition that more young children are presenting with anxiety and mental health issues over recent years, and perhaps early childhood may be a suitable time to introduce MPs to young children. Ria shared

> There is so much going on for children, some with complex backgrounds and they need something to help alleviate some of those pressures and we always talk about early intervention, and this is where mindfulness can fit nicely in early childhood.

Some participants strongly endorsed the idea of nurturing mindfulness in early childhood. One participant particularly noted that children are naturally mindful and intentional in their play and those dispositions should be supported by educators and not be intruded upon. Flo shared:

> Children are mindful, you know, if if they're left to their own devices in a space where they feel safe, they are very mindful and it's best not then to disturb them

One participant raised a concern that if children were engaging in mindfulness in early childhood, but it wasn’t continued in primary and secondary school, it could potentially lead to a negative impact on children.

There was a suggestion that a lack of reinforcement of mindfulness and MP could lead to the feeling of being present as devalued or dismissed which could result in children feeling confused and unsupported. This led to further reflections where the participants engaged in rich in-depth discussions regarding the importance of mindfulness being valued across the educational continuum with further suggestions that MP should not be viewed as an optional intervention to the curriculum. Sue shared:

> It is about the normalisation of mindfulness as part of the everyday curriculum in early years and beyond, a life practice rather than be seen as a touch feely therapeutic optional intervention that's brought in to fix a problem.

The group collectively valued the importance of MP as a universal approach to nurture children's wellbeing while recognising the importance of using an intervention strategy where needed. However, there was a clear recommendation that educators should not wait until a child appears dysregulated to use MP but rather as part of pedagogical interactions. Ria expressed:

> Mindfulness practice shouldn't just be trying to pull them out when things are not going well but built into the relationships into the pedagogy.

Contrasting viewpoints emerged when one participant shared a personal experience where their child received inconsistent mindful teaching methods which was perceived to have contributed to their child not enjoying mindfulness. This prompted a discussion amongst the participants where they highlighted the importance of educators valuing mindfulness and intentionally using MP with young children, utilising flexible teaching approaches and modelling mindfulness to children. This discussion resulted in spontaneous expressions of understanding and respect for each other's viewpoints, although some were not universally shared.

For example, while some participants mentioned the importance of educators valuing mindfulness, others noted that one's values and MP could be deeply personal but could also be context dependent. Abi shared:

> It is a tricky one, you want to believe and value something in order to share it with children, but maybe some don't see it for themselves or maybe they don't put themselves first and see the benefits only for children.

When asked how educators could value mindfulness, the consensus was that educators should have opportunities to understand mindfulness and develop their own MP and that attending training was integral. However, there was an agreed concern about manualised programmes being used in early childhood and that such an approach could deviate from the essence of mindfulness as presence. Ria expressed:

> What we are saying is we want to try and move away from these 10 week programmes and because that type of approach may be easier to implement, go off do your training and come back and do 10 sessions, but really we are saying it is being more present, it may be too much to ask one or two people in a service to do that.

Across the focus group, there was agreement that using MP in early childhood not only benefits children's immediate wellbeing in the present moment but is a valuable life skill that young children can bring forward with them to help navigate life's ups and downs. Sue reflected:

> I see mindfulness as money in the bank for socio- emotional development and health of babies and young children... we know from the research it is going to benefit them across the life course.

This train of thought led to in-depth discussions around not "*reinventing the wheel*" (Dot), whereby mindfulness has the potential to be aligned with existing government initiatives on socio-emotional development and mental health that are already part of the national discourse.

The consensus was including mindfulness under this remit could ensure its longevity and reduce the risk of mindfulness being viewed as the "*in thing*" (Sue) and increases the probability of mindfulness becoming an integrated practice. Dot expressed:

> I think it is leveraging what they have already as mental health is kind of the national narrative; we can have mindfulness part of that and then it becomes the norm rather than a train that moves on again to the next cycle.

6.3.1.3 Subtheme Three: Recognising the Constraints on Educators in Implementing Mindfulness Practice.

After an in-depth discussion, there was consensus that mindfulness should be incorporated into ECE, however participants expressed concerns about the practical challenges that educators face. The group noted that working within a strict staff: child ratio and the current staffing crisis could negatively impact educators' opportunities to be mindful and to slow down and be present with children. This prompted reflective responses from the group with a shared acknowledgment of the daily constraints for educators that may be imposed by policy, setting culture and lack of funding. Flo observed:

> We have to look at the realities as well, when you're in a busy environment, if you're working to what the ratios are, and it can be hard to create that space of to facilitate mindfulness.

There was a shared respect for the complex role of the educator as the group emphasised the vital role the educator plays in a child's life. It was suggested to prioritise the intentionality of the educator from a broader and more holistic perspective at policy and leadership level - one that prioritises being calm, present, and emotionally attuned to children rather than being driven by work demands. They agreed that while it was beneficial to share MP with young children in early childhood, the reality of practice could be a challenge. There was agreement that

supports for the educator must be in place both internally and externally in order for MP to be embraced in practice. Dot shared:

> We need to look at at ways in which we can kind of support mindfulness practice whether that is going for training, mentoring, or making supports available from a policy perspective

The panel frequently mentioned the importance of educators looking after their own wellbeing and suggested that engaging in MP may be a promising route to do so. However, there was strong agreement that those at management and policy level had a responsibility to prioritise educators' wellbeing to ensure retention and high-quality sector. Ria shared:

> There is an onus on leaders to ensure the wellbeing of the educators and to keep them in the sector, they are leaving rapidly, so programmes like mindfulness could really help nurture their development.

They noted educators engaging in MP could result in positive personal impacts, reap positive benefits on the classroom environment, enhance educators' response strategies, and support more meaningful engagement and relationships with young children. Dot highlighted

> There's a real opportunity for educators and children's wellbeing... a lovely space where you can combine the two together and I think there's something potentially really powerful in that.

6.3.1.4 A Mindful Reflexive Pause on the Significance of Theme to the Research Question.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

While writing this theme, I reflected on my overall research questions and the objectives of conducting a focus group. The panel's perspectives on the role of mindfulness practice in early childhood education mirrored the educators' perspectives, yet the discussions prompted me to consider the need for continued broader discussions on mindfulness practice across the education continuum. Their advocacy for mindfulness practice as a tool that would benefit children's present moment experiences and as a valuable life skill echoed the educators' previous perspectives (RQ2). The dialogue regarding mindfulness practice as a slow pedagogical approach revealed subtle tensions, that mindfulness practice goes beyond a slow pedagogy (RQ3). The group consensus on potential constraints, particularly the lack of time for educators "to be mindful", prompted me to consider the evident gaps between aspirational policies and the realities of on the ground practices. It has provoked me to think more deeply about supports needed for effective implementation of mindfulness practice in early childhood education.

Figure 6.11 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

6.3.2 Theme 2: Threading Mindfulness Practice Across a Child's System

This theme builds on the previous theme where the participants placed value on MP being threaded through a child's life from early childhood to adulthood. Being asked for their opinions on adopting a whole-school approach or having a potential mindfulness champion in an early childhood service prompted thoughtful discussion on the role of mentoring and leadership. When exploring the idea of a whole systems approach to MP in early childhood, participants engaged in an in-depth conversation about the integration of both a top-down and bottom-up approach which includes policy makers, the role of third level programmes for preservice educators, parental involvement and the educators. The following two subthemes as illustrated in Figure 6.12 will be explored in more detail below.

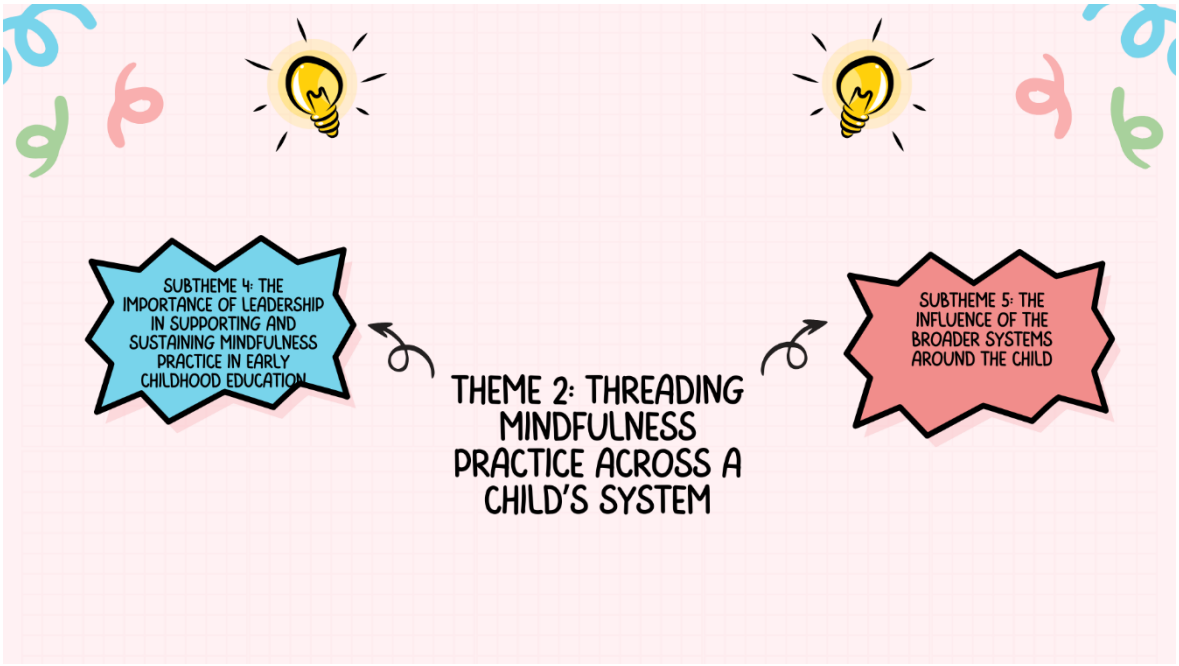


Figure 6.12 Illustration of Theme Two and Subthemes

6.3.2.1 Subtheme Four: The Importance of Leadership in Supporting and Sustaining Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education.

There was a shared recognition from the group regarding the importance of modelling MPs within ECE, where they noted children could benefit from observing the positive strategies being used by educators. It was noted that an educator modelling mindfulness in the room could encourage other educators to engage in such MP. One participant suggested there could be significant value in modelling a gentle, mindful approach with parents which could introduce parents to the concept of mindfulness, with the hope it will positively impact their parenting and the potential of introducing slow parenting. Sue expressed:

> Mindfulness can become like, slow parenting and when we see the knock on, do you know, what kind of influence mindfulness can have and how it will spread out.

Thoughtful suggestions regarding having supportive structures in place to allow the educator to embrace a mindfulness approach included a responsive manager and knowing when to offer additional support to the rooms. Flo shared:

> Management needs to have the skills to be able to see where the support is needed for…everyone has an important role to play, planning the day and when to tag in and out and allow that presence.

When I posed the idea of a mindfulness champion, there was initially a sense of cautiousness from the group with having 'another champion' in early childhood. There was a consensus that early childhood settings may already be inundated with existing champions such as parent champions, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) champions, and inclusion coordinators. The group collectively agreed on the inclusion of mindfulness and suggested it may be better placed under the remit of wellbeing, with coordinator/s leading this area rather than just focusing solely on MP.

One participant's idea of distributed leadership sparked an in-depth discussion among the group, where they reinforced the idea of exploring the skillset from within the service, and nurturing and harnessing educators' skills would empower staff to take such leadership roles. There was a strong consensus this person should come from within the service and be familiar with the culture and practices. Flo shared:

> I think about empowering people who are in the setting, so they feel confident to take this role, they make the best leaders, they know the service, the children, the parents.

However, one participant expressed a concern that assigning one person as the mindfulness champion could pose some challenges if they did not have the capacity or skills to transfer the knowledge they learned in training. They suggested this could negatively result in mindfulness not being adopted by the whole service. Several participants expressed agreement with this sentiment, where they discussed the possibility for managers and educators to first engage in a reflective audit of the service through a mindfulness lens. Adopting such a process could help pinpoint how mindfulness is being embedded into the service and identify areas for improvement to support the wellbeing of all. Abi shared:

I think it is building on best practice, it is possible that maybe lots of different people and lots of different ways we are tapping into mindfulness, it is nearly like doing an audit of how mindfulness is, and checking are we doing mindfulness. Maybe we're doing nothing, but maybe we're doing something and build on that.

6.3.2.2 Subtheme Five: The Influence of the Broader Systems Around the Child

There was significant emphasis placed on cultivating a shared understanding and appreciation of mindfulness across all the systems that impact a child's life, including policy makers and those at university level who are responsible for pre-service teacher education. One participant emphasised that in order for "*real change*" (Flo) to happen there needs to be a mixture of both a top-down and bottom-up approach with mindfulness, highlighting again the need for a universal definition. Dot reflected:

> If we want to make change within the system, we need that top-down bottom-up approach… As educators, policy makers, as researchers and experts in the field we need to be clear on what we want it to be for the sector so it doesn't become just an add on programme but it is more about integrating mindfulness into our practice …there has to be a national approach but that definition is crucial to mindfulness getting traction in education.

The panel highlighted the bi-directional influence of policy on practice and practice on policy and suggested that educators are best placed to provide an evidence base of the impacts of MP, which in turn could inform policy makers. The panel highlighted how research like the present study has an opportunity to do so. Abi expressed:

> It's great to to see where the research is going and and you know the evidence base that you're building here, we need to see that at policy level

There was strong agreement about including MP training in third level ECE programmes, where they preferred an embedded "*interwoven*" (Abi) approach across all taught modules. There was a sense of conviction from the group that this was the preferred approach rather than an optional mindfulness module, as they expressed a shared concern that an optional module may not be taken up by the

students or may position mindfulness and MP as an add on, rather than an essential practice to embed into their pedagogy. Dot mentioned potential practical issues and "*competing pieces*" at play that could pose a challenge to integrate mindfulness into a very structured programme. There was consensus from the group most specifically regarding departmental pressure to have all the necessary teaching elements included in the curriculum. However, there was a proposition for third level institutions, similar to the suggestion made earlier for ECE settings, to conduct an audit to discern if there are elements of mindfulness that already exist and to explore new ways to integrate mindfulness more explicitly within modules.

The panel recognised the importance of including parents in MP in ECE, through sharing practices, and that educators asking for opinions and feedback would increase the likelihood of MP being sustainable and implemented in the home environment. Abi shared:

> Involving parents as well, getting their opinions on mindfulness involving them is so important especially if you want to see the practice become a real transferable and meaningful way of living throughout a child's life.

There were additional suggestions to capture children's experiences of MP, by listening to children, observing their engagement and asking their opinions which could shape meaningful planning and ensure children are respected as "*agentic learners*" (Flo). Dot shared:

> Thinking about these children, let's ask them, observe them and figure out what matters to them if they like or don't like the practices and let them help shape the activities, isn't that really seeing them as agentic learners

It was also felt that involving children in research could contribute to the current policy narrative of prioritising consultation with children. Sue observed:

> Maybe part of that is to have space as well as to expand this ties in on where we're going with policy and child consultations to learn about children's experiences of mindfulness and and what they're getting from it

There was shared agreement that mindfulness and MP offer benefits for young children and adults alike across the lifespan. However, they noted that in order for mindfulness and MP to be embedded in ECE and wider health services, there must be recognition and support from policy and government stakeholders described as "*the powers that be*" (Abi).

The group collectively agreed research into mindfulness in early childhood is timely and may "*push an already open door*" (Dot) mentioning the possibility to situate mindfulness within the national narrative of supporting the wellbeing of children from early childhood, primary, secondary and beyond. Sue concluded the focus group by sharing:

> We need to look at mindfulness generationally and trying to break all of these different cycles, that mindfulness is another tool in that toolkit or another resource in that toolkit to nurture the wellbeing of everyone from young to old.

6.3.2.3 A Mindful Reflexive Pause on the Significance of Theme to the Research Question.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

The collective discussion highlighted the importance of leadership, specifically distributed leadership and modelling mindfulness as an alternative to relying solely on a single mindfulness champion, as a potential solution to overcome some barriers of implementation (RQ5) I was mindful how my own interest in sustainable approaches may have shaped how I interpreted these points. The group's strong collective agreement on the integration of mindfulness practice across a multitude of modules for pre-service educators again to potentially support implementation (RQ5). While the support for this approach was unequivocal, I also reflected was their consensus reflective of their shared professional values rather than a universal view? The agreement on the importance of having a balance between a top-down and bottom-up approach to MP reinforced the importance of alignment across all systems for mindfulness practice to be successfully embedded into early childhood education, once resources, and policy restraints are overcome.

Figure 6.13 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

6.3.3 Section Summary

This phase facilitated a collaborative and dialogic exploration of the earlier findings generating two key themes that extended the insights from Phase One and Phase Two.

The first theme revealed the tensions between the ideal and reality of MP in ECE. While the group highlighted the urgency of having a shared and values driven understanding of MP as a vehicle to support children's wellbeing in ECE and as a foundation for lifelong learning, there was a shared recognition of the constrictions facing educators, which may impede them to be mindful or teach mindfully.

The second theme underscored the importance of threading MP across a child's broader and societal system. They emphasised the importance of leadership and modelling MP in ECE while advocating for a distributed leadership approach. They highlighted the important role policymakers; curriculum developers and third level institutions play as drivers of legitimising the implementation of MP across the education continuum. They called for a broader discourse on MP, including perspectives from educators, parents and children to build a sustainable and inclusive MP culture.

A comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the findings from this phase will be presented in Chapter Seven alongside the findings from Phase One and Two.

6.3.4 Phase Three Limitations and Strengths

The focus group built on the previous phase of this study by presenting the findings to a collective group of thought leaders in the field of ECE in Ireland.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to this phase of study that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the collective nature of the group may have inhibited some participants sharing their thoughts and views. While I did not identify any such challenge as everyone contributed equally and meaningfully and without interruption, it remains a potential limitation. Secondly, conducting a singular focus group offers only one perspective, therefore the findings must be understood within those boundaries and within the context. Thirdly, while five participants took part, I initially intended for two more individuals to participate which may have offered alternative perspectives. Fourthly, the participants all had some insight into MP, with one participant having engaged in formal training demonstrating a general positive disposition towards MP, limiting alternative perspectives.

However, the strengths of this phase enabled a dynamic discussion with diverse viewpoints and experiences. Additionally, the focus group revealed nuanced insights that may not have been possible from a singular interview. The collective nature of the focus group allowed participants to build on each other's ideas (Kabir 2016) and afforded the opportunity to shape the discussion. Data source triangulation added contextual understanding to the overall study. Conducting a focus group with participants from policy, practice and research not only gave voice to the educators' suggestions in Phase Two but also laid the foundation for having broader discussions of MP in ECE.

6.4 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Closure of Chapter

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

During the collective discussion, I was taken aback by the varying perspectives of a mindfulness champion; however, these discussions are crucial for fostering innovative thinking. They advocated for a wellbeing role in early childhood education, a distributed leadership approach as a way to empower educators and potentially make wellbeing a focus, help educator buy in and for mindfulness practice to be more sustainable in the long run. There was a sense of aligning with other Irish policy wellbeing initiatives and the potential for mindfulness practice to sit nicely within this remit. Perhaps early childhood education could be the driver of change? Further conversations need to happen to see this potential alignment.

Figure 6.14 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

This chapter has explored the final phase of data collection, offering insights into the collective reflections and opinions of a panel of thought leaders in ECE in Ireland. Section 6.3 described the methodological choices behind conducting a singular focus group to complement and deepen my earlier findings, while also describing the processes of RTA. In Section 6.4, the findings were presented through two overarching themes and five subthemes, illuminating the tensions, hopes and systemic considerations surrounding integrating MP into ECE in Ireland. I acknowledged some of the strengths and limitations of this phase.

The intention of this phase was not to confirm previous findings, rather offer a space to critically reflect on the emerging ideas from a different vantage point. The collaborative nature of the focus group provided a unique lens to explore broader systemic structures that could enable or constrain meaningful engagement with MP. This phase reaffirmed that while MP may be viewed as an individual practice or internal process, its implementation into education is relational, political and systemic. In embracing the iterative nature of this study, with each phase building on the previous phase, each has added an additional layer to understanding MP implementation in ECE. The following chapter will bring these threads together as I

provide a synthesis of my questionnaire in Phase One, the interviews in Phase Two, and the focus group in Phase Three, ultimately shaping key implications for practice, policy, and research.

Chapter Seven: Arriving Home

"*Everyone of us already has the skill to be mindful, we all have it within us, we just have to keep practicing to keep it growing.*" (Dee-Educator)

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a critical and reflective discussion of the findings from the three-phase study: the questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group, while drawing comparisons to previous research to highlight the implications of the findings within the context of early childhood education (ECE). This study set out to address a significant gap; to establish for the first time, a comprehensive national picture of, *if*, *how,* and *why* educators are using mindfulness practice (MP) with young children in ECE in Ireland. By mapping this unexplored landscape, the research provides critical insights into educators' understandings, current practices, and challenges, offering a robust evidence base to inform future practice, research, and policy in ECE.

The research aim was addressed through the following exploratory research objectives:

- To explore how educators construct and personally engage with MP.
- To capture the multiple perspectives and experiences of educators using MP with young children.
- To explore how MP is being implemented in ECE settings, including the methods, tools and training undertaken by educators to engage young children in MP.
- To explore educators' perceptions of the impact of MP on young children.
- To identify educators perceived barriers to implementing MP and potential solutions to overcome such barriers.

Phase One provided a national picture of MP in ECE in Ireland through a mixed-methods questionnaire that invited contributions from educators, including those who do or do not currently use MP with young children.

Phase Two involved a deeper exploration of lived experiences of implementing MP with young children from the educator's perspective, focusing on those actively engaged with the practice.

Phase Three added an additional layer by presenting the findings to a panel of thought leaders, with individuals who have influence and expertise in policy, education and research in ECE in Ireland, and sought their perspectives with a view to situate the findings within a broader context.

Drawing on the rich data generated across these phases, this chapter critically explores how MP is understood, practiced, and integrated into ECE in Ireland. This discussion is framed around the five key research questions, drawing together the common threads and insights across this study.

7.2 Summary of Findings

Phase One: The mixed-methods questionnaire, completed by 744 educators in Ireland provided the landscape on *if, how* and *why* educators may or may not be using MPs with young children. The results indicated that while many educators are using formal and informal MPs with children, their constructions and rationale differed.

The findings also revealed a significant association between educators' own practice of MP and practicing with young children. Barriers to using MP with young children included uncertainty of how to use MP within existing curricula, lack of confidence, and an absence of available training. Nevertheless, the findings

demonstrated that educators are eager for training and for MP to be incorporated in a more integrated manner to benefit both the children and the educators.

Phase Two: This phase built on the findings from Phase One, through semi-structured interviews with 27 educators who use MP with young children. This sample was generated from those who completed Phase One. The four main themes generated were:

Theme One: Mindfulness as a multi-dimensional experience where the educators viewed mindfulness as a multidimensional concept, with varied interpretations, often associated with present moment attention.

Theme Two: Practicing with intention, where the educators shared the multiple ways they personally practice mindfulness with reported benefits. They emphasised the benefits of using MP with young children to nurture their wellbeing as they present in early childhood, while also providing them with a lifelong skill.

Theme Three: Cultivating a mindfulness-based teaching approach where the educators favoured adopting an embedded pedagogical approach to mindfulness. Self-practice and training were identified as facilitators to help overcome some of the barriers of self-efficacy to share MP with children and educator buy-in.

Theme Four: Nurturing MP across the systems where there was strong consensus that MP warrants further discussion and consideration across policy.

Phase Three: Building on the insights from the previous phase, Phase Three involved a focus group of five thought leaders in ECE in Ireland. This phase explored the findings in a broader context and examined future implications. The two main themes that were generated were:

Theme One: Tensions between the ideal and the reality of MP in ECE were apparent, where the group highlighted the need to have a shared definition and understanding of MP. The group agreed that MP has an important role in children's wellbeing and learning for now and for life trajectory while also recognising barriers such as lack of educator support training.

Theme Two: Threading MP across a child's system where the group advocated for the importance of modelling and leadership practices across all system levels to drive effective change.

7.3 Revisiting the Research Objectives

In this discussion, I synthesise findings across the three phases by addressing each research objective in turn. I conclude with a mindful reflection on the title of this thesis and draw this chapter to a close.

7.3.1. Mindfulness: What For Art Thou?

Research Objective One: Explore how educators construct and personally engage in mindfulness practice.

7.3.1.1 Exploring Educators Understanding of Mindfulness and MP

In addressing the first part of Research Objective One, this study revealed significant variation in educators understanding of mindfulness, reflecting the conceptual ambiguity widely noted in the literature. Across all three phases of this research study, the understandings of mindfulness ranged from narrow practice-based definitions to broader, experiential interpretations. Mindfulness was equated to present moment attention across the questionnaire and interview phases, however, many attributed mindfulness to a specific meditative practice such as breathing. In contrast, the focus group in Phase Three described mindfulness as a

personal presence rather than equating it to any specific activity or practice. This spectrum of understanding highlights the complexity of what mindfulness and MP means to individuals. What constitutes mindfulness and mindfulness practice persisted throughout the study, mirroring Goldberg et al.'s (2022, p. 605) reference to "*definitional fuzziness*". This diversity in interpretation was evident across the whole study pointing to a broader issue around ambiguity regarding the word mindfulness. In the interviews the participants highlighted how the lack of a universal definition of mindfulness made it difficult to grasp. The conceptual vagueness may thus hinder efforts to share MPs, most notably with parents. The focus group in Phase Three amplified these concerns, warning that the absence of a universal definition and understanding may lead to inconsistent practices with young children in education. This finding is echoed by Tonga's (2020) argument that conceptual incoherence and understanding may pose a significant barrier to educators practice of mindfulness. Recently, scholars (Oman 2023; Sedlmeier 2023) have called for establishing a core definition of mindfulness to maintain the integrity and understanding of what is being practiced and studied. It appears from many of the studies conducted to date with educators, that research exploring what constitutes mindfulness is lacking. This begs the question, if we don't explore the root of the meaning, how can we truly, authentically, understand educators' experiences?

Interview participants strongly advocated for a clear and cohesive definition that could anchor mindfulness as a legitimate pedagogical approach, rather than being dismissed as a novelty add-on. This clarity was argued for in the focus group, that having a clear definition and understanding of mindfulness and MP could support educators' confidence and efficacy in the integration of MP with young children. Furthermore, having an agreed definition and understanding could serve a broader systematic coherence across policy, education and health initiatives. Despite the

growing interest in mindfulness and MP, there is a noticeable gap in studies that have critically explored how educators themselves understand the terms mindfulness and MP. This omission is significant, as within the interviews it was perceived that the educator's conceptualisation of mindfulness and MP directly impacted how and why they implemented MP with young children. To address this gap, research must create space for educators to articulate and share their understanding of mindfulness and MP.

Not exploring their understanding risks misrepresenting their lived experiences and may risk not capturing key factors that have shaped their authentic implementation of MP with young children. By providing the first national mapping of how mindfulness is understood by educators, this study contributes to the evidence base and underscores the need for greater conceptual clarity of mindfulness and MP which may support the meaningful and sustainable integration of MP in ECE.

7.3.1.2 Embodying mindfulness practice: educators' personal engagement with mindfulness practice

Alongside exploring educators' understanding of mindfulness and MP, this study explored educators' personal practice of mindfulness. As outlined in Section 4.4.1, 67% of the educators in Phase One reported engaging in personal MP. This represents a significantly higher proportion compared to other national studies. For instance, in the UK, Simonsson et al. (2021) estimated that 15% of adults have learned about mindfulness, with findings from the U.S National Health Interview Survey reporting a similar figure (17%) of the population engaging in meditation as of 2022 (Davies et al. 2024). It remains to be seen whether the higher level of engagement in MP observed in the present study, represents the self-selected nature of the study, where educators interested in mindfulness may have been more

inclined to participate or whether it indicates a broader trend of engagement with MP within the ECE sector. Further research is warranted to explore engagement and participation rates.

Across the interviews, educators articulated a strong sense of value in their personal MP, some described it as a mechanism to support their personal and professional wellbeing. Importantly, their MP was not seen as a separate compartmentalised activity, but rather an integrated part of their identity that nurtured their own sense of self, reduced stress and supported their pedagogy with young children. This resonates with prior research (McKeering and Hwang 2019; Weare 2013; Napoli et al. 2005) which connects educators' personal MP to personal and professional development by alleviating feelings of stress. However, this study delved deeper by highlighting how the educators internalise and embody mindfulness which shaped their relational presence for themselves and for young children. In Phase Two, educators spoke openly about the tension between being present and performing their duties as an educator specifically. Many expressed a concern about feeling on autopilot in their daily work, highlighting a risk of disconnect from the present moment due to the demands of the role. This insight is reflected within the broader literature regarding the complexities and pressures associated with being an educator in ECE (Farewell et al. 2022; Eadie et al. 2021; Koch 2016).

Notably, the panel in Phase Three echoed the concern that educators are under significant pressures, and emphasised the need for systemic supports, both internally and externally to enable educators' capacity to engage in MPs both personally and professionally.

Educators in Phase Two described multiple formal and informal practices that they felt nourished their well-being, these included breathing practices, journalling, mindful walking, meditation, and yoga. Breathing practices were the most commonly used MP across Phases One and Two, valued for their flexible and adaptable nature, an observation reflected in the literature (Holt and Atkinson 2022). It was remarkable how the majority of educators reported using breathing practices with young children, suggesting a natural transference from personal practice to pedagogical practice.

Significantly, some of the educators appeared to grasp the distinction between state mindfulness (moment-to-moment awareness during practice) and trait mindfulness (a more enduring disposition of presence) (Carsley et al. 2018; Kiken et al. 2015). While they placed significant value on using both formal and informal MPs, many expressed a desire to shift beyond using intermittent practices towards cultivating a more sustained, embedded practice, that would permeate throughout their personal and professional life.

The educators in Phase Two shared some of the transformative impacts of their own MP, which supported their relational capacities with young children. For example where MP helped them be more present, patient, and responsive, to the evolving needs of young children. This is consistent with action research studies undertaken by Holt et al. (2021) and Lyndon et al. (2025) which highlighted how the perceived

benefits of educators' engagement with MP may positively influence their interactions with young children in their settings.

Interestingly, some mentioned a shift in self -kindness, reinforcing the idea of befriending oneself, which in turn they felt nurtured a more empathetic and compassionate approach towards others. This finding is significant as it suggests that MP, when authentically practiced, can potentially cultivate personal wellbeing and have the potential to enhance relational engagement. This warrants further research to explore the relationship between educators' MP and their relational interactions with young children, as it is unclear if these are connected (Hwang et al. 2019b).

Despite the reported benefits, the systemic pressures educators face must be addressed if MP is to take root and become a sustainable part of ECE. Recent research suggests a relationship between educators' and children's wellbeing (Dreer 2023), however, with the majority of studies reliant on teacher-rated scales and a lack of multiple perspectives, policy support in this area remains limited. In Ireland, for example, the Department of Education's (DoE) Wellbeing Policy Statement Framework for Practice (DoE 2021) emphasised supporting primary school educators' wellbeing, while there is a notable gap of equivalent policy for educators in ECE. Early childhood policy in Ireland, including the revised Aistear (GoI 2024) and the Nurturing Skills: Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care 2022- 2028 (DCEDIY 2021), have offered minimal recognition of supporting the wellbeing of the educator, despite the critical role they play in young children's lives.

This omission in policy represents a worrying oversight considering growing international research such as OECD's Teacher's Wellbeing Framework (OECD

2021) and Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce report (OECD 2019). These highlight the necessity of supporting educators' wellbeing as foundational for quality ECEC provision. Without explicit policies and policy mechanisms in place, efforts to integrate practices like MP risk being undervalued and under-resourced.

In Ireland, while mindfulness or MP is not mentioned specifically in ECE policy or primary school education, wellbeing and mental health remain a national priority for our youngest citizens to our oldest (Department of Health 2020). Moreover, the studies conducted to date (Corthorn et al. 2024; Carroll et al. 2022; Koch 2016; Flook et al. 2015) and including this present study, have indicated that MP can support both educators and children's wellbeing. In light of these findings, I argue that it is necessary to centre educators understanding and experience of MP and advocate for policies that support their capacity to be well for themselves and for the children.

7.3.2 Through Many Eyes: Educators Diverse Experiences of Mindfulness Practice with Children.

Research Objective Two: To capture the multiple perspectives and experiences of educators using MP with young children

This study revealed a complex, and occasionally contradictory image, of why educators engage in MP with young children. In Phase One, 65% of educators reported using some form of MP with young children in their settings, offering valuable insight into the landscape of MP in ECE in Ireland. However, the findings cannot be extrapolated to all educators as some provinces had higher representation.

A strong connection between personal and professional practice emerged from the interviews in Phase Two, reflecting a deeply held value of the benefits of mindfulness and MP for both educators and children. The educators in Phase Two expressed a strong desire to share the potential benefits they experienced with MP with young children in their care. This underscores the prevailing belief amongst the educators that self-practice nurtures their motivation and potential self-efficacy to share practices with young children.

Within Phase One there was a significant association between educators' personal MP and their use of MPs with young children, with those who reported using mindfulness more likely to report engaging in MPs with young children. With 100% of educators who undertook accredited and non-accredited training reporting using MP with young children, this offers interesting insights. It is assumed from the literature that educators who personally practice mindfulness are more likely to integrate MP in their settings with children (Jeon et al. 2022; Carsley et al. 2018).

In the interviews the educators highlighted that engaging in personal MP helped develop their understanding and self-efficacy to share practices with children. This is also supported in the literature (Kim et al. 2019). This suggests the importance of personal MP to not only enhance their belief and competency in MP but how they enact MP with young children. From this, I suggest that for meaningful integration of MP in ECE, cultivating personal MP and engaging in training could be a precursor for this to be achievable.

However, Phase One revealed that a significant proportion of educators (*n*=87) practice mindfulness with young children, despite not engaging in personal practice. This complicates the assumptions in the literature that self-practice is a pre-requisite for sharing practices with children (Jeon et al. 2022; Weare 2019). Furthermore,

this highlights the need for further exploration into educators' reasons or motivations for practice and raises critical questions such as: Are there institutional or contextual discourses influencing their take-up of MP with young children? Do some educators perceive MP as valuable for children and not themselves? Are some educators not personally interested in MP for themselves but see MP as a tool to use with young children?

These tensions and unanswered questions unsettle the dominant discourse in the literature and point to a gap to explore the motivational, contextual and ideological drivers for sharing MPs with young children. Further research is needed to examine the relationship between self-practice and the implementation of MP with young children. While these questions were not addressed in this study, it signals a need for further research to explore the interplay between educators' personal values, professional identity, and drivers for MP.

A consistent thread across the study was educators' motivation for using MP with young children; to support and nurture their immediate wellbeing, while also providing a coping tool they can use for the future, reflecting the dual perspective of children as both *beings* with present needs and *becomings* as future adults. This perspective could provide immediate benefits for young children, while also fostering future resilience. However, there was a concern raised in the present study that situating MP in the *becomings* discourse may risk reducing MP to an outcome-focused tool and risk undermining its foundational purpose of presence. This resonates with prior research by Flores (2016) who warns taking such an approach which focuses on productivity or future direction, could risk MP being reduced to a schoolification approach. This tension between perspectives highlights the need to approach MP with a hybrid model, one that is valued for its future benefits, while also supporting children as they present right now.

Many of the studies conducted to date, reported positive improvements in young children's emotional regulation and behavioural outcomes (Duff 2024; Erten and Gunes 2024, Haines et al. 2023; Crooks et al. 2020), but specific examples of relational processes were not described. This study offers new insight by revealing the deeper relational and affective dimensions of MP. The educators in the interviews framed MP as an emotionally regulatory tool for individual children, but also as a relational pedagogy by cultivating attuned environments. MP was described as a feasible tool that supported children's capacity to recognise, name and positively respond to their own emotions and those of others, through educator presence and teaching. In doing so, educators positioned MP as a transformative pedagogical approach, where they fostered children's emotional literacy through presence and co-regulation. This marks a shift in focus from outcomes measurements to the relational processes that are sometimes overlooked in evidence-based studies.

From the interviews, some reasons for engaging in MP with young children were shaped by the educators' perception of children presenting with increased levels of stress and anxiety, challenging behaviours and emotional dysregulation, which they partly attributed to the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The educators articulated concerns regarding the potential negative impacts of the pandemic, a finding echoed within the literature (Clarke et al. 2021; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. 2021). The educators noted MP as having a calming impact on children, with educators sharing anecdotal improvements in children's behaviour and mood following these practices. This finding is mirrored in research which suggests MP could help soften some of these behaviours that children are experiencing while enhancing children's wellbeing (Sheinman and Russo-Netzer 2021; Behan 2020).

Beyond pandemic related concerns, educators in Phase Two specifically mentioned the increasing prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, including parental separation, parental incarceration and familial mental health issues. Within these contexts, there was a shared agreement amongst both the interviews and focus group that MP may serve as a positive tool to help soften some of the negative impacts of early adversity, aligning with the arguments raised by Greenberg and Harris (2012) and Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) who advocate for mindfulness as a proactive strategy to mitigate some of those potentially adverse childhood experiences. Given the well documented detrimental impact of early trauma (Elmore et al. 2020), MP could have the potential to offer a non-invasive, accessible practice to support children in early childhood.

Nevertheless, within the interviews, the educators expressed concern regarding the use of MP, especially with young children who may have experienced trauma. They noted that the absence of ethical mindfulness training could risk retraumatising children or unintentionally causing further distress. This is a crucial insight and highlights the importance of trauma informed practice in ECE. The literature echoes this perspective, calling on educators to be mindful of MPs being implemented with young children, and the importance of staying attuned to children's needs and abilities to enable a safe practice that does not place children in any additional harm (Sun et al. 2024; Ortiz and Siblinga 2016). Both Lipscomb (2021) and Bethell et al. (2016) argue that MP in early childhood could support resiliency in young children once approached from a trauma informed position, however they note this is reliant on educators having access to the right tools, skills and knowledge.

The focus group reinforced this point, noting that without robust structures in place in the setting, systemic intervention procedures and ethical quality training may risk MP being reduced to a surface level intervention. They argued that without these in

place, MP risks being used as a tool to manage children's behaviour, rather than a thoughtful relational practice that supports young children's wellbeing. This signals to a broader concern, the risk of reducing MP to a set of activities or an intervention which could disconnect the practice from its roots in intentional, present moment awareness. To avoid this, MP needs to be understood, practiced and reframed as a reflective and relational pedagogy grounded in ethical care.

It could be suggested educators and thought leaders believe in the transformational potential of MP for both educators and children, however, this potential is dependent on factors including personal commitment, training, support and sensitivity. This layered relationship between educators' self -practice and that with young children should not be reduced to casual claims. For some it enhances authenticity and self-efficacy to share with young children, for others implementation of MP occurs in its absence. This makes me wonder are there structural or other pedagogical motivations to practice with young children in the absence of self-practice? This complexity highlights the need for contextually grounded research to explore these dynamics.

7.3.3 Weaving Mindfulness Into Practice

Research Objective Three: To explore how MP is being implemented in ECE settings, including the methods, tools and training undertaken by educators to engage young children in MP.

When exploring how educators are implementing MP in their settings with young children, there was a clear indication that practice went beyond formal instruction and teaching mindfulness. Rather than perceiving their practices as interventions, they framed them as a stance of being rather than doing mindfulness, one that

encompassed present moment awareness and intentional attunement to young children. This framing aligns closely with Shapiro et al.'s (2006) foundational attitudes of mindfulness of intention, attention and attitude (IAA) which underpins my conceptual lens for this study.

Educators described being mindful as a state of self-awareness to observe and explore their inner thoughts and emotions with greater clarity, reduce their habitual tendencies to worry about the past and the future and move towards fostering present moment attention with young children, consistent with established definitions (Kabat-Zinn 2005; Thondup 1996). Many expressed that inhabiting this form of presence enhanced their responsiveness to young children and contributed to a calmer and more attuned room environment, reflecting research that associates a calm and mindful educator to enhancing children's wellbeing and the creation of a positive emotional climate (Lubis et al. 2024; Felver and Jennings 2015).

However, a recurrent tension arose, with regard to striking a delicate balance between *doing* and *being* mindful. Participants across Phase Two and Three recognised mindfulness as a disposition, nevertheless, they acknowledged that formalised instruction or intervention are sometimes necessary when a child appears dysregulated or when first introducing MP to young children. The participants in Phase Three noted that educators could be more inclined to use MP as a responsive strategy in times of need, which corresponds with Beers Dewhirst and Goldmans (2018) finding that 90% of educators were more likely to use MP reactively with children who appeared upset. Importantly, participants in the focus group called for a shift away from using MP as a reactive model, towards a universal holistic support for the wellbeing of all children.

Phase One and Phase Two revealed the creative and flexible ways educators integrated MP throughout their day with young children. Breathing practices emerged as the most used, valued as easy to model, flexible, and requiring minimal resources; a finding consistent with previous research (Beers Dewhirst and Goldman 2020; Razza et al. 2020). However, their practices extended beyond breathwork, to the use of music (including instrumental music) to explore pace and rhythm and as a calming backdrop to support learning, children's yoga, being outside in nature and exploring the senses, and integrating mindfulness language within STEAM activities and creative art activities. These various applications support the multi-modal approaches described in the literature (Lubis et al. 2024; Sun et al. 2021; Berti and Cigala 2020; Jones, 2018) and echo Kabat-Zinn's (2020) view that there is no singular way to practice mindfulness, rather it should be one that is flexible and individualised.

Educators highlighted in the interviews the importance of adapting MP to children's age, developmental stage and interests, a finding consistent with prior research (Mukadam 2023; Holt and Atkinson 2022; Singh and Singh Joy 2021; Wood et al. 2018). Many of the educators in Phase Two articulated their practice as including components of being mindful, namely mindfully teaching and teaching mindfulness, which resonated with Hawkins (2017) three dimensions of mindfulness in education. This suggests a growing awareness of MP, not only as something to be taught, but as an orientation to be modelled and nurtured in ECE.

A striking finding was the centrality of educators' attitudes, specifically, openness, curiosity, willingness and playfulness, as important attitudes they felt as integral to how they implemented MP in their settings. Moreover, during the interviews the educators demonstrated these qualities by asking questions, engaging in rich discussion and participating enthusiastically. The *wonder question* at the conclusion

of each interview sparked a sense of fun, wonder and awe, and allowed them to be present with their thoughts and ideas. Educators attributed value to personal attitudes, which supported them in intentionally sprinkling mindfulness throughout their daily routine by being responsive to children's interests and needs. They situated MP as a pedagogical mindset rather than a one-off activity to be completed. This mindset is echoed in Shapiro et al.'s (2024) view that openness and receptivity is foundational to effective MP. However, several authors argue that this type of sprinkling approach may risk diluting mindfulness and undermining the foundational depth required for practice (Oman 2023; Hyland 2015). However, findings from this study suggest that planting seeds of mindfulness even in brief moments can be meaningful, developmentally appropriate and potentially nurture lifelong MP.

One of the most conceptually novel findings within the interviews was the association the educators made between being mindful and adopting a slow pedagogy. While both terms emphasise presence, intentionality and engagement, the educators noted a key distinction. Educators distinguished slow pedagogy as an educational approach rooted in the interaction between educators and children, whereas they viewed being mindful as rooted in self-awareness, presence and reflection, that extended beyond the classroom. This understanding aligns with Kabat-Zinn's (2003) definition of present moment awareness and Payne and Wattchow's (2009) framing of slow pedagogy as the capacity to pause and dwell in different spaces.

However, the educator's concept of slow pedagogy and being mindful was more of a complex construct that was not synonymous with slowness. When posed intentionally to the panel in Phase Three, they described slow pedagogy and mindfulness as a way of being connected and responsive to children, irrespective of the pace, recognising the connection between the two terms. This perspective

mirrors Clark's (2022) argument that slow pedagogy is less about slowing down but more concerned with educators' attentiveness to the different rhythms of the children. From this, I argue that MP and being mindful may serve as a foundational disposition that could underpin educator's embodiment of a slow pedagogical practice, one that prioritises greater responsiveness and connection to young children.

A key moment of reflection with the focus group occurred following the publication of the updated Aistear (GoI 2024). The group observed that while the updated framework does not specifically mention mindfulness or MP, it does include specific mindfulness concepts such as slowing down, stillness and being present, which highlights the role of the educator in modelling a slow pedagogy. This subtle alignment suggests that the foundations of mindfulness and MP are embedded in the curriculum framework, yet I concur that the implicit nature of the document leaves educators without clear guidance and support for practice. Drawing on Shapiro et al.'s (2006) framework of IAA ,and shaped by my interpretation of the findings and my positionality, I postulate that MP in education could expand far beyond practices of stillness and calm. It incorporates how, why and what manner educators pay attention and engage with children, making MP a relational and ethical pedagogical stance. This warrants further research to explore how MPs are being used in educational settings, are they limited to calming and stillness activities or do educators understand the broader applicability?

Despite participants in Phase Two and Three recognising early childhood as an optimal time to introduce MP, a concern was raised in the focus group about discontinuity of MP across the education system. Specifically, the focus group questioned whether the slowed down, responsive pedagogical approach cultivated in ECE, may be disrupted by the more didactic and instructional approach that is

associated with primary and secondary teaching. This tension raises a critical question, what constitutes a mindfulness pedagogy and how can it be implemented and sustained across the education continuum?

A significant structural factor emerged regarding training and professional development. Strikingly, in Phase One, only 7% of educators had engaged in some formal certified mindfulness training and 18% in non-accredited training, yet an overwhelming 65% reported using MPs with young children. This disconnect raises concerns about educators understanding of MP, implementation practices, and pedagogical depth. This gap appears to be compounded by the fact that CPD for ECE in Ireland is not universally offered, but instead unevenly available throughout the sector. In Phase One, with a strong interest in future training (74%) and only 3% reporting no personal interest in MP, this suggests a willingness to engage, however the current lack of training available poses a risk that may reduce MPs to decontextualised techniques, inconsistency and implementation in counterproductive ways. Phase Two deepened the call for training, with educators advocating for practical in-person training, rather than online platforms. They highlighted the importance of embodied practices, theoretical learning and practical activities to ensure meaningful implementation. This echoes Rosati's (2023) argument that educator training is fundamental to acquire foundational knowledge, personal practice and develop strategies that can be embedded into practice with young children.

Collectively, these findings highlight that MPs are being implemented in ECE in diverse, creative, and self-directed ways. The educators' insights frame MP less as an intervention strategy but more as a pedagogical disposition, with the potential to positively impact relationships and early learning. However, these implementations occur within the context of a lack of training infrastructure, ambiguous policy

direction and systemic discontinuity. While educator autonomy, motivation and innovation are evident strengths throughout this study, there is a reliance on individual implementation with an absence of institutional support, which may limit the sustainability of mindfulness-based pedagogies. Ultimately, I argue that if MP is to be embedded into ECE, we need systemic scaffolding with the support of an explicit framework, accessible training and sustained support.

7.3.4 Echoes of Calm.

Research Objective Four: To explore educators' perceptions of the impact of MP on young children.

While existing research in MP in ECE has often centred on measuring outcomes, this study deliberately sought a different path. Educators expressed concern that mapping outcomes or completing check-lists risked reducing MP to what one described as a "tick box exercise" and shift back to the mere doing of mindfulness. While the educators did not engage in formal assessment of the outcomes of MP on young children, nor was this the aim of this study, they offered rich, compelling anecdotal observations suggesting positive shifts in children's capabilities. Educators consistently noted an increase in children's attention and focus. These effects were most noticeable during a formal mindfulness breathing activity, where children appeared engrossed and attentive to the present moment. Beyond the formal practices, concentration and attention were observed in other activities such as constructive play, STEAM activities, and creative play, particularly when slow instrumental music was added to the activity. These findings align with prior studies that suggest once practices are developmentally adapted and attuned, they could help foster children's attention skills (Kander et al. 2024; Janz et al. 2019). It is worth noting, that despite the growing interest in measuring children's executive function

with some studies reporting positive impacts of mindfulness- based interventions (MBIs) (Janz et al. 2019; Thierry et al. 2016), direct evidence regarding the impact of MP on children's attention remains limited. This points to the need for further research conducted in early childhood to explore how MP supports young children's attentional capacities, drawing on educator led insight, as it is through those daily interactions that educators are best positioned to contribute.

A compelling contribution of this study is the acknowledgment that young children often display a natural predisposition for mindfulness in their play. The educators reflected that children's deep engagement in play echoes those attentional qualities that MP wishes to cultivate. This led to a striking paradox in the interviews and the focus group, where they acknowledged they themselves could inadvertently disrupt children's natural mindfulness by imposing direction or instruction. This resonates with Suszek et al.'s (2019) suggestion that children can be more present-orientated than adults. These insights reinforce the need for caution on the behalf of educators in assuming that formal MP is necessary, especially in contexts where children are already displaying present moment awareness and attention.

While existing literature has connected mindfulness programmes to an increase in children's prosocial behaviours such as empathy, sharing and cooperation (Duff 2024; Bazzano et al. 2023; Viglas and Perlman 2018; Flook et al. 2015), these impacts have often been presented as broad or general outcomes. In contrast, this study offers a nuanced perspective. In the interviews, educators shared nuanced accounts of children engaging in spontaneous acts of compassion such as offering comfort to another child or sharing a mindfulness tool with an upset peer. However, I critically ponder whether these observations reflect the direct impact of the MP itself or whether it was shaped by the positive relational and compassionate practices already used in the early childhood setting. The educators reported

numerous accounts of children displaying spontaneous acts of kindness towards each other and toward the educators, an aspect often overlooked in literature. Even so, these narratives from the educators offer valuable insight into the potential impacts of MP as a tool for self-regulation, and as a tool for supporting authentic compassion and kindness.

A significant finding of this study relates to the perceived positive impact of MPs as a support strategy for children presenting with additional needs. The educators shared multiple stories of children with autism and ADHD responding positively to the MPs being implemented in their settings, resulting in an observed calming impact on the children following the MPs. Notably, they shared that children were independently initiating MPs, such as using breathing balls and breathing cards, without educator prompting. These examples point to the potential of MPs in nurturing self-regulation and agency in young children with additional needs. This calls for further research to explore these impacts in ECE. While existing studies have focused primarily on older children and adolescents with ADHD (Zhang et al. 2017; Haydicky et al. 2015), there remains a dearth of research conducted in early childhood contexts. Some findings from studies conducted in early childhood suggest that children who displayed lower levels of executive function (Flook et al. 2015), those who exhibited weaker social skills (Viglas and Perman 2018), or challenging behaviours [Crooks et al. 2020), may benefit most from mindfulness interventions. However, it is unclear if children with a formal diagnosis were included in these studies, highlighting the need for further focused studies and making the current findings in this study particularly valuable.

7.3.5. Grassroots to Governance: Building Sustainable MP in Early Childhood Education.

Research Objective Five: To identify educators' perceived barriers to implementing MP and potential solutions to overcome such barriers.

There was a shared value in the potential of implementing and integrating MP in ECE in Ireland across all three phases, yet significant barriers to meaningful and sustainable integration were identified. In Phase One, half of the educators who do not use MP with children, expressed an uncertainty regarding how to use MP within their existing curriculum of Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. This concern is reflected in previous studies within international contexts (Schussler et al. 2025; Tonga 2020), pointing to a broader issue of insufficient resources and guidance. As mentioned previously, without clear alignments to existing curriculum frameworks, MP risks being viewed as a novelty add-on, rather than an integrated pedagogical approach

While the educators in Phase Two recognised the importance of using formalised approaches in certain contexts, they were vehement that sustainable MP required an everyday embedded approach. Many educators and focus group participants voiced a deep resistance to a formalised mindfulness curriculum, warning that it could become a rigid, manualised approach or even left on the shelf. This view echoes Holt and Atkinson's (2022) call for the need for further guidance and ongoing professional support for educators to integrate mindfulness in ECE. Furthermore, this emphasises the broader tension between *doing* mindfulness as a structured activity and *being* mindful as a relational practice. The educators' insights underscore the central role they play in understanding and shaping MP in their setting and highlight the need for any new implementation strategy to be effective, it must honour educators and children's autonomy and be contextually flexible.

A consistent barrier across Phase One and Two was educators' lack of self-efficacy and fear of judgment, despite educators in Phase Two exhibiting professional confidence in their capabilities as an educator. In Phase One, one third of educators reported a lack of confidence. This concept of lack of confidence is also echoed in the literature (Holt and Atkinson 2022; Tonga 2020). Within the interviews, the educators expanded on this. Despite feeling confident in their role as educators, they noted when it came to MP, there was a fear of looking silly or being judged by peers. However, many reported they had overcome some of these hesitations once they had observed the positive impacts of MP with young children. This suggests that educators' self-efficacy does not solely develop through self-practice but through relational experiential practice in real-time contexts. Nevertheless, the call for mindfulness training was emphasised by the educators in Phase Two to nurture personal practice and belief in their ability to share MP with young children, which also resonates with literature highlighting the importance of mindfulness training (Crane et al. 2023; de Carvalho et al. 2021).

When exploring potential solutions to these barriers, participants across all three phases advocated for accessible and relevant MP training and development in ECE. The educators in Phase One revealed a strong desire for accredited mindfulness training (92%) over non-accredited training. Qualitative findings in the interviews added depth to this perspective, where the educators favoured practical in-person training, to support building relational skills between the team, and authentically transferring skills to children. O'Hara- Gregan (2023) supports this perspective and argues for the benefits of in-person training that allows a shared, embodied experience of MP. From the interviews, while there was an emphasis on accredited training, there was a deeper focus on beginning with practical workshops to spark interest. However, a concern was raised that these may not be delivered by an

experienced mindfulness facilitator, which puts notions of quality and implementation at risk. This preference for practice signals a move towards valuing relational and experiential modes of learning, underscoring the need to reflect on the structure of professional development being offered.

Importantly, the educators in Phase Two advocated for the inclusion of MP in pre-service teacher education, viewing early exposure to MP as a way to nurture personal practice and build pedagogical self-efficacy, this is also echoed in a study conducted by Tonga (2020). Although, there was some debate whether MP should be offered as a standalone elective module or woven throughout all modules, the consensus in Phase Three favoured full integration. Taking such an integrated approach was seen as integral to normalise MP as a core competency of teacher education rather than a tokenistic module elective. However, the focus group recognised potential institutional challenges, such as an overcrowded curricula and other competing demands, as warranting further exploration to identify solutions as to how MP could be integrated into ECE programmes.

For the educators in Phase Two, access to ongoing continuous professional development (CPD) was a consistent barrier for the sector. Interestingly, the educators framed this as a logistical challenge but also as a matter of social justice and equity, as they felt their sector receives limited CPD compared to other educational contexts. Participants in Phase Three called for greater systemic supports for all educators to have access to tools to support the wellbeing of the educator and child. This finding is mirrored within existing research (Cochran and Peters 2023; Hirshberg et al. 2020; Tonga 2020), that associated educators' engagement in mindfulness training with not only fostering personal wellbeing but also that of young children.

Ultimately, these findings point to the importance of a multi-layered approach to support sustainable MP in ECE - an approach that bridges pre-service educator training, ongoing CPD for educators currently in practice and pedagogical support for MP. The insights from the educators in this study highlight the importance of training and offer a roadmap that is grounded in their own lived experience and insight.

7.3.5.1 Embracing a Whole-school Mindful Culture

When exploring future directions for MP in ECE, this study uncovered a clear hope among educators to move from the sporadic use of MP and mindfulness activities with young children, towards a more integrated whole-school approach. Educators in Phase Two argued such an approach has the potential to enhance outcomes for all children, and ensuring consistency of MP in all rooms has the potential to transform the overall ethos of the setting. The literature robustly supports this viewpoint, advocating for a whole-school approach to MP that places the wellbeing of children, educators and families at the heart of the setting (Jennings 2023; Weare 2023; Hudson et al. 2020). From this perspective, MP moves beyond an intervention, towards a systemic cultural practice that integrates mindfulness into curriculum, staff training, leadership, families and community, a move that could maximise efficacy and value (Weare et al. 2019; Roeser et al. 2012). However, in Phase Three the panel were cautious about the practicalities of such an approach. They felt success would rest on educator buy-in, self-efficacy and strong leadership; which is also echoed in prior research (Ergas and Hadar 2023; Jennings 2023; Hudson et al. 2020). Moreover, scholars such as Henriksen and Gruber (2024) and Schussler et al. (2025) noted that adopting a whole-school approach must be adapted to the needs and culture of the setting to increase effectiveness and longevity. These findings highlight a potential challenge of balancing the fidelity to

MP principles with the flexibility needed for authentic integration in a particular setting.

A novel contribution in this study is the educator-driven proposal for a mindfulness champion or mindfulness mentor, as analogous to Inclusion coordinators (INCO) in ECE in Ireland. Educators believed such a leadership role could nurture consistent embedded MP, educators' engagement, and embed MP as part of the ethos. Studies have shown that leadership and modelling mindfulness are crucial for a whole-school approach to MP (Baelen et al. 2023; Hudson et al. 2020; Albrecht 2018). Similarly, emergent research from Schussler et al. (2025) explicitly advocate for MP champions to drive a whole-school approach as they can provide strong leadership that will encourage buy-in from other educators. This also echoes recent research by Lyndon et al (2025) who found that by identifying a Mindfulness Champion in the four nurseries, who were supported by training and professional development was integral to enhancing the wellbeing of the children and educators and the effective implementation of MP.

Despite this, some of the panel in Phase Three voiced concerns about potentially placing additional responsibilities on an already overburdened educator. There was recognition that assigning such a responsibility would require careful consideration of the educators existing workload and expertise. In response, the group proposed a more integrated approach, to embed mindfulness and MP within a broader wellbeing role. This approach was seen as a more practical and feasible solution that could align with the new national mental health policy agendas, and potentially position early childhood as a leader in wellbeing promotion. Notably, this approach also aligns with the global priorities of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) (2015) specifically, the aims of SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing where having a wellbeing leader in the setting could support the wellbeing of the

children and the educators and SDG 4: Quality Education, by taking a whole-school wellbeing perspective, the leader could help embed sustainable, equitable, inclusive supportive practices and spaces for young children to thrive.

Despite this divergence of views on leadership structures, it underscores the importance of listening to all stakeholders, particularly those educators who have hands-on experience and know what is needed in practice. Ensuring these perspectives are included in policy making is crucial for feasibility and sustainable practices. Nonetheless, there was strong and consistent advocacy, from both the educators and the focus group, for the embodied modelling of mindfulness in practice. Both groups emphasised the importance of educators being intentionally present with the children, slowing the pace down, engaging in mindful listening and responding calmly, especially during stressful moments. Such relational modelling was viewed as foundational for educators' practice, which in turn would support the creation of calm and responsive environments for young children as emphasised in Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland (GoI 2024). These deep insights align with existing research that suggests educators who embody mindfulness skills are often more attuned to children's needs and help create a positive classroom climate (Hawkins 2017; Felver and Jennings 2015). Additionally, they suggested educators who may not be initially interested in MP could be positively encouraged by observing those educators who model MP in the setting with young children, mirroring Holt and Atkinson's (2022) finding that peer role modelling can be a powerful motivator for engagement.

While not explored in other chapters, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory offers a valuable connection here as young children internalise the attitudes, behaviours and emotional dispositions of those around them. In this context, the educator's mindful presence of calm and awareness is more than just a technique, but a

pedagogical orientation that actively shapes children's learning. When framed within Shapiro's et al.'s (2006) model of IAA, such modelling can be understood as the lived expression of mindfulness, the pedagogy of the educator in practice. Therefore, the educator's role is not limited to simply teaching MPs to young children, but the possibility to enact mindfulness as a way of relating and being with them, reinforcing the deep relational and ethical foundations of the practice.

7.3.5.2 Supporting the Parents' Nest and Wider Considerations

Educators strongly emphasised the importance of involving parents in their settings with curriculum practices recognising their central role in a child's life and the potential to extend MP beyond the early childhood setting. Partnership with parents was seen as a priority to embed MP meaningfully in children's lives. However, educators noted they encountered some barriers including doubt from parents, particularly around their perceived religious connotations. This led some educators at the beginning to avoid using the word mindfulness explicitly with parents, instead opting to use more secular words such as breathing or slowing down and providing examples of the practices being implemented. This reveals a critical tension between accessibility and authenticity in the sharing of MPs beyond the setting.

This tension prompted personal reflection on how contemporary secularised MPs are implemented. While intentionally adapted to be inclusive and accessible, could they have lost touch with the spiritual and philosophical foundations from which they originate? While this contemporary shift has made mindfulness more accessible to be used in different contexts, is Hyland's (2015) cautionary perspective even more valid? He warns that such adaptations may reduce mindfulness to an outcomes driven practice, moreover potentially stripping mindfulness of its original essence.

This concern aligns with Miller's (2025) call for educators to return to the foundational roots of MP as an ethical practice of presence, stillness and awareness. These viewpoints raise a critical question regarding how we can meaningfully implement MPs and maintain its ethical and integral nature.

Despite these complexities, the educators in Phase Two proposed several inclusive and practical strategies to involve parents ranging from open evenings, to sharing practices and activities for home, and offering informal workshops to demonstrate simple MPs to parents. The educators demonstrated a strong sense of empathy for parents especially regarding the pressures of balancing home and work life. As a result, they framed MP as an invitational tool to support parent's self-care to manage stress and present moment parenting. This aligns with the concept of "slow parenting" as raised in the focus group, and echoes Clark's (2021) stance that such an approach is more intentional and relational in nature. Such perspectives are also reflected in calls for authentic bi-directional involvement of parent and educator in MP (Maclid 2023; Tonga 2020). However, I must acknowledge that these strategies are proposed and have not been tested in this present study, since no parental perspectives were sought, nonetheless the insights from the educators and the focus group could guide future research in this area. In contrast, Haines et al. (2023) offer a compelling example of including parents' perspectives of the mindfulness programme, and by doing so provided insight into parents understanding and perspectives of MP in the home environment. Yet, the broader research base on engaging parents with MP in early childhood remains limited, highlighting an area for future research.

7.3.5.3 Moving Towards a Whole Systems Approach to Mindfulness Practice

The educators in the interviews argued that to position mindfulness in ECE it must be supported through a whole system approach connecting policy, education and practice. Participants in Phase Two and Three expressed a concern that without top-down policy support and bottom-up grassroots commitment, MP risks being viewed as tokenistic and unimportant and may not gain traction. This finding aligns with Ergas' (2019) vision for a new wave of "*mindfulness as education"* that moves beyond outsourced mindfulness intervention towards a relational, embedded practice.

Importantly, many educators framed MP not just as a pedagogical tool but as a part of a broader social justice agenda, a collective responsibility to support young children's wellbeing for now and for their life trajectory. Their reflections made me wonder, could MP help reshape ECE into a foundation for lifelong wellbeing? This broader framing of mindfulness became the impetus for Phase Three of this study, which allowed me to bring the findings to key thought leaders in education, policy and research in early childhood in Ireland. My aim was to initiate wider dialogue on how the inclusion of mindfulness in the early childhood sector may be reimagined and subsequently extended across all sectors in response to proposals from educators in Phase Two to embed MP into pre-natal care and across educational systems. This aligns with recent research (Henriksen and Gruber 2024, Oman 2023; Sedlmeier 2023) which suggests that more consideration should be given to better understand the larger societal impact of mindfulness, and advocate for mindfulness to be integrated into public health and other policy domains.

However, an unwavering barrier noted across the literature and the present study was the lack of a shared definition and understanding of mindfulness as previously discussed in Section 7.3.1. Without conceptual clarity, societal buy-in and

government support efforts to embed mindfulness across the systems may risk fragmentation and dilution of mindfulness and thus risk misapplication. Comparisons between policy in the UK and Ireland further illustrates the challenge of fragmentation. For example, the UK has advanced MPs in policy through the All-Party Parliamentary Group in Mindfulness, leading to reforms within education, healthcare, workplaces and the prison service. This focus on having internal policy drivers for mindfulness has kept mindfulness a priority. In contrast, Ireland remains at a standstill. The dissolution of Mindful Nation Ireland reflects a missed opportunity and has left a vacuum in national advocacy. This inaction threatens to widen the gap between evidence and implementation, yet the evidence base continues to grow regarding the positive impacts of mindfulness and MP across society.

Despite this vacuum, the present study provides real world insights from educators who are implementing MP with young children, educators who are eager to embrace mindfulness as a transformative practice. With the dissolution of an advocacy group such as Mindful Nation Ireland, it is essential to reignite conversations about MP, draw from grassroots knowledge as offered by this present study, and invest in collaborative strategies.

As briefly touched upon in Chapter One, Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems theory provides a useful lens through which to understand the multi-faceted structures the educators deemed necessary for embedding MP meaningfully in ECE. The educators and focus group panel frequently acknowledged that MP cannot stand alone, its integration depends on a number of interconnected systems with a call for policy stakeholder engagement and commitment. These align closely with Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological model: the microsystem where educators model MPs to young children, the mesosystem through relationships with parents and families; the exosystem through the settings ethos and leadership; and the

macrosystem which encompasses national policy, societal attitudes, training and funding. When interpreted through this lens, it suggests that without alignment across these systems, MP risks being an unsustainable practice in ECE.

7.4 A Mindful Reflexive Pause and Closure of Chapter

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

As I reach the close of this discussion chapter, I return to the title of my thesis "It just takes a sprinkle of mindfulness: Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland". While the phrase it just takes a sprinkle was offered by an educator, time and time again the educators spoke of these sprinkles of mindfulness. Even the smallest acts of mindfulness, momentary pauses, a quick breath, resulted in positive impacts on both them and young children. This idea of "sprinkling" resonated with me and brought me to consider the multiple and accessible ways that mindfulness practices can be shared that do not require instruction; rather, mindfulness can be in the gentle, intentional practices that can ripple from one person to the next. The findings of this study support the potential of mindfulness practice as transformative approach to enhance the wellbeing of the educators, children and families in early childhood education. For me a "sprinkle of mindfulness" represents hope, that even small steps towards embracing mindfulness practice can sow the seeds of meaningful change in how we live, how we teach and how we engage with one another.

Figure 7.1 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Having reflectively and critically situated the findings within the broader research landscape, this study demonstrates the educators' perspectives of the value and enduring relevance of MP in ECE. The findings revealed the complex and nuanced role of mindfulness in ECE, far more than a set of intermittent techniques. For the educators, MP is valued as a pedagogical orientation and a relational way of being, one that nurtures presence with themselves but also as a means of connection to young children and others. From this perspective, MP is deeply relational,

supporting the responsiveness and attunement to young children, colleagues and the wider community.

By positioning educators' voices and experiences at the centre of this study, this research contributes original insight into how MP is conceptualised, experienced and enacted in ECE in Ireland. This research responds to a critical gap in the literature by bringing forth the underexplored educator perspective of MP, and in doing so, bridges conversations of mindfulness, pedagogy and policy, that are often limited.

The participants in this study expressed their beliefs and perspectives about MP in ECE in Ireland and the educators support the idea for MP to become meaningfully and sustainably integrated into ECE, and that to move beyond ECE parameters, it must be supported at multiple levels through grassroots practice, systems of training and supportive national policy. A shared vision is crucial, one that acknowledges MP as an integral part of a broader relational and pedagogical transformation, to embed mindfulness into inclusive, sustainable, and emotionally supportive education systems. Central to this vision, is holding space for educators' wellbeing, as educators in Phase Two and the panel in Phase Three both reiterated the importance of supporting educators' wellbeing.

The following chapter will draw this thesis to a thoughtful close, discussing the implications for policy, practice and research, offering a reflection on the limitations and concluding with a final mindful reflexive pause to honour my journey of inquiry and presence.

Chapter Eight: From Insight to Action

> "*The journey of mindfulness isn't to reach a certain destination or to get anywhere really, I feel my journey of the practice is the destination"* (Jay-Educator)

8.1 Introduction

When reflecting on the reflexive nature of this study, I returned to the "so what?" question posed by Braun and Clarke (2021, p.146), what does this study contribute to research, practice, and policy? Throughout this research journey, I have been guided by the words of Hugh Kearns (2023) when he asks, does your thesis have a SOCK- A significant and original contribution to knowledge.

This study "*It Just Takes a Sprinkle of Mindfulness: Exploring Mindfulness Practice in Early Childhood Education in Ireland*" employed a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach to explore *if, how* and *why* mindfulness practice (MP) is being implemented in early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland.

Chapter One introduced the rationale for conducting this study, outlined my conceptual lens and positionality and provided an overview of the thesis structure. Chapter Two presented a thematic exploration of the literature pertaining to the subject area. Chapter Three presented an overview of my chosen methodology for this study, my philosophical stance, an overview of the study design and the data analysis processes employed. Chapter Four introduced Phase One of the study which employed a mixed-methods approach via questionnaire with 744 educators. This chapter outlined the methodology, presented the findings and an initial discussion. Chapter Five presented Phase Two of the study a qualitative approach via semi-structured interviews with 27 educators. This chapter detailed the methodology used and presented the findings of the interviews.

Chapter Six presented Phase Three of the study. This phase adopted a qualitative approach via a singular focus group with five thought leaders, and included the methodology used and findings. Chapter Seven presented an in-depth reflective discussion of the findings from Phase One, Two and Three of the study.

Finally, this closing chapter provides a brief synthesis of the key findings in relation to the research questions, and discusses the study's contributions, recommendations, limitations and future directions. It concludes with one final mindful reflexive pause.

8.2 Alignment of Findings with the Research Questions

The research study was guided by three key aims to explore, *if*, *how* and *why* MP is used with young children in ECE in Ireland. The study was conducted in three phases. Phase One involved a questionnaire distributed to educators working in ECE in Ireland, inviting responses from those who may/may not use MP with young children. Phase Two consisted of 27 semi-structured interviews with educators who implement MP with young children. Phase Three involved a focus group with five thought leaders, those with influence and expertise in policy, education and research to help situate the findings within the broader ECE context in Ireland.

The first research objective was to explore, "*How do educators construct and personally engage with mindfulness and MP*?" Findings revealed a variety of interpretations and personal practices, highlighting the individualised and often context-dependent nature of MP in ECE in Ireland. While most associated mindfulness with "*being present*", both physically in the moment and emotionally, there were notable differences in how the concept was interpreted and enacted.

For some, mindfulness was seen as a way of being, while others connected it to structured meditative practices. This divergence highlights a shared value for MP, although a persistent ambiguity with its meaning. The lack of a coherent definition raises important questions regarding how MP is conceptualised and enacted in ECE and if this variability hinders its integration into practice.

The second research objective was to explore "*What are the multiple perspectives and experiences of educators using MP with young children?*" Findings indicate that MP is indeed being implemented in ECE in Ireland, however the nature, depth and consistency of these practices vary significantly. Breathing practices were revealed as the most favoured and accessible practice, often used for supporting children's self-regulation and creating a calm classroom climate. Educators described using an array of practices including gratitude activities, time spent in nature and embedding mindful awareness within other activities. There was a widespread view that these multitude of practices were adaptable and inclusive to support children across all age groups including those presenting with additional needs. While this flexibility of practice is a strength, it also raises critical questions regarding coherence, fidelity and points to an ongoing tension between MP as a pedagogical tool and the need for practical guidance regarding its implementation.

The third research objective was to explore "*How is MP implemented in ECE settings, including the methods, tools and training undertaken by educators to engage young children in MP*?" Findings point to a preference for a naturally embedded approach to MP, one that is woven into daily activities rather than delivered through formalized programmes.

There was a strong appetite for professional development: 74% of educators in Phase One expressed an interest in training with 91% favoring accredited training. However, the educators in Phase Two offered a nuanced perspective. While accreditation was seen as valuable the educators placed value on practical in-person training that would lead to greater implementation in the setting. Across all phases, participants continuously expressed the need for training and support to meaningfully integrate mindfulness into their pedagogical practice. Such support may be especially beneficial for those educators in Phase One who expressed uncertainty about how to implement MP within their existing curriculum.

The fourth research objective was to explore "*What are educators' perceptions of the impact of MP on young children*? The educators reported several positive impacts on their own wellbeing, noting MP has helped them to become more present, responsive and attuned, in what many described as a stressful job. This presence was seen to support their relational pedagogy and their interactions with young children. Anecdotal reported impacts on young children included improved attention, enhanced emotional regulation, and the development of socio-emotional skills including acts of kindness and compassion. Notably, some educators observed children initiating MP with their peers without educator instruction, suggesting a degree of internalisation, and relationality. However, caution must be applied as there may be other contextual factors at play such as children's individual characteristics, relational and compassionate practices or ethos within the service that was not explored in this study. Overall, the educators and focus group valued using MP to support children's wellbeing as they present in early childhood but, they also hoped children would use it as a tool throughout their life trajectory. Such dual applications raise questions about MP and its applicability and scalability in education.

The fifth and final research objective was to explore "*What are educators identified/ perceived barriers to implementing MP and are there potential solutions to overcome such barriers*?" A key theme across the study was the absence of a clear shared definition of mindfulness both in ECE and more broadly across society. This lack of definition was seen as a significant barrier, possibly leading to inconsistencies in how it is understood, shared, and enacted. Devising a shared definition, one that is supported by policy and education would help lessen ambiguity and contribute to the credibility of MP in ECE and beyond. The lack of available quality training was identified as a barrier to implementing MP with young children, with participants advocating for practical in-person workshops and continued professional and mentoring support. Notably, a top-down approach that includes management and policy makers who could prioritise, and value MP was seen as central to making MP sustainable in early childhood. Overall, this study has illuminated the need for joined up thinking through a coordinated, system-wide approach across education, policy and practice to meaningfully integrate MP into ECE.

8.3 Contributions of this Study

This thesis offers contributions to practice, research and policy (as illustrated in Figure 8.1) by presenting evidence on the current understandings, use and perceived impacts of MP in ECE in Ireland, provided by educators from ECE and thought leaders, most of whom came to the study with positive dispositions towards MP. The following insights and recommendations are intended to inform ongoing dialogue and decision making regarding the role of MP in ECE.



Figure 8.1 Implications of Research Study

8.3.1 Contributions to Practice

This research study provides a strong evidence base on the multiple ways educators have included MP in ECE, encouraging novice and experienced educators to adopt MP in their pedagogical approach. The educators in this study emphasised the importance of developing a personal MP in order for mindfulness to become a part of their pedagogy. This highlighted the importance of educators exploring MP for themselves as a starting point. Additionally, the participants in Phase Two and Phase Three advocated for a mindfulness pedagogy, one that is sustainable and flexible- moving from a prescriptive curricula approach. Therefore, I make the following recommendations for practice.

Recommendation One: Establishing a Shared, Contextualized Definition of Mindfulness in Early Childhood Education

This study emphasised a significant lack of coherence in how mindfulness and MP are understood and implemented by educators. While many associated it with being present, their interpretations ranged from informal, relational practices to formal structured practices. This inconsistency in interpretation echoes previous studies (Tonga 2020) where the absence of a clear definition can impede educators understanding and implementation of MP with children.

Therefore, I recommend establishing a shared contextualised definition of mindfulness and MP for ECE in Ireland. This definition should be co-constructed with researchers, educators, policy makers, stakeholders including parents and children, and should be grounded in pedagogical theory respecting the cultural origins of mindfulness. Such a definition should not aim to overly formalise mindfulness in a way that hinders its flexibility of use. Rather, it should provide a conceptual anchor that supports understanding and meaningful engagement. This would help alleviate some of the misconceptions and ambiguity identified within this study and support educators to meaningfully and sustainably integrate MP into their pedagogy.

A working definition of mindfulness/ MP in ECE could:

- Provide conceptual clarity for educators and policy makers to support professional development and better alignment with Aistear the early childhood curriculum framework (GoI 2024). This clarity will support educators to move beyond surface level understandings and engage more confidently with MP.

- Acknowledge and respect the historical and cultural roots of mindfulness while supporting the adaptation to ensure it is developmentally appropriate and inclusive for all children in early childhood.
- Reduce the risk of a tokenistic use of MPs in ECE, for example a classroom management tool without meaningful pedagogical integration.
- Contribute to a broader societal understanding of MP and its wellbeing implications. A shared definition of mindfulness could help shift practice and policy away from intervention ideologies to a more holistic relational model. By recognising the importance of the wellbeing children, educators, families, communities and the public could inform wider public health and education strategies.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

The aim in constructing a shared definition of mindfulness and mindfulness practice, is not to reduce mindfulness to a rigid definition or framework, but to allow space for an inclusive understanding, one which respects its cultural roots and supports authentic practice.

Figure 8.2 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Two: **Developing a Mindfulness Pedagogical Approach (MPA) for Early Childhood**

This study highlighted a significant gap in guidance for educators to embed MP into their own pedagogical practice with young children. Rather than looking at mindfulness as a solitary activity, findings support the development of a Mindfulness Pedagogical Approach (MPA).

Such an approach positions mindfulness as a way of being present with the children rather than *doing* mindfulness, one that is grounded in intentionality and relational attunement to the children. An MPA aligns with Hawkin's (2017) philosophy of educators being mindful and mindfully teaching, which highlights the educator's

presence, emotional responsiveness and the integration of mindfulness into the fabric of an educator's pedagogy. The development of this pedagogy also echoes emerging research from the Little Minds Project in the UK (2025) who have created a mindfulness pedagogy for educators to use with young children in a flexible non-prescriptive manner. While initially aimed to enhance speech and language development of young children, such a pedagogical framework could be extended to support the wellbeing of the educator and the child.

Notably, this recommendation of adopting an MPA is closely aligned with the recent updated Aistear (GoI 2024), which places an emphasis on fostering children's wellbeing with explicit encouragement for educators to adopt a slow relational approach with young children (Sorrels and Madrid 2024; French et al. 2022).

A MPA for ECE has the potential to:

- Offer clear guidance on how to embed MPs into the daily routine and practice.
- Support educators' wellbeing by providing practical examples of self-practice and allowing time to practice and model MPs.
- Promote an inclusive wellbeing whole-school culture in the setting, that benefits all children, educators and stakeholders.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

The intention of creating a mindfulness pedagogical approach will provide something grounded in research and something that is gentle in practice. By offering a coherent and flexible guide for educators to support the wellbeing of the children and the educators themselves, rooted in intentionality, present moment attention and approached with an open attitude.

Figure 8.3 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Three: Embed Mindfulness Training into Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Across all three phases, participants noted the critical role of high-quality accessible mindfulness training for educators. Educators expressed the need for theoretical understanding and hands–on experience of MP to understand its impacts and how to integrate MP in their pedagogical practice. This recommendation aligns with Ireland's Nurturing skills: Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (2022-2028), which recognises the importance of comprehensive continuous professional development for educators. Including mindfulness as part of CPD could support educators' wellbeing, professional development and relational competencies as outlined in Nurturing Skills.

Although, a government funded initiative addressing early childhood disadvantage, Equal Start (DCDE 2024), includes some provision of CPD and acknowledges the importance of wellbeing, the scope of training remains limited and not accessible to all educators. To address this, including MP within CPD under Equal Start could be made widely available to all educators. Embedding MP into eligible CPD would place educator and child wellbeing at the centre. This also aligns with the updated Aistear (GoI 2024) which promotes educators engaging in a slow relational pedagogical approach. With training more broadly accessible, the ECE sector can progress towards a more equitable wellbeing pedagogy.

Mindfulness training for ECE could:

- Include mindfulness training as part of the CPD framework for ECE, supported by initiatives such as the Nurturing Skills learner fund and Equal Start, both of which allow in-service release time to support educators to create environments that support the wellbeing of young children.

- Offer mindfulness training to support the development of slow pedagogical practice as outlined in Aistear (GoI 2024). The roll-out of training for the updating of Aistear commenced in Autumn 2025 and will be continued to roll out in 2026. This presents an ideal opportunity to integrate mindfulness and MP to support Aistear's mindful language included in the recent update. Including mindfulness and MP would provide educators with the knowledge and skill of present moment awareness, slow relational pedagogy and support them to foster the wellbeing of themselves and young children.

- Include foundational knowledge such as theoretical, historical and cultural roots of mindfulness drawing on critical perspectives (Hyland et al. 2015) to ensure training is grounded in integrity and avoids the commodification of MP.

- Ensure the training is grounded in balanced research that includes the positive impacts and potential limitations. Training should be trauma informed, developmentally appropriate and sensitive to the diverse needs of the educators and the children.

- Be delivered to support educators sustained practice such as in-person workshops, opportunities for experiential practice, ongoing mentoring and modelling. Such approaches could support educators to internalise and adapt MPs as part of their pedagogy rather than a one-off intervention.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

As I reflect on the ways of embedding MP into CPD for educators, my hope is that it will equip educators with the knowledge, skills and practical ways to explore mindfulness practice in that is sustainable and authentic. I recognise my positionality as outlined in chapter one and my provision of CPD through private practice. I am mindful of my ethical responsibility and have taken steps to ensure my role as mindfulness practitioner has not influenced the analysis or recommendations in a self-serving manner. This recommendation is based on educators' voices and the empirical findings from this study rather than a commercial interest.

Figure 8.4 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Four: **Integrate Mindfulness into Pre-Service Educator Training**

Both the participants' feedback and literature strongly emphasized the importance of including MP in pre-service educator training. Tonga's (2020) study with preservice educators highlighted that integrating mindfulness into initial teacher training supports children's wellbeing but also equips future educators with the skills needed in their pedagogical practice. From the discussion with the panel in Phase Three, it became evident that rather than offering mindfulness as a stand-alone module, third- level programme leaders could undertake a systematic review of their current modules being offered to identify avenues to incorporate mindfulness across the curricula. Therefore, further engagement with higher level institutions is warranted to determine the interest and feasibility of MP being implemented. It was also noted that teachers/ lecturers implementing or teaching MP to students should have the skills and experience to authentically and meaningfully do so.

Such integration in the pre-service educator training could:

- Foster pre-service educators' personal wellbeing and reduce stress during their initial training.

- Arm future educators with the skills of mindfulness and MP that can be brought into their pedagogical practice with young children.
- Align with current research which calls for developing a more holistic, engaging and relational approach to teaching young children (GoI 2024).
- Contribute to cultivating a broader culture of mindfulness and MP within third level institutions which could potentially benefit students, staff and the wider community.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Taking a moment to reflect on my own early days in education and the worry and strain, I longed for ways to fill up my own cup of wellbeing so I could be a resilient and positive role model for young children. Intentionally incorporating mindfulness practice into pre-service educator training will lay a solid foundation of reflective practice, wellbeing, sense of presence and a deep relational awareness which are all essential skills for providing quality early childhood education.

Figure 8.5 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

8.3.2 Contributions to Research

As outlined in Chapter Two, there remains a significant gap in exploring educators lived experience with MP. Most previous studies relied on quantitative methods such as teacher rating scales and measurement tools. This study contributes to addressing this gap by employing a mixed-methods design through a constructivist interpretivist lens, foregrounding educators' voices and offering a more nuanced, contextualised understanding of how MP is implemented in ECE.

Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with educators in Phase Two and a focus group with a panel of thought leaders (policy, education and research) in Phase Three this research offered multiple perspectives and added contextual depth. This integration of educator and policy level insights signifies an advancement in a research area often dominated by singular perspectives.

Methodologically, this study shows how qualitative approaches integrated within a mixed method design can reveal complexities and contextual factors that may not have been possible through outcomes focused research. The integration of Shapiro et al.'s (2006) model of mindfulness (IAA) served as a conceptual and reflexive tool supporting awareness of my dual role as a researcher and mindfulness practitioner. The use of mindful reflexive pauses enhanced the trustworthiness, transparency and integrity of the research process. I now present recommendations for future research.

Recommendation Five: Prioritise In-Depth Qualitative Research on Mindfulness in Early Childhood

While this study provides the first comprehensive insight into MP in ECE in Ireland, there remains a significant need for further qualitative research to deepen the understanding of educators lived experiences of MP in ECE. Existing literature calls for qualitative research that contributes nuanced and contextual dimensions of MP in ECE (Holt and Atkinson 2022; Roeser at al. 2012).

Further research should explore how MP is being implemented in ECE and the perceived impacts for young children and the educators. This approach will not only complement the quantitative evidence base but will contribute to the evolving qualitative field in exploring *if, how* and *why* MP is being used in ECE. Given this study is the first of its kind nationally, exploring *if, how* and *why* MP is being used in ECE, expanding the qualitative evidence could provide opportunities for educators' voices to be included in potential policy formation, curricula and professional development for MP.

Such research is important to:

- Identify barriers and contextual factors that may impede MP implementation.

- Support the adaptation of mindfulness programmes and practices nationally and internationally.
- Capturing educators' voices to provide an evidence base for researchers and policy makers.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Prioritising in depth qualitative research similar to this study will ensure attention is given to the educators' perspectives. These insights are central to understanding how MP is being implemented in early childhood. Understanding grass roots practice could help shape future policy and training development.

Figure 8.6 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Six: **Expand Qualitative Research to Include Young Children's Experiences of Mindfulness Practice.**

The scope of this study was limited to exploring educators' experiences of MP with children in early childhood. Although, educators shared their perceived impact of MP on young children, a critical gap remains: the voices and lived experiences of young children themselves as the main recipients of the practices being implemented. The panel of thought leaders in Phase Three specifically mentioned that future research should engage with young children directly. This aligns with research (D'Allesandro et al. 2022; Holt and Atkinson 2022, Thomas and Atkinson 2017) that successfully included young children's perspectives offering valuable insights.

Capturing young children's experiences could:

- Provide deeper insight into understanding children's felt experiences of MP, moving beyond adults' assumptions.

- Identify elements of practice that are meaningful, interesting and challenging from a child's perspective supporting the development of a child led developmentally appropriate approach.
- Advance participatory research methodologies in ECE, by aligning with contemporary calls for including young children's voices in research.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Capturing young children's voices within mindfulness research will allow insight into their lived experiences and help shape future practice. By doing so, will uphold children's rights and agency and bring their voices to the centre of practice, policy and research. This also aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and national priorities on children's participation and engagement as outlined in the updated Aistear curriculum framework.

Figure 8.7 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Seven: Including Parents' Perspectives in Research

The educators in this study noted the importance of collaborating with parents/ guardians in supporting young children's wellbeing and the integration of MP. Capturing parents/ guardians' perspectives could offer valuable insight into how they understand MP and *if*, *how* and *why* it is practiced in the home environment. Parents may also observe impacts with their children which they may attribute to MP that may not be visible in the setting, therefore enriching the evidence base. Including parents in research aligns with broader calls for family-centred approaches in ECE (OECD 2021) and reflects educators' clear value of parental engagement.

Engaging parents in mindfulness related research could:

- Facilitate a bi-directional exchange of understanding between parents and educators, providing insight on how MP is understood and experienced in the home context, and offering opportunities for educators to share MP, help address concerns together and strengthen continuity between the setting and home.
- Reveal the impacts observed in the home environment by providing a fuller picture of young children's experiences with MP.
- Foster greater engagement from parents and families with a shared use of mindfulness language and activities, creating a bridge between home and the early childhood setting.
- Help inform the development of a more sustainable, family inclusive mindfulness pedagogy that respects the roots of MP and contemporary family values.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Including parents in mindfulness research supports a more holistic wrap around approach in early childhood education and feels like a natural extension of a relational approach that is used in early childhood education. It could also strengthen the connection between home and early childhood settings and value parents as educators and co-researchers.

Figure 8.8 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Eight: Exploring Educators' Reasons for not Using MP in ECE

Findings from Phase One revealed that 35% of educators reported not using MPs with young children, and while this was a notable proportion, the reasons for educators not using MP are under-explored in research. Although, some educators in Phase One identified barriers such as uncertainty on how to use with their existing curriculum, self-confidence, and lack of training, only 3% indicated no personal interest. Considering that the study sample consisted of educators who were interested in completing the questionnaire on MP, these findings suggest that the reasons they identified for not practicing is not a rejection of MP but rather reflects complex and contextual factors warranting further exploration. However, there remains a population of educators who did not participate in this study who may have little interest in MP, therefore further exploration is warranted.

Exploring these perspectives could:

- Provide researchers with knowledge about the reasons why, alongside any practical barriers for educators in implementing MP in ECE.
- Help inform the design of CPD and training programmes in MP by addressing the concerns and needs educators may have.
- Support the development of more inclusive, flexible and accessible training pathways that accommodate all educators at different stages of readiness, ability and experience with MP while respecting those with no stage of readiness.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Exploring why educators choose not to use MP is crucial to gain an inclusive understanding of the practice and reminds me of the importance of having an open attitude to different opinions and values. Valuing different perspectives is key to ensure that training that is developed is responsive and respectful of individuals choice, beliefs, readiness and professional contexts for implementing mindfulness practice.

Figure 8.9 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Nine: Exploring Educators' Reasons for Implementing Mindfulness Practice with Children who do not engage in Personal Practice

An intriguing finding from Phase One revealed that 18% of educators implement MPs with young children, however they do not practice personally. This presents a unique and under researched area that warrants qualitative exploration. Gaining additional insight into why educators implement MP with young children without personally engaging in MP may offer new knowledge into educators perceived personal value, potential contextual systemic issues or motivations.

Further research in this area could:

- Explore how educators conceptualise mindfulness and the use of MP for children and for themselves, to uncover any differences in perceived value and impacts.
- Reveal potential tensions between personal and professional engagement with MP.
- Highlight any barriers to personal practice that may influence educators' decisions.

- Help inform the design of CPD and professional training that support and encourage educators' personal MP, recognising its potential influence on the authenticity of their teaching MP to young children.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

When I noticed some educators were using mindfulness practices with young children and not themselves in phase one, it prompted me to question why. Exploring why some educators may share practices with young children while not engaging in self-practice could reveal important insights into motivations and barriers. This insight could help inform supportive training that encourages personal and professional engagement with mindfulness practice. However, I am reminded to hold an attitude of respect and acceptance of different choices, mindfulness practice is an invitation, something to be explored and never forced.

Figure 8.10 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Ten: Broadening the Scope of Mindfulness Research Across Educational Contexts

While this study specifically focuses on MP in ECE in Ireland, the findings highlight the importance of exploring educators' experiences of mindfulness across the educational continuum. Gaining insight into *if, how* and *why* educators are implementing mindfulness in primary, secondary and tertiary levels would offer a more comprehensive national landscape of MP across education.

Further research should:

- Extend similar qualitative studies into other educational settings to gain a national picture of how MP is being used in education.
- Compare across the educational contexts to gain insight into context, age group, culture and other factors that shape MP integration.

- Inform educator training and CPD frameworks by identifying gaps in training and ensuring they meet the needs of educators.
- Support national education policy from early childhood, primary and secondary by identifying needs, barriers and opportunities to support educators understanding and implementation of MP.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Expanding mindfulness research across educational contexts will assist in creating evidence informed approach to support both children's and educators' wellbeing. Conducting such research could highlight other possibilities, practices, barriers and solutions. Extending research into different educational contexts could position mindfulness practice as a valued part of Ireland's educational landscape.

Figure 8.11 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

8.3.3 Contributions to the Irish Policy Context

This research study offers valuable insights into ECE in Ireland by exploring the experiences of educators engaging in MP. It highlights the growing interest in MP within ECE and presents an opportunity for policy makers and curricula developers to acknowledge and respond to the emerging interest in MP in the sector.

Educators expressed their desire for a more systematic and coordinated approach to MP into ECE, calling on policy makers to support MP as an important wellbeing strategy for early childhood. Their voices point to a noticeable gap in policy. While wellbeing is a national priority, the role of MP within this remit is under explored. This study aims to bridge this gap between educators' perspectives and policy development. Phase Three addressed this, albeit to a limited degree through dialogue with a panel of thought leaders in policy, education and research in ECE. Their insights reinforced the critical need for policy makers to actively support and embed MP within the ECE landscape. The findings revealed that meaningful

integration requires a dual approach of top-down policies frameworks that value and resource MP, with grassroots educators' practice to ensure MP is authentic, meaningful and sustainable. The following recommendations are outlined below.

Recommendation Eleven: Prioritise Young Children's Wellbeing Within Policy

The wellbeing of children is emphasised across Irish government policy, most recently in Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028. (DCEDIY 2023) which emphasises prevention and early intervention. However, existing wellbeing initiatives are predominantly targeted at primary and post primary education.

ECE in Ireland continues to lack dedicated wellbeing initiatives, despite the critical time of the first five years of children's lives being recognised in First Five: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (GoI 2019).To address this gap, national policies should prioritise young children's wellbeing with mindfulness–based practices as developmentally appropriate and research informed supports. MP aligns with two of the national outcomes of Young Ireland:

Outcome 1: Active and healthy. The introduction of MP may help support children's emotional regulation (Kim et al. 2020) and potentially reduce stress which directly enhances children's wellbeing.

Outcome 2: Achieving in learning and development. Research has shown that MP enhances attention and self-regulation for young children (Crooks 2020; Flook et al.2015). Furthermore, findings from this study further demonstrate the perceived positive impacts on young children's attention supporting their holistic development.

Additionally, integrating MP into ECE, supports Young Ireland's spotlight on Child and Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing, by supporting children's resilience and enabling an early intervention practice.

Aligning MP with the national framework would involve the following:

- Develop a mindfulness-based wellbeing programme specifically for ECE.
- Offer national support of guidance and training for educators to deliver such programmes.
- Pilot and evaluate such programmes to assess sustainability, impact and feasibility, ensuring the evaluation process captures the voices of children, educators, and families, through qualitative and quantitative methodology. Taking such an approach will provide a richer understanding of the lived experiences and the contextual impact of the programme.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Integrating wellbeing initiatives and more specifically, mindfulness practice across Irish policy will strengthen alignment with national objectives of fostering a healthy and well society. This provides an opportunity to include such studies like this present one, to support policy development and to highlight the importance of nurturing wellbeing in early childhood.

Figure 8.12 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Twelve: Integrate Mindfulness Practice into Inclusion Supports for Young Children

The study highlighted perceptions that MP benefits all children inclusively with a notable and novel finding of perceived positive impacts specifically for children with additional needs. MP offers a supportive inclusive approach that supports learning,

attention, emotional regulation and overall wellbeing, making it a valuable tool in ECE, however, to date MP has not been explicitly integrated into existing inclusion programmes.

To strengthen supports for children with additional needs or challenges, it is a recommendation to explore how MPs can be aligned with the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) programme in Ireland.

AIM is a significant national initiative that supports the inclusion and participation of children with additional needs in ECE. It provides settings with tiered supports including additional staffing, useful resources, training and guidance. Integrating MPs into AIM provision could provide educators with a valuable tool to support and nurture children's emotional regulation and wellbeing.

The LINC programme provides accredited training, a special purpose award (QQI Level 6) for educators in Ireland to become Inclusion Coordinators (INCO) in their respective ECE settings to support the inclusion of children with additional needs. Incorporating mindfulness training within the existing LINC modules, particularly those focused on wellbeing, inclusion strategies and curricula, would empower the inclusion coordinators to champion MPs within their settings.

Steps to align with AIM and LINC:

- Review existing AIM resources and materials available for educators to identify opportunities to include MP and mindfulness activities as part of the educator's inclusion plans and supportive pedagogical strategies for young children.

- Collaborate with the LINC programme leaders and board of directors for the potential to integrate MP into modules, specifically those focused on children's wellbeing and supportive practices.
- Develop pilot-based initiatives with ECE settings supported by AIM or those with a LINC inclusion coordinator in their service to support the evaluation of the impact of MP on children's and educators' wellbeing. This evaluation should use a mixed-methods approach, gathering qualitative and quantitative data from children, educators and families to ensure the resources are inclusive, accessible and effective.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Listening to the educator's stories and the positive impacts they have observed with young children with additional needs, I can see the potential of integrating mindfulness practice into AIM and LINC. This presents a valuable opportunity to align inclusion and presence to support the wellbeing of children with additional needs in early childhood education in Ireland.

Figure 8.13 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

Recommendation Thirteen: **Establish a Mindfulness Initiative in Ireland**

The UK's Mindful Nation initiative has reported significant benefits, especially with the engagement of parliamentary members who reported positive impacts on their own wellbeing and productivity through engaging in mindfulness programmes (Simmonson et al. 2023).

This government supported initiative has resulted in mindfulness programmes expanding into public sector including healthcare, education, workplaces and prison

services across the UK, while inspiring many countries across the world to do the same.

Across Phase Two and Phase Three, participants called for engagement and support from government stakeholders to enable the implementation of MP within ECE, and more broadly across education and health care provision, that has the potential to benefit all across the lifecycle. Following the cessation of Mindful Nation Ireland in November 2023, there is currently no government supported initiative in Ireland promoting mindfulness. This study calls for an organisation in partnership with government and policy leaders to take the lead in promoting mindfulness in education and wider society, believing that such leadership would add to the credibility and widespread adoption of MP. Having such an initiative would signal strong government intent towards prioritising mindfulness and MP for the wellbeing of all in society. This also aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals- particularly SDG3 (Good health and wellbeing) by supporting preventative wellbeing measures and mental health initiatives and fostering societal wellbeing.

Recommendations to establish a mindfulness initiative in Ireland drawing on the UK model:

- Create a dedicated all-party government group with clear roles and responsibilities assigned to individuals in order to maintain momentum and provide oversight and reporting to government.
- Collaborate with external experts and academics in the field of MP to help guide development of the programme, provide training, and support the evaluation reports.

- Similar to the UK model, begin with the introduction of mindfulness training for government officials to foster their wellbeing, cultivate an understanding of MP, and build their leadership capacity.
- Set national goals within this initiative by defining the vision and devise strategic objectives shared through a comprehensive plan.
- Integrate mindfulness programmes across existing or new government policies, programmes and services such as health, education, workplaces and criminal justice, mirroring the UK model.
- Acquire sustainable government funding to ensure the government's national commitment to mindfulness, assist with long-term development, and support the delivery, evaluation and expansion of the initiative's objectives.

A Mindful Reflexive Pause

My proposal to re-establish a government supported mindfulness initiative in Ireland remained with me throughout this research study because I viewed it as more than policy but a system level commitment to mindfulness practice and wellbeing. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory recognises the importance of all these systems working together. With clear structure and government support would demonstrate a collective attitude that supporting the wellbeing of children and all people in society is a priority and could position Ireland as a leader in mindfulness- informed policy.

Figure 8.14 A Mindful Reflexive Pause

8.3.4 Section Summary

The research offers valuable insight and recommendations for educators, higher education institutions, academics and Irish policy makers. While this study is grounded in the Irish context, the findings have global relevance for MP in ECE. This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how educators in Ireland are using MP with young children, addressing a significant gap given that there is only one peer-reviewed published study, to date, in Ireland (Flanagan et al. 2025). By addressing this gap, this thesis enriches the limited research available and lays a foundation for further research in this growing field. Importantly, this study advances academic discourse and scholarly discussion, and represents educators' voices and experiences, providing them with practical insights and encouragement to support them in implementing MP in ECE.

8.4 Limitations and Strengths of this Research Study

It is essential to recognise the limitations of this study as they shape how the findings are interpreted and applied. The strengths and limitations were identified in each phase in Chapters Four, Five and Six accordingly. These are summarised in Table 8.1 below. Following this, I offer further reflections of the strengths and limitations of this study as a whole.

Table 8.1 Limitations and Strengths Summary Table

Phase	Limitations	Strengths
Phase One: Online Questionnaire	Uncertain how many ECE settings were included, therefore challenging to make assumptions Over representation of some counties over another which may have limited understanding of regional variances Sample may be considered self-selected, where educators may have put themselves forward due to their interest in MP in the first instance The questionnaire did not explore how often educators use MP with young children in their ECE settings Online questionnaire may have unintentionally omitted some educators who may not have had access to questionnaire	First national overview of MP in ECE in Ireland Large sample size (*n*=744) Qualitative and quantitative questions strengthened credibility of findings Act as standalone contribution to research Valuable foundation for next phase of study
Phase Two: Semi-structured Interviews	Participants may have been positively biased, whereby they volunteered after taking part in Phase One The sample was highly representative of the regions of Munster and Leinster, with minimal representation from Ulster and Connaught The sample did not include those who do not use MP with children, possibly omitting an alternative perspective Methodologically, it would not be possible for another researcher to replicate the study due to the use of RTA.	By centring educators' voices offered depth and richness of qualitative data Extended the breadth of findings from Phase One Provided contextualised understanding of MP in ECE Allowed deep engagement with data through RTA Informed the development of Phase Three and provided a bridge between educators lived experiences and wider professional conversations
Phase Three: Focus Group	Due to the collective nature, may have inhibited some participants from sharing thoughts and views Conducting a singular focus group offers one perspective, therefore the findings must be understood within those boundaries and context I had intended for more participants to attend which may have offered alternative perspectives	Enabled a dynamic discussion with different viewpoints Revealed nuanced insights that may not have been possible from a singular interview It allowed voice to educators' suggestions from Phase Two Data source triangulation added contextual understanding to the study. Conducting a focus group with participants from policy, research and education laid the foundation for broader discussions of MP in ECE

Firstly, Phase Two focused on exploring educators' implementation of MP with young children, however, not including educators who do not practice mindfulness with young children may have omitted nuanced reasons for not using MP. Excluding these voices may have limited the insights into barriers or contextual factors that shape educators' decisions not to use MP.

Secondly, across all three phases, the sample lacked gender balance, with an over-representation of female participants, albeit this is reflective of a wider systematic issue as males represent less than 2% of the ECE workforce in Ireland. Nevertheless, this limits the diversity of perspectives.

Thirdly, while I robustly and rigorously employed RTA, in alignment with my ontological and epistemological stance, I could have chosen to use member checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. However, this was not a necessary process for RTA as throughout a reflexive interpretative approach was embraced.

Despite the study's limitations, this study adds a valuable and comprehensive contribution to the limited body of research of MP in ECE in Ireland. It is the first study to map the national landscape of *if, how* and *why* MP is being implemented in ECE in Ireland, drawing on a large-scale questionnaire (*n*=744), in-depth semi-structured interviews (*n*=27) and a focus group (*n*=5) with leaders from policy, research and education in Ireland.

The use of multiple data collection methods and data source triangulation added breadth, depth and contextual understanding to this study. To date, research of this scale does not appear to have been conducted internationally in ECE, marking a meaningful and timely contribution to the field of research.

Collectively, the findings from the three phases of the study have generated meaningful implications and recommendations for future practice, policy and research, while providing future researchers with deep insight into the methodological processes used to explore the landscape of mindfulness practice in early childhood education contexts.

8.5. Locating the Study and a Final Mindful Reflexive Pause

The constructivist and interpretivist orientation of this study was reflected in the RTA approach, which foregrounded and embraced my active role in meaning making. Throughout the research process, I engaged in mindful reflexive pauses which enabled me to return to *intention*, *attention* and *attitude* which allowed me to consider my assumptions, experiences that shaped the questions I asked and the interpretations I produced. Drawing on Shapiro et al.'s (2006) model of mindfulness offered me a framework for this reflexive process, helped guide the development of the questions and supported my interpretation of the data. Given that no national study of MP in ECE has previously been conducted in Ireland, this research was exploratory in nature. Consequently, the findings presented here are not positioned as objective truths but rather as a situated and co-constructed account consistent with my constructivist-interpretivist worldview.

8.5.1 A Final Mindful Reflexive Pause

Throughout this research journey, I came to a realisation that mindfulness is not really something that can just be taught, rather it is something individually experienced, felt and lived. The sentiment that mindfulness is caught rather than taught resonated with me. It became clear to me that MP or mindfulness itself is less about isolated solitary practices but more about how we are, rather than something we simply do. Mindfulness, and the practices we use to be more mindful, is more about how we show up, how we relate to others, and how we engage with our

present moment experiences. In the simplest sense, mindfulness is synonymous with awareness. With mindfulness practices there is no place to go, and nothing to attain as you are already present in this very moment.

Reflecting on the words and readings of Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness does not have to be a cerebral conceptual thing, it is awareness, wakefulness, heartfulness. Moreover, mindfulness can function in many different ways, where there are many different doors (ways of practicing) that bring you to the same room (of being present).

One of the most profound 'ah-ha!' learning moments for me was recognising the importance of intentionality. Every interaction that I had, whether in conversations with my supervisors, my participants, engaging with the literature or interrogating my own positionality revealed a deep sense of intentionality. I was particularly moved by each participant's story and how they intentionally created mindful, meaningful spaces for young children. Such warm, relational, and mindful practices have shown me how we show up for ourselves and for others and the attitude we use to do so really matters.

This study has shaped me as a researcher, but also as an educator and mindfulness practitioner. I had the wonderful opportunity to deepen my practice while being introduced to new learnings, new ideas and teachings along the way which has deepened my appreciation for both professional and personal growth. Jon Kabat Zinn (1994) refers to mindfulness as a state of wakefulness and being present in the moment we are in. This research process has allowed me to experience that state of wakefulness; to the quiet power of being present, to the nuances of MP and the beautiful responsibility we have as educators to model the values and practices we

hope to instil in young children that they can bring with them throughout their life journey.

By positioning my interpretations among wider literature discourses, building on each phase of the study, and viewing my study through my conceptual lens, I believe this study offers a unique contribution to the field. I feel it underscores the importance of mindfulness and mindfulness practice, not as a trend or a luxury add on, but a crucial orientation towards compassion, awareness and connection, qualities that are really needed in the present world climate.

In closing, I hope this research study invites further dialogue about how mindfulness practice can be embedded into early childhood education not only nationally but internationally- not as an add on but as the way of being, being with ourselves, being with others and being with children. My learning is ongoing. My mindfulness practice deepens. I carry forward a deeper clarity, and my research journey continues on.

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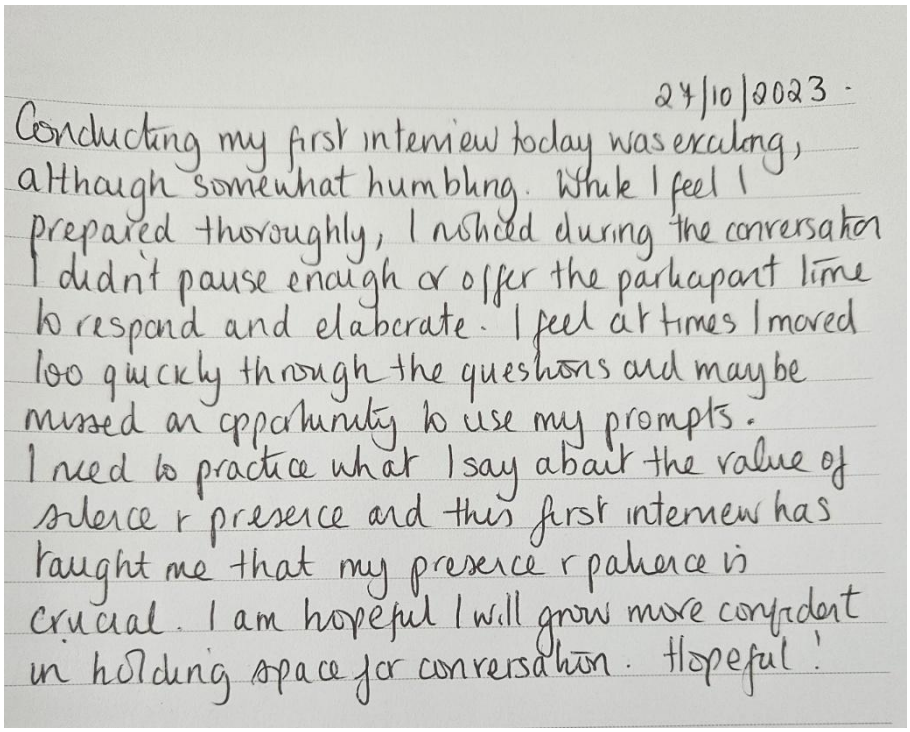
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Appendix A Reflexive Diary Entries



24/10/2023 -

Conducting my first interview today was exciting, although somewhat humbling. While I feel I prepared thoroughly, I noticed during the conversation I didn't pause enough or offer the participant time to respond and elaborate. I feel at times I moved too quickly through the questions and maybe missed an opportunity to use my prompts.
I need to practice what I say about the value of silence & presence and this first interview has taught me that my presence & patience is crucial. I am hopeful I will grow more confident in holding space for conversation. Hopeful!

08/02/2024

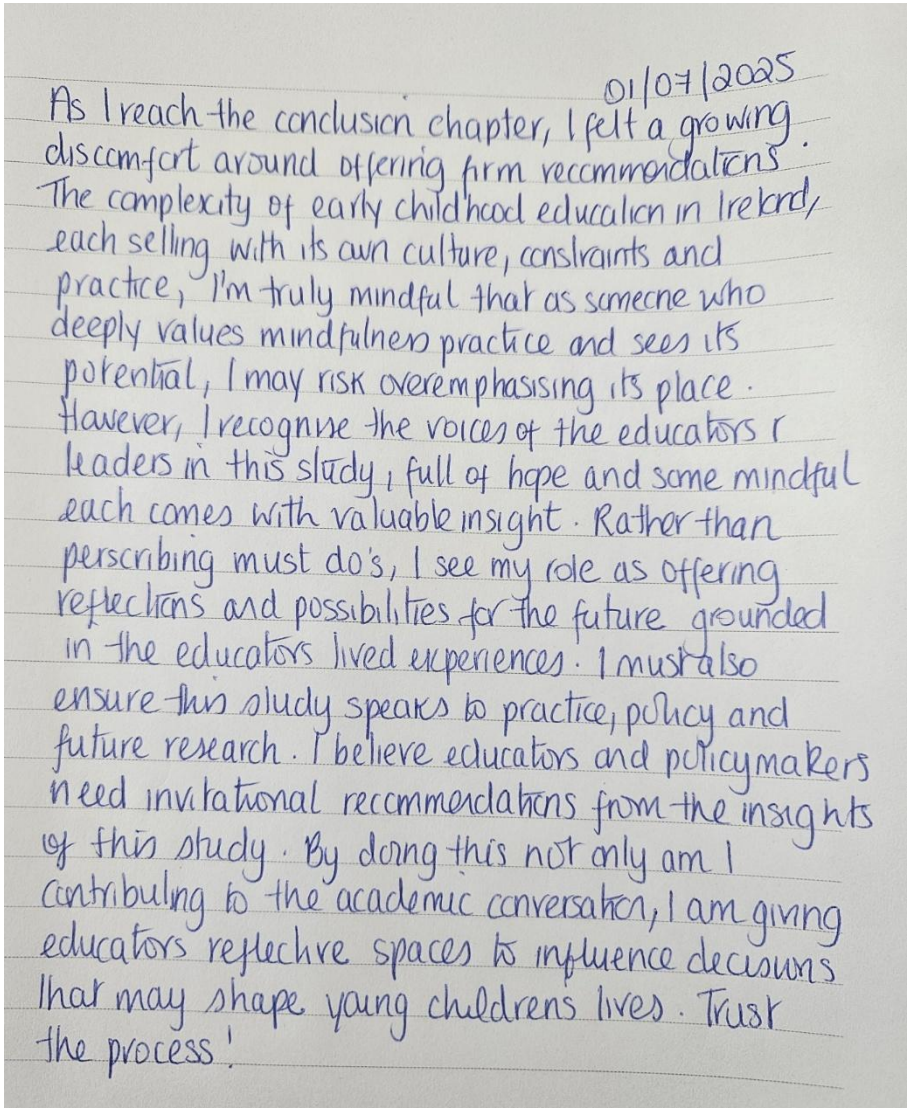
As I navigated my role as the researcher, I was reminded that I was not an outsider looking in, but someone who is deeply entagled in mindfulness practice – the very thing I was exploring. My values of intention attention attitude really became the compass by which I conducted myself in this process. I didn't set out to judge or evaluate mindfulness practices but understand if, how & why they were being used. I had a deep curiosity & respect for the educators and their practice. By mindfully engaging and listening and really delving into my own practices allowed me to listen to what was being said, how it was being said and lean into what was unfolding. As someone who has significantly benefited from mindfulness practice, I remained conscious of my biases & its potential. I reminded myself that each person brought their own context and meaning and to ensure I was honoring that diversity by including their own words in this study. I really feel my own personal practice of MP acted as both a good resource but also responsibility as it gave me insight while also demanding integrity as it allowed me to research the topic of mindfulness but also acted as a way of being in the research.

5/2/2025.

I really felt that facilitating the focus group was such a different experience compared to the one to one interviews. While the interviews felt intimate and grounded, the focus group offered a broader perspective. I felt I had to carefully plan and moderate the focus group which at times took me away from the conversation however it was inspiring to hear the diverse perspectives that were respectful and insightful. This also provided me with a chance to engage directly with those in the wider landscape of early childhood education and gave me valuable insight into potential policy alignment and systemic challenges adding breadth and critical context. Deeply full of gratitude today!

14/5/2025

As I was writing my discussion chapter, I became increasingly aware of how my own background as an educator and the value I hold for mindfulness has shaped the decisions that I make when writing this chapter. At times I felt quite protective of the educators perspectives and thinking back on the interviews I did find myself drawn to those narratives that echoed my own values around presence and intention and care. For me to help with this, my aim has always been to centre their voices, all educators voices whether they embrace or feel unsure about mindfulness practices. I really want to ensure this discussion piece allows their lived realities to be authentically represented and not ~~just~~ filtered through my own advocacy. It reminds me of the tension throughout as my positionality and experience is both a strength and a responsibility in this study.


01/07/2025

As I reach the conclusion chapter, I felt a growing discomfort around offering firm recommendations. The complexity of early childhood education in Ireland, each selling with its own culture, constraints and practice, I'm truly mindful that as someone who deeply values mindfulness practice and sees its potential, I may risk overemphasising its place. However, I recognise the voices of the educators & leaders in this study, full of hope and some mindful each comes with valuable insight. Rather than perscribing must do's, I see my role as offering reflections and possibilities for the future grounded in the educators lived experiences. I must also ensure this study speaks to practice, policy and future research. I believe educators and policymakers need invitational recommendations from the insights of this study. By doing this not only am I contributing to the academic conversation, I am giving educators reflective spaces to influence decisions that may shape young childrens lives. Trust the process!

Appendix B Email to Early Childhood Education Settings

Dear Manager,

My name is Leesa Flanagan, and I am currently undertaking my PhD in Dundalk Institute of Technology where my study is focused on exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland.

I fully appreciate how precious your time is and how many demands you face daily. I would be most grateful if you and your team of educators could complete a short online questionnaire which should take no longer than 6 minutes.

Your input is of great value to this national study, whether or not you practice mindfulness with young children. The goal is to gain a broad and accurate picture of the landscape of mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland. I have attached the participant information leaflet for your attention and please see the link below to the online questionnaire.

https://forms.office.com/e/pqU5014e9w

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me.

Many thanks and best wishes,

Leesa

Appendix C Gatekeeper Information Leaflet

Study title:

“Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education”

Researcher Name:	**Leesa Flanagan**
Telephone number of Researcher:	**085 8826811**
Email address of Researcher:	**leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**
Research Supervisors Names:	**Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O’Connor**

Dear Gatekeeper,

My name is Leesa Flanagan, and I am a PhD student in DkIT. I am undergoing a piece of research titled “Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education”. The purpose of this research is to investigate the prevalence of mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland and ECEC educator’s implementation of mindfulness practice with young children. This survey will be conducted through an online Microsoft Forms questionnaire. There are no right, or wrong answers and input is welcome from all educators, those who use or do not use mindfulness practice in their work with young children. It is hoped these findings will contribute to the evolving field of mindfulness practice in the early years. You are being invited to take part or/ and distribute this questionnaire as you are either a manager of an early year’s service or a member of a professional group working with early year’s educators in Ireland. I would like to convey to you that participation is voluntary and please see attached the consent form and participation leaflet to inform you about the study in more detail to empower you to make an informed decision. A link to the anonymous Microsoft Forms questionnaire is attached to this email. I would be most grateful if you could disseminate this link to ECEC educators. All my contact details are included if you have any questions or wish to seek clarification.

Kind regards,

Leesa Flanagan

Appendix D Participant Information Leaflet

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education"

Researcher Name:	**Leesa Flanagan**
Telephone number of Researcher:	**xxxx**
Email address of Researcher:	**leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**
Research Supervisor's Names:	**Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor**

You are being invited to take part in a research study to be carried out at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT). Before you decide whether you wish to take part, you should read the information provided below carefully and, if you wish, discuss it with your family, friends or colleagues. Please take time to ask questions – do not feel rushed and do not feel under pressure to make a quick decision. You should clearly understand the risks and benefits of taking part in this study so that you can make a decision that is right for you. This process is known as 'Informed Consent'. Your participation is voluntary. You can change your mind about taking part in the study and exit the questionnaire and your responses will not be submitted. However, once you press submit it will not be possible to opt out at that stage.

Why is this study being done?

This study aims to explore early childhood educators understanding and use of mindfulness practice with young children in the early years. I am carrying out a national survey, which involves a questionnaire for early childhood educators who are currently working in ECEC settings. I welcome contributions from educators who use or do not use mindfulness practice in their work with young children.

Who is organising and funding this study?

This PhD studentship comprises of the researcher receiving a stipend and contribution towards research costs affiliated to the study. This is co-funded by the Higher Education Authority's Technological University Transformation Fund and DkIT. Participants will not receive any remuneration or payment for taking part in this study.

Why am I being asked to take part?

You are being invited to take part in this research study, as you are a qualified ECEC educator who is currently working with young children in an ECEC setting with young children between 0- 6 years. Consequently, you meet the criteria as a potential participant

for this research study. As a participant, you are invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire regarding your current understanding of mindfulness practice, your engagement and experience of mindfulness practice with young children. Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You will not be asked for any identifying information except should you wish to provide your email address at the end to express an interest in partaking in the next phase of this study or/ and to receive a copy of the final findings. To stop or withdraw from the questionnaire, you can choose not to access the questionnaire via the link you have been provided with or if you have begun the questionnaire and wish to withdraw, you can cease the questionnaire by not answering any more questions and exit. Once you press submit, it is no longer possible to withdraw from the questionnaire.

How will the study be carried out?

This phase of the study will be carried out through an anonymous online questionnaire using Microsoft Forms.

What will happen to me if I agree to take part?

If you volunteer to participate in this research study, you will be required to complete an anonymous online questionnaire using Microsoft Forms. No log in details will be required to access the questionnaire.

There will be up to 29 questions to complete taking approximately 6 minutes. The questionnaire will be anonymous, and the responses collated will be used only for the purpose of this research study. Only the researcher and the researcher's supervisors will have access to this data. For any publication purposes, all data will be anonymised.

What are the benefits?

Although you will not directly benefit from participation in this research study, you will be contributing to a greater understanding of mindfulness-based practice in early year's education in Ireland. Furthermore, the researcher would like to highlight to you that you are central to this study, sharing your understanding and experience is fundamental to this research study.

What are the risks?

The potential risks of participating in this research study are limited, however you should be aware that you are free to stop at any stage and to withdraw from the online questionnaire until you press the submit button. All information shared is confidential and your anonymity is assured. Whilst the researcher can guarantee that all data will be retained on DkIT encrypted OneDrive files, however with any data systems there is always a risk of a data breach.

Due care and diligence have been undertaken by the researcher to ensure the questions do not place participants under stress or experience emotional distress.

What if something goes wrong when I'm taking part in this study?

Please be assured there are no right, or wrong answers and the hope is to gain insight into all ECEC educators' perspectives on mindfulness-based practice. While this questionnaire

is unlikely to cause distress, please feel free to email the researcher with any concerns you may have. If you wish to withdraw up to the point of submission, please exit the questionnaire and this will terminate your participation.

Will it cost me anything to take part?

Participants will not incur any costs to participate in this online questionnaire.

Is the study confidential?

Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants are of utmost importance and will be adhered to at all times. The questionnaire will be shared with participants via a link to Microsoft forms. No log in credentials are required. All data collected will be accumulated and anonymous to ensure that no participant is identifiable.

Data generated from the questionnaires will be interpreted by the researcher and will only be accessible to the researcher and the researcher's supervisors on this research project. The data will be stored securely in password-protected files on DkIT's encrypted Microsoft OneDrive on the researcher's password protected laptop. The laptop will be securely locked in a cabinet to which the researcher has the only access.

The researcher will adhere to the policies of DkIT and GDPR guidelines regarding the retention of data. Data will be retained up to two years post competition of this PhD research study to allow further analysis and potential peer review of this study. After a period of two years, all data will be destroyed/ erased; both hard and soft copies and no additional copies will be retained.

You may wish to contribute to the next phase of this research study, and an option to input your email will be provided. This is voluntary and your email will be stored securely and separate from your responses.

You may wish to be informed about the final findings of this research study, once complete, an option to input your email will be provided. This is voluntary and your email will be stored securely and separate from your responses.

Where can I get further information?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me on

Name: Leesa Flanagan
Email: leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie
Address: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth, A91 K584.
Phone No: 08XXXXXXX

If you wish to raise a concern regarding the study, please contact the research supervisors on

Name: Dr. Jemma Mc Gourty and Dr. Catherine O'Connor
Email: jemma.mcgourty@dkit.ie Catherine.oconnor@dkit.ie
Address: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth, A91 K584.

Appendix E Copy of Questionnaire

Exploring mindfulness-based practice in early years education in Ireland

My name is Leesa Flanagan; I am a PhD researcher at Dundalk Institute of Technology and am undertaking a study exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland. This study is co-funded by the Higher Education Authority's Technological University Transformation Fund and Dundalk institute of Technology.

I am carrying cut a national survey to gain insight into mindfulness practice in the early year's sector in Ireland. I welcome contributions from all early childhood educators including those who use or do not use mindfulness practice in their work with young children. Please be assured there are no right or wrong answers, the hope is to gain insight into all ECEC educators' perspectives of mindfulness -based practice.

If you volunteer to participate in this research study: you will not be asked any identifying information except, should you wish to provide your email address at the end to express an interest in partaking the next phase of this study or/ and to receive a copy of the final research findings. There will be up to 29 questions to complete taking approximately 6 minutes.

Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants are of utmost importance. All data collected will be accumulated and anonymous to ensure no participant is identifiable. Data generated will be interpreted by the researcher and only accessible to her and the research supervisors. The data will be stored securely in password protected files on DkIT's encrypted Microsoft One drive on the researcher's password protected laptop. The researcher will adhere to all DkIT and GDPR policies regarding the retention of data.

By completing and submitting the survey you are indicating your informed consent. If you wish to withdraw, simply stop answering any further questions and exit the survey to terminate. Once you press submit all your responses be recorded. If you require any further information or wish to request a copy of the full participant information sheet, please do not hesitate to contact me at Leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this research study. Best wishes:

Leesa Flanagan

Consent:

1. Consent: I understand that by pressing yes, I confirm that I have read the information displayed above and consent to take part in this survey.

This section invites you to share insight about you as an early year's educator in Ireland

2. Do you currently work as an early year's educator in Ireland?
   Yes
   No
3. Please state your gender in the text box below.
4. In which county do you work in as an early year's educator? (dropbox0
5. In approximately years and months, how long have you been working as an early year's educator in Ireland? Please use the text box below.

6. What is the highest level of qualification in early childhood education that you have fully achieved to date?
   QQI level 5
   QQI level 6
   QQI level 7
   QQI level 8
   QQI level 9 or above
   Other

7. What are the ages of the children who you work with? Please select all that apply.
   Under 1 years
   I year olds
   2-year-olds
   3-year-olds
   4-year-olds
   5-year-olds
   6-year-olds
   Afterschool age

In this section, I wish to gain insight into your understanding and practice of mindfulness. I wish to gain insight into all educators understanding, those with minimal, some and extensive knowledge of mindfulness.

8. Could you share with me what mindfulness means to you?

9. Have you ever practiced mindfulness yourself?
   Yes
   No
10. Could you please describe what types of mindfulness practice you have engaged in?

11. Have you ever practiced mindfulness with young children in your setting?
    Yes
    No

12. Would you please share your reasons for practicing mindfulness with young children.

13. The most common ways to practice mindfulness is formally and informally. If you have practiced mindfulness formally with young children, below are some of the mediums of formal practice. Please select all that apply to your work with young children.

    Yoga

    Meditation practices

    Breathing

    Other

14. If you have practiced informal mindfulness with young children, below are some of the mediums of informal practice. Please select all that apply to your work with young children.

    Creative mindfulness activities
    Musical mindfulness activities
    Mindfulness stories
    Other

15. Could you please share the possible reasons you do not practice mindfulness with young children? Please select all the apply to you.

No personal interest
Little understanding of mindfulness
Unsure how to use mindfulness with existing curriculum
No access to training
Not having enough time
Cost of training
Cost of resources
Self-confidence to practice with young children
Other

The following section relates to how you may have learned about mindfulness

16. Have you completed any of the following training in mindfulness?
    MBSR
    MBCT
    None of the above
    Other

17. Have you ever engaged with any of the following to learn about mindfulness? Please select all that apply to you.
    Mindfulness book
    Newspaper/ magazine
    Mindfulness website
    Mindfulness podcast
    None of the above
    Other

18. Have you ever attended any accredited/ certified training (s) that allows you to teach mindfulness to young children in the early years?
    Yes
    No

19. Please provide the name of the training course (s) you attended.

20. Please provide the duration of the training course (s) you attended.
21. Please provide some details of the content that was covered in the training course (s) you attended.

22. If accredited/ certified training that would allow you to teach mindfulness to young children in the early years was available to you, would you attend?
    Yes
    No
    Maybe

23. Have you ever attended any informal training on teaching mindfulness to young children in the early years? For example, once off workshops, information sessions, continuous professional development.

24. Could you please share details of the informal training (s)/ workshop (s) that you attended.

25. If informal training/ workshops/ continuous professional development on teaching mindfulness to young children in the early years was available to you, would you attend?

    Yes
    No
    Maybe

26. If you had to choose between attending accredited/ certified training to teach mindfulness to young children and attending non-accredited workshops, which would be your preference?
    Accredited/ certified
    Non-accredited workshops

Concluding section

27. If there is anything else you would like to contribute regarding mindfulness practice, please do so here.

28. The next phase of this research study will consist of semi-structured interviews with early years educators. If you would like to participate further in this research study, please leave your email details below.

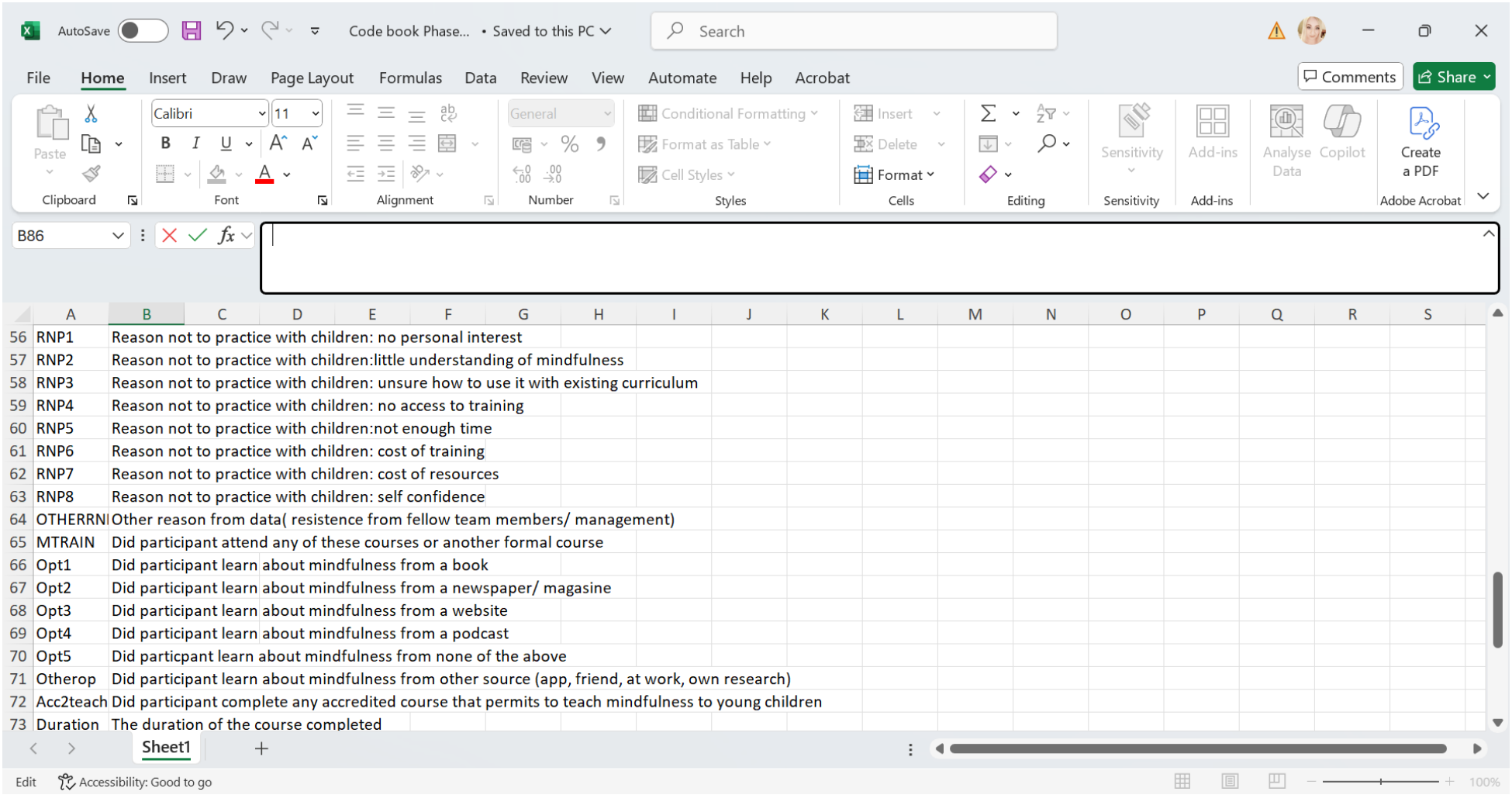
29. If you would like to receive the final findings of this research study once complete, please leave your email details below.

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this research study. Leesa

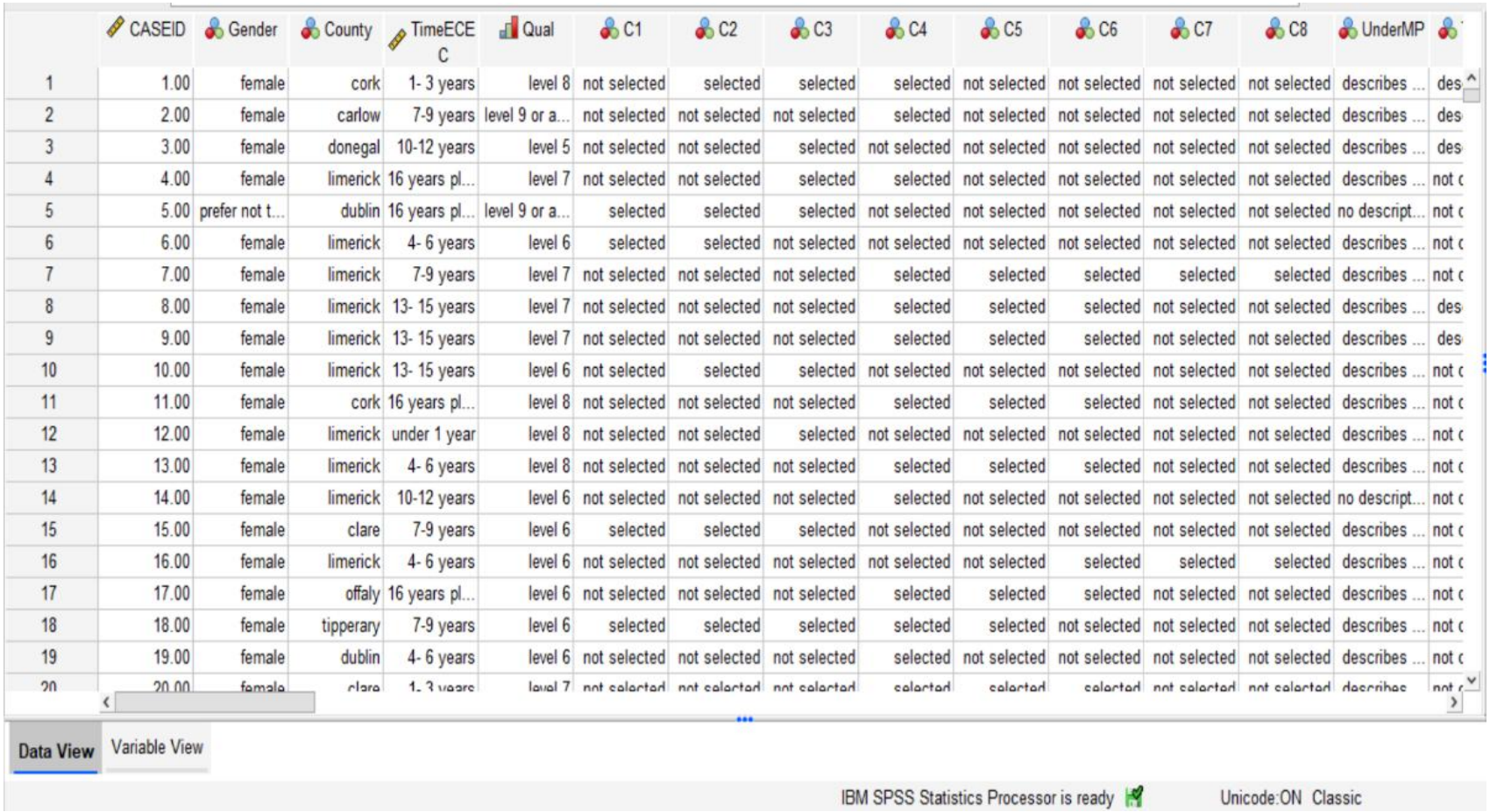
Appendix F Feedback Sheet for Pilot Sample

1. How long did it take you to complete the questionnaire?
2. Are the instructions clear in each section?
3. Do you feel the sections flow from one to the next?
4. Are the questions logically in order?
5. Are the questions concise?
6. Are the questions unbiased?
7. Are there any questions that made you feel uncomfortable?
8. Are there enough response options to ensure inclusion?
9. Would you recommend any changes to the questions asked?
10. Have you any other recommendations regarding the overall questionnaire?

Appendix G Engagement with SPSS



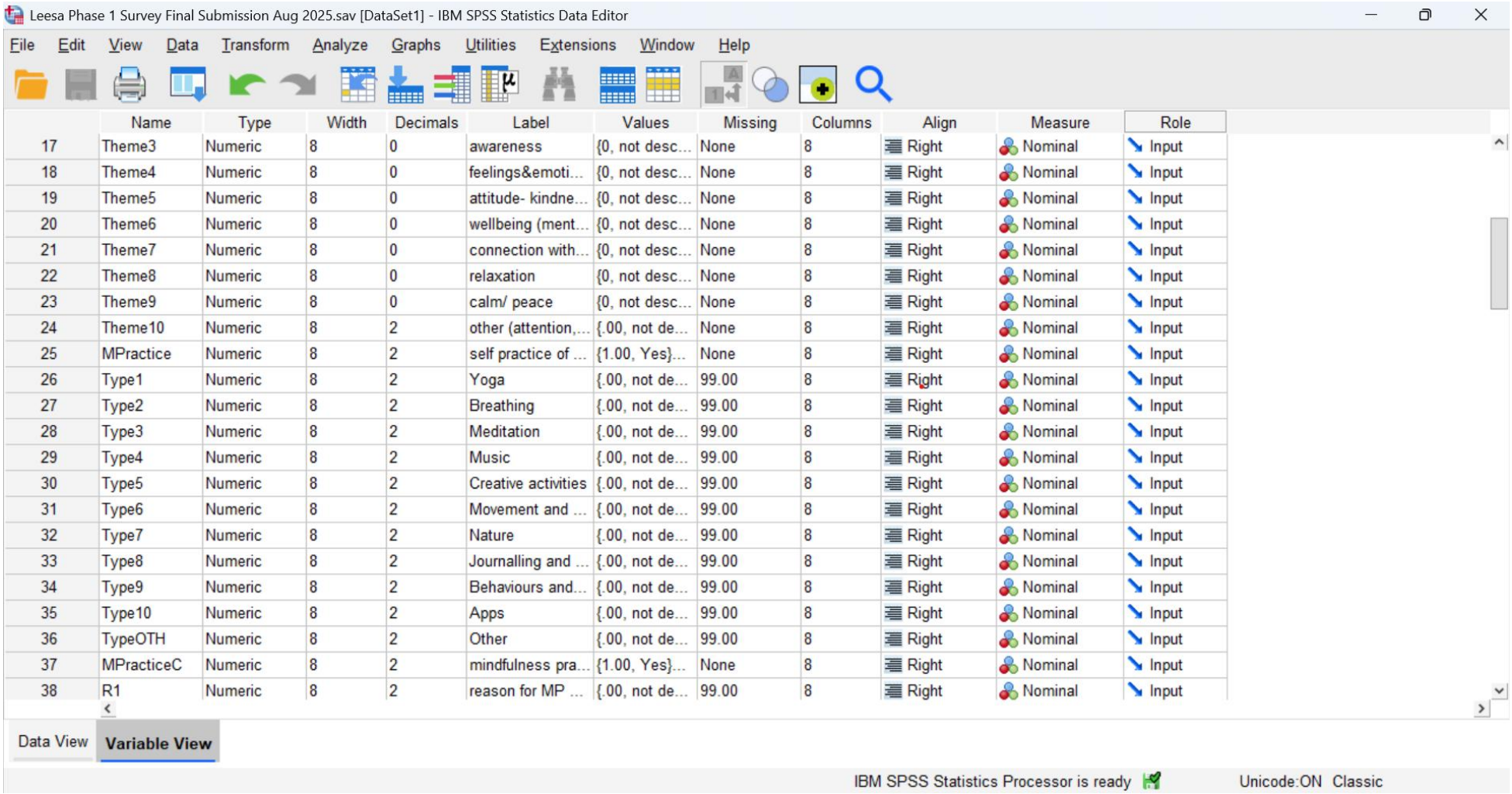
	A	B
56	RNP1	Reason not to practice with children: no personal interest
57	RNP2	Reason not to practice with children:little understanding of mindfulness
58	RNP3	Reason not to practice with children: unsure how to use it with existing curriculum
59	RNP4	Reason not to practice with children: no access to training
60	RNP5	Reason not to practice with children:not enough time
61	RNP6	Reason not to practice with children: cost of training
62	RNP7	Reason not to practice with children: cost of resources
63	RNP8	Reason not to practice with children: self confidence
64	OTHERRN	Other reason from data(resistence from fellow team members/ management)
65	MTRAIN	Did participant attend any of these courses or another formal course
66	Opt1	Did participant learn about mindfulness from a book
67	Opt2	Did participant learn about mindfulness from a newspaper/ magasine
68	Opt3	Did participant learn about mindfulness from a website
69	Opt4	Did participant learn about mindfulness from a podcast
70	Opt5	Did particpant learn about mindfulness from none of the above
71	Otherop	Did participant learn about mindfulness from other source (app, friend, at work, own research)
72	Acc2teach	Did participant complete any accredited course that permits to teach mindfulness to young children
73	Duration	The duration of the course completed



	CASEID	Gender	County	TimeECEC	Qual	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	UnderMP	
1	1.00	female	cork	1- 3 years	level 8	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	des
2	2.00	female	carlow	7-9 years	level 9 or a...	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	des
3	3.00	female	donegal	10-12 years	level 5	not selected	not selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	des
4	4.00	female	limerick	16 years pl...	level 7	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
5	5.00	prefer not t...	dublin	16 years pl...	level 9 or a...	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	no descript...	not c
6	6.00	female	limerick	4- 6 years	level 6	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
7	7.00	female	limerick	7-9 years	level 7	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	selected	selected	describes ...	not c
8	8.00	female	limerick	13- 15 years	level 7	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	des
9	9.00	female	limerick	13- 15 years	level 7	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	des
10	10.00	female	limerick	13- 15 years	level 6	not selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
11	11.00	female	cork	16 years pl...	level 8	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
12	12.00	female	limerick	under 1 year	level 8	not selected	not selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
13	13.00	female	limerick	4- 6 years	level 8	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
14	14.00	female	limerick	10-12 years	level 6	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	no descript...	not c
15	15.00	female	clare	7-9 years	level 6	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
16	16.00	female	limerick	4- 6 years	level 6	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	describes ...	not c
17	17.00	female	offaly	16 years pl...	level 6	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
18	18.00	female	tipperary	7-9 years	level 6	selected	selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
19	19.00	female	dublin	4- 6 years	level 6	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	not selected	describes ...	not c
20	20.00	female	clare	1- 3 years	level 7	not selected	not selected	not selected	selected	selected	selected	not selected	not selected	describes	not c

Data View | Variable View

IBM SPSS Statistics Processor is ready | Unicode:ON Classic


Leesa Phase 1 Survey Final Submission Aug 2025.sav [DataSet1] - IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor
File Edit View Data Transform Analyze Graphs Utilities Extensions Window Help
Name Type Width Decimals Label Values Missing Columns Align Measure Role
17 Theme3 Numeric 8 0 awareness {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
18 Theme4 Numeric 8 0 feelings&emoti... {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
19 Theme5 Numeric 8 0 attitude- kindne... {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
20 Theme6 Numeric 8 0 wellbeing (ment... {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
21 Theme7 Numeric 8 0 connection with... {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
22 Theme8 Numeric 8 0 relaxation {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
23 Theme9 Numeric 8 0 calm/ peace {0, not desc... None 8 Right Nominal Input
24 Theme10 Numeric 8 2 other (attention,... {.00, not de... None 8 Right Nominal Input
25 MPractice Numeric 8 2 self practice of ... {1.00, Yes}... None 8 Right Nominal Input
26 Type1 Numeric 8 2 Yoga {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
27 Type2 Numeric 8 2 Breathing {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
28 Type3 Numeric 8 2 Meditation {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
29 Type4 Numeric 8 2 Music {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
30 Type5 Numeric 8 2 Creative activities {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
31 Type6 Numeric 8 2 Movement and ... {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
32 Type7 Numeric 8 2 Nature {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
33 Type8 Numeric 8 2 Journalling and ... {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
34 Type9 Numeric 8 2 Behaviours and... {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
35 Type10 Numeric 8 2 Apps {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
36 TypeOTH Numeric 8 2 Other {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
37 MPracticeC Numeric 8 2 mindfulness pra... {1.00, Yes}... None 8 Right Nominal Input
38 R1 Numeric 8 2 reason for MP ... {.00, not de... 99.00 8 Right Nominal Input
Data View
Variable View
IBM SPSS Statistics Processor is ready
Unicode:ON Classic

Reason not practice, unsure use with existing curriculum

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not selected	129	17.3	50.0	50.0
	selected	129	17.3	50.0	100.0
	Total	258	34.7	100.0	
Missing	question not applicable	486	65.3		
Total		744	100.0		

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	138.232[a]	1	<.001		
Continuity Correction[b]	136.303	1	<.001		
Likelihood Ratio	136.345	1	<.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				<.001	<.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	138.046	1	<.001		
N of Valid Cases	744				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 83.57.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.431	<.001
	Cramer's V	.431	<.001
N of Valid Cases		744	

Appendix H Ethical Approval

DkIT
An Scoil Sláinte & Eolaíochta
School of Health and Science

Ms. Leesa Flanagan,

Department of Nursing, Midwifery & Early Years
Dundalk Institute of Technology,

Dundalk,

Co. Louth March 2023

Re: Exploring mindfulness-based practice within early years' education

Dear Leesa,

The above study was discussed at the Ethics Committee on the 6th March 2023. I acknowledge receipt of your amendments dated the 16th March 2023. This study is now granted ethical approval. Wishing you the best of luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Edel Healy

Dr. Edel Healy

Chair of School of Health & Science Ethics Committee

Cc: Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor

DKIT
An Scoil Sláinte & Eolaíochta
School of Health and Science

Ms Leesa Flanagan,
Department of Nursing, Midwifery & Early Years
Dundalk Institute of Technology,
Dundalk,
Co. Louth 13th October 2023

Re: Exploring mindfulness-based practice within early years' education

Dear Leesa,
The above application was reviewed at the School of Health and Science Ethics Committee on the 28th September 2023 and granted ethical approval . On behalf of the Committee, wishing you the best of luck with your research.
Yours Sincerely,



_____
Dr. Edel Healy
Chair of School of Health & Science Ethics Committee
cc. Dr. Jemma McGourty/Dr. Catherine O'Connor

DUNDALK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
INSTITIÚID TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA DHÚN DEALGAN

Leesa Flanagan,

Department of Nursing, Midwifery and Early Years

DkIT 27th January 2025

Re: Application for ethicalapproval

Dear Leesa,

I am pleased to inform you that your proposal, **Exploring mindfulness-based practice within early childhood education** has been approved by the DkIT School of Health and Science Ethics Committee.

I wish you the very best with your research,

Yours sincerely

Dr Moira Maguire

Chair, DkIT School of Health and Science Research Ethics Committee

Appendix I Participant Information Leaflet

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education"

Researcher Name:	**Leesa Flanagan**
Telephone number of Researcher:	**085 XXXXX**
Email address of Researcher:	**leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**
Research Supervisor's Names:	**Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor**

You are being invited to take part in a research study to be carried out at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT). Before you decide whether you wish to take part, you should read the information provided below carefully and, if you wish, discuss it with your family, friends, or colleagues. Please take time to ask questions – do not feel rushed and do not feel under pressure to make a quick decision. You should clearly understand the risks and benefits of taking part in this study so that you can make a decision that is right for you. This process is known as 'Informed Consent'. Your participation is voluntary. You can change your mind about taking part up to two weeks post interview. Please contact me by email within two weeks of your interview date to let me know you wish to opt out, and your data will not be included in this research study.

Why is this study being done?

This study aims to explore early childhood educators understanding of mindfulness, explore educator's use of mindfulness practice regarding their own personal practices and their use of mindfulness practice with young children in the early years. I am carrying out semi structured interviews, which will include early childhood educators who are currently working in ECEC settings and who have completed Phase One of this research study.

Who is organising and funding this study?

This PhD studentship comprises of me receiving a stipend and contribution towards research costs affiliated to the study. This is co-funded by the Higher Education Authority's Technological University Transformation Fund and DkIT. Participants will not receive any remuneration or payment for taking part in this study.

Why am I being asked to take part?

You are being invited to take part in this research study, as you are a qualified ECEC educator who is currently working with young children in an ECEC setting with young children between 0- 6 years. Consequently, you meet the criteria as a potential participant for this research study, and you completed Phase One of this research study, the online

survey. As a participant, you are invited to take part in a semi structured interview with myself regarding your own mindfulness practice and your engagement and experience of mindfulness practice with young children. Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You will not be asked for any identifying information except should you wish to provide your email address at the end to express an interest in partaking in the next phase of this study or/ and to receive a copy of the final findings. To stop or withdraw from the interview, you can choose to stop at any stage and withdraw from the interview, and I will stop recording. You can also choose to withdraw for up to two weeks after the interview takes place, please contact me by email to inform me of your choice to do so.

How will the study be carried out?

This phase of the study will be carried out through semi-structured interviews that can take place in three ways.

1. Upon approval from the centre manager/ owner, I can come to the natural setting of the early years' service.
2. At a location that is comfortable and convenient for you.
3. Via Microsoft Teams.

The interview will take approximately 60- 90 minutes in duration.

What will happen to me if I agree to take part?

If you volunteer to participate in this research study, you will be required to participate in a semi structured interview with me. You can choose whether to have this interview in person or online via teams.

If you chose in person, I could come to the early year's setting upon permission from yourself and the manager or we can meet in a location and time that is comfortable and convenient for you.

The interview questions will be given to you two weeks in advance, so you have insight to the general structure of the interview and take the time you need to review and make informed consent.

The interview in person will be audio recorded, and I may take handwritten notes. The interview will be anonymous where I will apply a pseudo name to ensure this.

If the interview takes place on Microsoft Teams, the interview will be video, and audio recorded as per Microsoft Teams settings, please note this interview will not be anonymous however data will be erased after data analysis. I will also ensure that I am the only person to have access to your data and will be stored securely on my password protected laptop which is secured in a locked cabinet to which I have the only key.

The responses collated will be used only for the purpose of this research study and a pseudo name will be used to ensure your anonymity. Only myself and my research supervisors will have access to this data. For any publication purposes, all data will be anonymised.

What are the benefits?

Although you will not directly benefit from participation in this research study, you will be contributing to a greater understanding of mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland. Furthermore, I would like to highlight to you that you are central to this study, sharing your understanding and experience is fundamental to this research study. As an act of reciprocity, I will offer all participants a mindfulness resource that can be used with young children in your setting as a thank you for giving your valuable time.

What are the risks?

The potential risks of participating in this research study are limited, however you should be aware that you are free to stop at any stage and to withdraw from the interview. If you wish to take a break from the interview at any stage, please notify me and we will take a comfort break. You may also choose not to answer a particular question, and you have the right to do so if you wish. All information shared is confidential. While anonymity is assured for in person interviews where audio recording takes place, however for interviews taking place via Microsoft Teams with the video and audio recording functions, anonymity is not possible. However, I will have the only access to this recording and will be protected on my password protected laptop which will be stored in a locked cabinet. This recording will be erased after my data analysis. Whilst I can guarantee that all data will be retained on DkIT encrypted OneDrive files, however with any data systems there is always a risk of a data breach.

Due care and diligence have been undertaken to ensure the interview questions do not place participants under stress or experience emotional distress. I understand that I am asking you to share details of your personal practice of mindfulness, consequently, interview questions will be shared with you two weeks in advance so that you can take the time and space you need to decide if the questions are too personal to not take part.

You will also be provided with a debriefing letter inviting you to contact me with any queries or concerns you may have after the interview has taken place.

What if something goes wrong when I'm taking part in this study?

Please be assured there are no right or wrong answers, and the hope is to gain insight into all ECEC educators' perspectives on mindfulness-based practice. While this interview is unlikely to cause distress, please feel free to email me with any concerns you may have. If you wish to withdraw from the interview, please inform the me straightaway and I will stop recording and cease the interview. If you decide upon reflection after the interview that you wish to withdraw, you are free to do so up to 2 weeks after the interview takes place and please email me to inform me of your decision to withdraw.

Will it cost me anything to take part?

Participants will not incur any costs to participate in the semi-structured interview; however, I understand that your time is valuable, and I will provide you with a mindfulness resource as an act of reciprocity.

Is the study confidential?

Confidentiality of the participants are of utmost importance and will be adhered to at all times. All data collected and through the use of pseudo names will ensure that no participant is identifiable.

Data generated from the interviews will be interpreted by myself as researcher and will only be accessible to myself and the researcher's supervisors on this research project. The data will be stored securely in password-protected files on DkIT's encrypted Microsoft OneDrive on my password protected laptop. The laptop will be securely locked in a cabinet to which I have the only access.

I as the researcher will adhere to the policies of DkIT and GDPR guidelines regarding the retention of data.

Data from recordings from Microsoft Teams will be erased after data analysis.

Data will be retained up to two years post competition of this PhD research study to allow further analysis and potential peer review of this study. After a period of two years, all data will be destroyed/ erased; both hard and soft copies and no additional copies will be retained.

You may wish to express an interest in contributing to the next phase of this research study, and an option to share your email at the end of the interview will be offered. This is voluntary and your email will be stored securely and separate from your interview data.

You may wish to be informed about the final findings of this research study, once complete, an option to provide your email will be provided. This is voluntary and your email will be stored securely and separate from your responses.

Where can I get further information?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me on

Name: Leesa Flanagan
Email: leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie
Address: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth, A91 K584.
Phone No: xxxx

If you wish to raise a concern regarding the study, please contact the research supervisors on

Name: Dr. Jemma Mc Gourty and Dr. Catherine O'Connor
Email: jemma.mcgourty@dkit.ie Catherine.oconnor@dkit.ie
Address: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth, A91 K584.

Appendix J Participant Consent Form

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education".

I have read and understood the **Information Leaflet** about this research project. The information has been fully explained to me, and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
I understand that I don't have to take part in this study and that I can opt out at any time during the interview and up to 2 weeks post interview.	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
I am aware of the potential risks of this research study.	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
I have been assured that information about me will be kept private and confidential.	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
I have been given a copy of the Information Leaflet and this completed consent form for my records.	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Storage and future use of information: I give my permission for information collected about me to be stored or electronically processed for the purpose of research and to be used in <u>related studies or other studies in the future</u> but only if the research is approved by a Research Ethics Committee.	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐

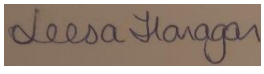
| | |

Participant Name (Block Capitals) | Participant Signature | Date

To be completed by the Researcher:

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.
Researcher's Name: LEESA FLANAGAN

Researcher's qualification: BA ECEC, MA Leadership & Advocacy.

Researcher's signature: 

Appendix K Participant Location Preference for Interview

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland"

Please fill in your preference in the boxes below and I will try to accommodate where possible depending on location. Thanking you for your valuable contribution to this study.

Participants Name	

Where will the interview take place?	
Online (TEAMS)	
In person (Please note your preferred location to meet, eg. Early years' service, home etc. please provide full address and Eircode so I can plan accordingly)	

What time will the interview take place?	
Between 9am – 12pm	
Between 12pm- 3pm	
Between 3pm- 6pm	
Between 6pm- 9pm	

Dates I am not available for interview

Please email me this completed form and the signed consent form to leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie and I will get back to you as soon as possible with dates for interview. With gratitude, Leesa

Appendix L Emails to Participants

Email Number One:

Good afternoon,

I hope that you are keeping well. Firstly, I want to thank you for completing the questionnaire in the initial phase of my research project exploring mindfulness in early childhood education in Ireland. I am now moving to the next phase, and I wanted to check in with you to see if you are still interested in partaking in an interview with me. Your insight and experience would be incredibly valuable for this research project; however, I do understand how busy schedules can be and I truly appreciate your time.

If you are happy to proceed, I have attached the information and consent form for you to look at. I have also attached the interview questions to give you an idea into what we will discuss along with a preference form to indicate your availability.

I am happy to meet in person or on Teams if that is more convenient for you. I can work around your schedule if you would prefer to meet in the morning, afternoon, evening or weekends.

I look forward to your response.
With best wishes and gratitude,

Leesa

Email number two

Good afternoon,

I just wish to thank you for partaking in an interview with me "Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland". Your insight and participation are greatly appreciated and added such breadth to my research study. Please note if you wish to withdraw your data, you can do so by emailing me within the next two weeks. Please see attached debriefing letter for your records.

If you would kindly email me your address and Eircode, so I can send a small token to you.

With gratitude,
Leesa

Appendix M Gatekeeper Sheet

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education"

Researcher Name:	**Leesa Flanagan**
Telephone number of Researcher:	**085 xxxxxxx**
Email address of Researcher:	**leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**
Research Supervisors Names:	**Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor**

Dear Manager/ Owner of ECEC Service,

My name is Leesa Flanagan, and I am a PhD student in DkIT. I am undergoing a piece of research titled "Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland". The purpose of this phase of my study, is to conduct interviews with ECEC educators who use mindfulness practice with young children in an ECEC setting. With consent from one of the participants to contact you, they have expressed an interest in partaking in an interview with me and have voiced a preference for me to come to the ECEC service with your permission.

I would like to convey to you that this choice is voluntary and if my coming to the service is in anyway an inconvenience to you, your team or the running of the service please let me know and I will organise an alternative venue to meet the participant. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes and would require a quiet space. If you are in agreement with me coming to interview the participant in the service, would you please let me know suitable dates and times so we can arrange accordingly, I will bring a copy of my garda vetting for you in addition to photo id. If there is anything else you require from me, please don't hesitate to let me know.

Thanking you for your support and I look forward to hearing from you.

Leesa Flanagan

Appendix N Interview Topic Guide Without Prompts

The interview will commence by the researcher reading through the participant information sheet and consent form to ensure informed consent and the participant fully understands their role. This will allow the participant an opportunity to seek clarification or ask questions. Both the consent form and participant information sheet will have been signed by the participant prior to interview.

Icebreaker

Q1. Could you tell me a little bit about how long you have been working in the early years and the age range of children that you work with?

Exploring Educators' Construction of Mindfulness and Educators' Self- practice

Q2. Would you share with me your understanding of mindfulness?

Q3. Could you talk to me about your own practice of mindfulness and what that entails?

Q4. Could you share with me how it feels for you when you practice mindfulness?

Q5. I am interested to know, have you found any impact of mindfulness practice on your own wellbeing and if you could tell me about this impact?

Q6. Could you tell me about how you were introduced to mindfulness?

Understanding How Educators Enact Mindfulness with Young Children

Q7. Could you share with me some of the mindfulness practices you have used with young children?

Q8. Regarding your mindfulness practices with young children could you describe to me how often you practice with young children?

Q9. Following on from our last question, the literature refers to two approaches to teaching mindfulness practice to young children, a task orientated approach or an embedded practice. Which makes more sense to you in your practice?

Q10. Would you tell me a little about the curriculum framework you follow and how mindfulness practices may align/ may not align with it?

Exploring the Perceived Impact of Mindfulness based Practice on Young Children.

Q11. Could you describe to me why you use mindfulness practice with young children in your service?

Q12. Having engaged with mindfulness practices/ activities with young children, could you describe to me what you have observed with children in terms of impact?

Q13. In your experience having engaged with mindfulness practice/ mindfulness activities with young children, what are your thoughts on sharing mindfulness practice with parents and families?

Q14. I am interested to discover have you found any additional impact of using mindfulness practice with children in the early years setting?

Q15. Do you feel there is a specific attitude required to share mindfulness practice with young children?

Identifying barriers to practice and exploring possible solutions to overcoming such barriers.

Q16. You shared with me how you have implemented mindfulness practice/ mindfulness activities with young children, perhaps we could talk about any challenges if any that you have experienced?

Q17. Some interesting findings emerged from the first phase of this study, whereby some educator's relayed self-confidence to practice mindfulness as a barrier, could you share with me your thoughts on this?

Q18. Another interesting finding from the first phase of this study, where some educator's noted that other individuals whether that be fellow colleagues or management structures are a barrier to mindfulness practice. I wonder what your thoughts on this finding is.

Q19. From your experience, would you able to describe to me some solutions to overcoming organisational and cultural challenges that you have adopted or suggest some solutions that early childhood educators could use?

Q20. Could you share with me your thoughts on early childhood educators undertaking training to teach mindfulness to young children and what this training could like?

Q21. What advice would you give an early childhood educator who is considering introducing mindfulness practices/ activities with young children in their setting?

Q22. What advice would you give an early years' service manager or owner who is considering introducing mindfulness practice in the setting?

Q23. I wonder, if you had a magic wand with an unlimited financial budget to implement mindfulness practice in your service, what three things would be the most important to focus on?

Conclusion

Q24. Is there anything that we have not discussed or mentioned today that you would like to share with me?

Q25. As we close this interview, would you like to share any key message about mindfulness practice?

Q26. Thank you for taking the time today to partake in this research study, I would be very interested to know how you found this experience of me interviewing you?

Appendix O Full Interview Guide with Prompts and Changes

(changes highlighted in red following pilot)

The interview will commence by the researcher reading through the participant information sheet and consent form to ensure informed consent and the participant fully understands their role. This will allow the participant an opportunity to seek clarification or ask questions. Both the consent form and participant information sheet will have been signed by the participant prior to interview.

Icebreaker

Q1. Could you tell me a little bit about how long you have been working in the early years and the age range of children that you work with?

Exploring Educators' Construction of Mindfulness and Educators' Self- practice

Q2. Would you share with me your understanding of mindfulness?

- *What has influenced your understanding of mindfulness?*
- *What does mindfulness mean to you?*
- *Could you explain some specific elements of mindfulness?*

Q3. Could you talk to me about your own practice of mindfulness and what that entails?

- *What types of practice have you engaged in?*
- *Could you share with me where and when you have practiced?*
- *Could you talk to me a little about the reasons why you practice mindfulness?*

Q4. Could you share with me how it feels for you when you practice mindfulness?

- *Could you describe to me how it feels in your body, mind?*
- *Could you share with me your experience of moment-to-moment attention?*
- *Is there any specific intention you embody?*

Q5. I am interested to know, have you found any impact of mindfulness practice on your own wellbeing and if you could tell me about this impact?

- *Could you explain any impact on your attitude or outlook on life?*
- *Has the practice of mindfulness impacted on your work with young children?*

Q6. Could you tell me about how you were introduced to mindfulness?

- *Was your practice Initiated by self, introduced by someone else, books, media, apps etc?*
- *Have you engaged with any mindfulness training/ workshops to learn about mindfulness?*

Understanding How Educators Enact Mindfulness with Young Children

Q7. Could you share with me some of the mindfulness practices you have used with young children?

- *Some of the practices can be formal and informal which can include breathing, creative, musical, meditation, books, nature outdoors, have you used any of these with young children?*
- *How do you practice in your classroom, and can you give me examples of what this looks like?*

Q8. Regarding your mindfulness practices with young children could you describe to me how often you practice with young children?

- *Is it once off, daily, weekly, less often that you practice?*
- *Is there a specific reason/s why you practice this way with young children?*

Q9. Following on from our last question, the literature refers to two approaches to teaching mindfulness practice to young children, a task orientated approach or an embedded practice. Which makes more sense to you in your practice?

- *Have you a preference for either approach with young children?*
- *Have you used either/ both approaches with young children?*
- *Could you share any reasons why an educator may choose a task orientated approach with young children?*

Q10. Would you tell me a little about the curriculum framework you follow and how mindfulness may align/ may not align with it?

- *From your experience does mindfulness align with Aistear and how you think it could?*
- *Are there specific themes in Aistear that mindfulness could align with?*

Exploring the Perceived Impact of Mindfulness Practice on Young Children.

Q11. Could you describe to me why you use mindfulness practice with young children in your service?

- *Could you share any knowledge or research on why it may be useful to use mindfulness in the early years?*
- *I have been reading about mindfulness in the early years being used by educators to enhance young children's wellbeing, reduce anxiety, improve social skills, do any of these resonate with you in your practice?*
- *Are there any reasons not to use mindfulness-based practice with young children?*
- *Do you feel there could be any disadvantages to using mindfulness-based practice with young children?*
- *What are your thoughts on the ages of children using mindfulness-based practice?*

Q12. Having engaged with mindfulness practices/ activities with young children, could you describe to me what you have observed with children in terms of impact?

- *I would like to know if you have seen any benefits to practicing mindfulness with children?*
- *From the literature, some of the benefits described of the possible impact of mindfulness on young children have included self-regulation, emotional literacy, prosocial behaviour, is this something you have seen?*
- *Could you share with me if you have observed children initiating mindfulness themselves or is this something initiated always by the educators?*

Q13. In your experience having engaged with mindfulness practice/ mindfulness activities with young children, what are your thoughts on sharing mindfulness practice with parents and families?

- *Do you feel sharing mindfulness practice with families is important?*
- *Could you share with me some ways in which you could/ have shared mindfulness with parents and families?*
- *Do you feel there could be any barriers to sharing with parents and families?*

Q14. I am interested to discover have you found any additional impact of using mindfulness-based practice with children in the early years setting?

- *Have you observed any Impact on relationships between educator and child that can be attributed to mindfulness-based practice?*
- *Have you observed any impact on the classroom environment that can be attributed to mindfulness-based practice?*

Q15. Do you feel there is a specific attitude required to share mindfulness practice with young children?

Identifying barriers to practice and exploring possible solutions to overcoming such barriers.

Q16. You shared with me how you have implemented mindfulness practice/ mindfulness activities with young children, perhaps we could talk about any challenges if any that you have experienced?

- *Have you experienced any organisational challenges, such as having enough time, access to resources, training?*
- *Have you experienced any cultural challenges, such as people's understanding of mindfulness, willingness to practice, values, beliefs etc.*
- *Are there any other barriers to practice that you feel could arise for an early year's educator to practice mindfulness with young children.*

Q17. Some interesting findings emerged from the first phase of this study, whereby some educator's relayed self-confidence to practice mindfulness as a barrier, could you share with me your thoughts on this?

- *Is self-confidence to practice something you have experienced, could you tell me about that?*
- *Could you share with me how you think that could be eased or supported to overcome?*

Q18. Another interesting finding from the first phase of this study, where some educator's noted that other individuals whether that be fellow colleagues or management structures are a barrier to mindfulness practice. I wonder what your thoughts on this finding is.

- *Could you share with me any experiences you have had regarding people barriers?*
- *Could you share with me how you think that could be overcome?*

Q19. From your experience, would you able to describe to me some solutions to overcoming organisational and cultural challenges that you have adopted or suggest some solutions that early years' educators could use?

- *Could you share some ways in which to combat having time to practice, what could an organisation do?*
- *Could you share some ways in which to combat access to training, what could an organisation do?*
- *Could you share some ways to combat cultural challenges and how to deal with people's resistance to mindfulness, other staff, management, parents etc*.

Q20. Could you share with me your thoughts on early years educators undertaking training to teach mindfulness to young children and what this training could like?

- *Have you a preference for accredited or no accredited training?*
- *What would the ideal training look like to you, themes, practices, activities, time, online, in person?*
- *Do you feel there could be any challenges to undertake training?*

- *The research is suggesting a whole-school approach is the optimal approach, whereby all stakeholders embrace and embody mindfulness including all educators, management, all staff, children, parents, what are your thoughts on this approach?*
- *How do you think this whole-school approach could be achieved?*
- *What are your thoughts on peer support from an experienced educator?*

Reflexive element

Q21. What advice would you give an early childhood educator who is considering introducing mindfulness practices/ activities with young children in their setting?

- *Are there any specific skills an educator requires?*
- *Are there any personal attributes needed, such as attitude, intention, and attention?*
- *Is personal practice a consideration for practicing mindfulness with young children?*
- *What approach should they take, task or embedded?*
- *Are there any other barriers an educator may face?*

Q22. What advice would you give an early years' service manager or owner who is considering introducing mindfulness practice in the setting?

- *How do you feel about educator's own practice, do you think this is an important element and why?*
- *Do you feel appropriate training for educators should be a priority and what would that look like?*
- *What would support from management look like in practice? – resources, time etc.*

Q23. I wonder, if you had a magic wand with an unlimited financial budget to implement mindfulness in your service, what three things would be the most important to focus on?

- *Resources, what types would you wish to have?*
- *Training, what types of training would you wish to undertake, once off, ongoing, online, in person?*
- *Would parent programmes being a consideration and what would that look like?*

Conclusion

Q24. Is there anything that we have not discussed or mentioned today that you would like to share with me?

- *Is there anything else about mindfulness practice that you would like to tell me about?*
- *Is there anything else you have experienced with mindfulness practice that you would like to share with me?*

Q25. As we close this interview, would you like to share any key message about mindfulness practice?

Q26. Thank you for taking the time today to partake in this research study, I would be very interested to know how you found this experience of me interviewing you?

- *Is there anything that you feel I could have done differently today?*
- *Is there anything else you recommend that I ask in future interviews?*

Appendix P Feedback Sheet for Pilot

1. Were any of the questions unclear, confusing or difficult to answer?
2. Did any of the questions feel unnecessary?
3. How did you find the pace of the interview?
4. Did I give you enough time to reflect and respond?
5. Did the order of questions feel logical to you?
6. Did you feel the questions allowed you to reflect and engage?
7. How comfortable did you feel in the interview?
8. Were any questions too personal or intrusive?
9. At any point did you feel you wanted to say more if given the opportunity?
10. Were there any topics you felt I could have asked but didn't?
11. Is there anything I could do to improve as an interviewer?
12. Is there anything you would recommend I change?

Appendix Q Post-Interview Debrief Letter

Debriefing Letter

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education"

Researcher Name:	**Leesa Flanagan**
Telephone number of Researcher:	**085 xxxxxxx**
Email address of Researcher:	**leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**
Research Supervisors Names:	**Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor**

Dear Participant,

I wish to thank you for your valuable contribution to my research study "Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education". The purpose of this research study is to explore early childhood educators understanding, experience and enactment of mindfulness practice in the early years. It is hoped these findings will contribute to the evolving field of mindfulness-practice in early childhood education. If you have any queries or questions post interview, please don't hesitate to contact me. If you wish to withdraw your interview data, please email me within two weeks of this interview taking place.

Thank you for kindly giving your time to this research study.

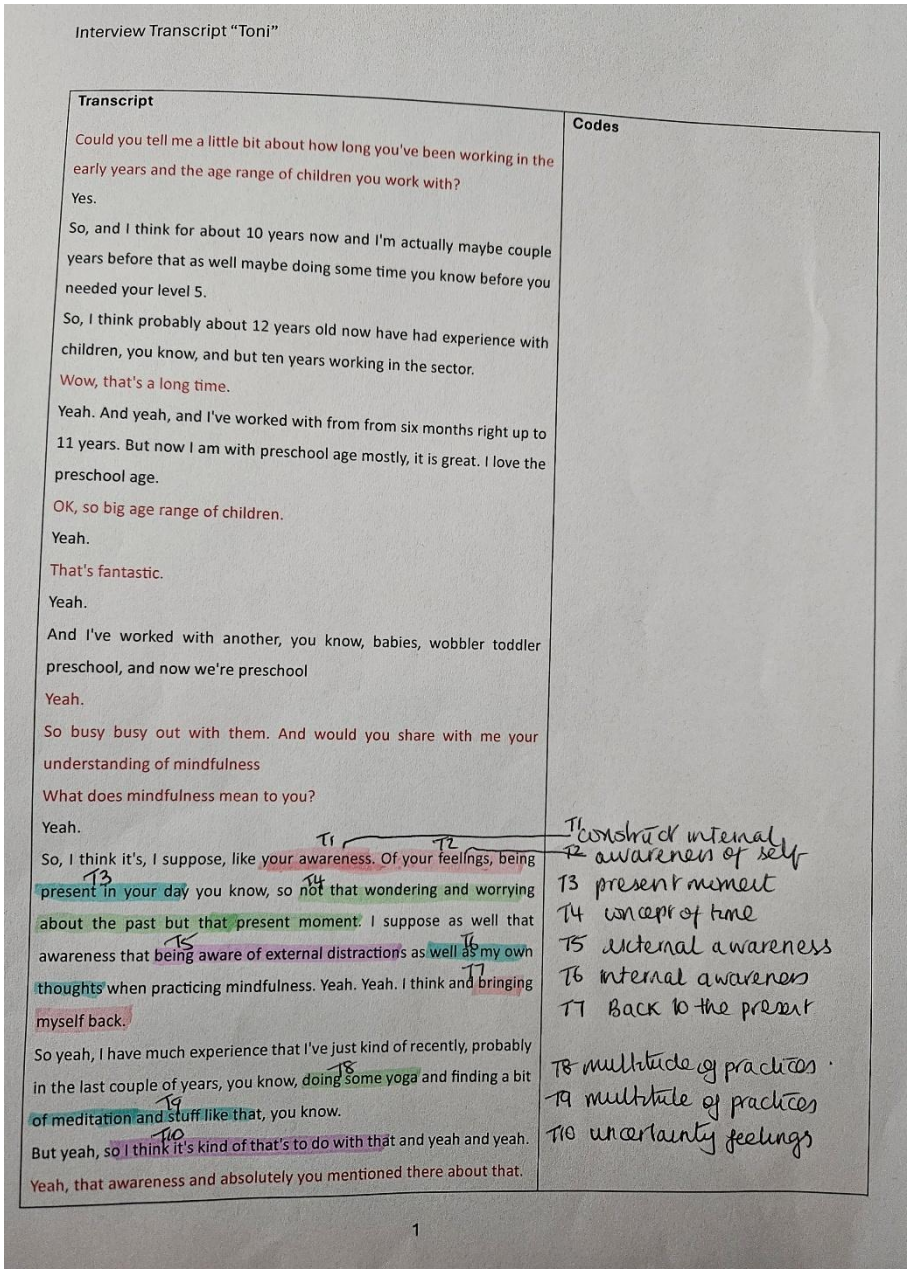
With best wishes,

Leesa Flanagan

Appendix R Photo of Gift for Educators



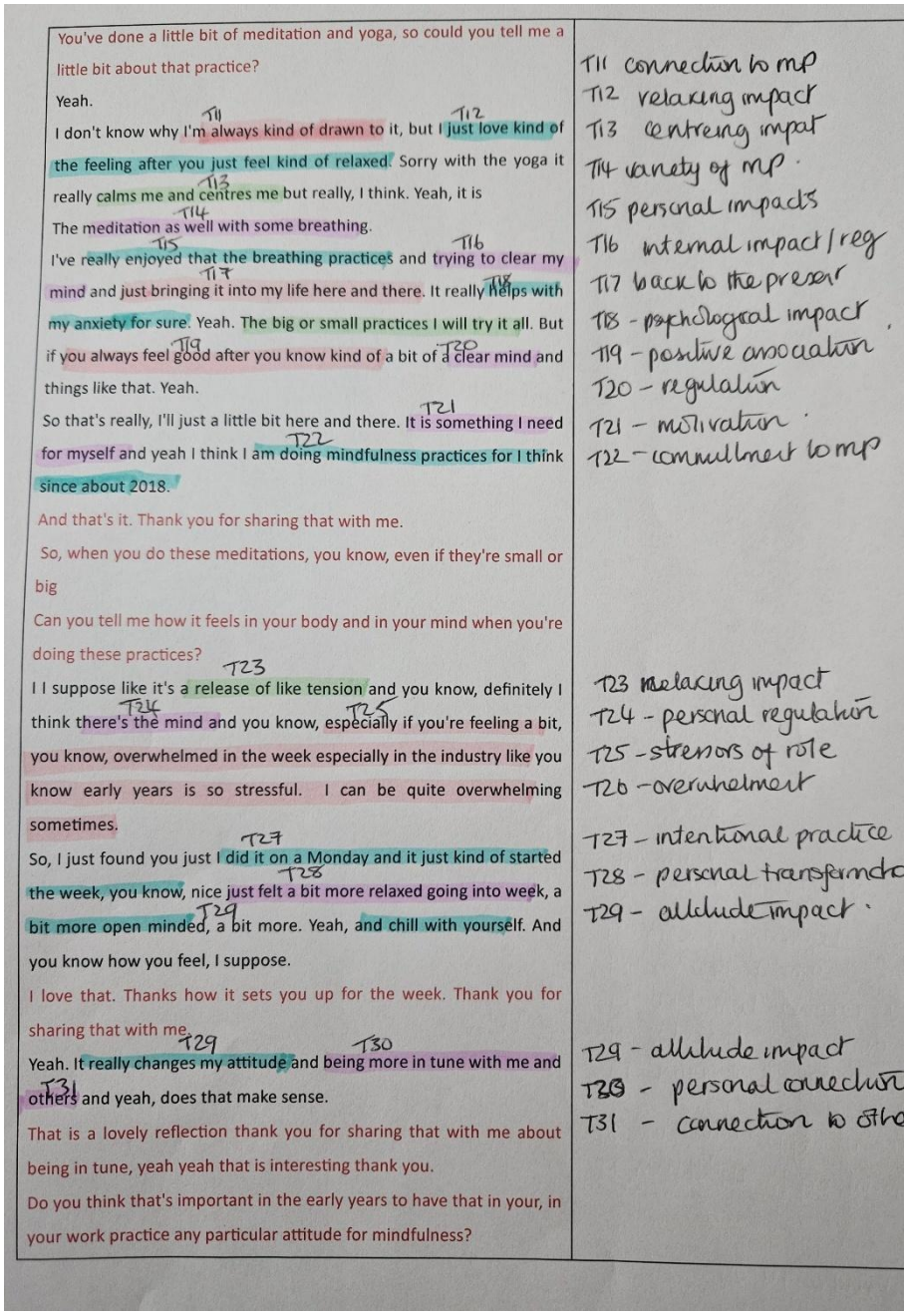
Appendix S Coded Interview Transcript



Interview Transcript "Toni"

Transcript	Codes
Could you tell me a little bit about how long you've been working in the early years and the age range of children you work with?	
Yes.	
So, and I think for about 10 years now and I'm actually maybe couple years before that as well maybe doing some time you know before you needed your level 5.	
So, I think probably about 12 years old now have had experience with children, you know, and but ten years working in the sector.	
Wow, that's a long time.	
Yeah. And yeah, and I've worked with from from six months right up to 11 years. But now I am with preschool age mostly, it is great. I love the preschool age.	
OK, so big age range of children.	
Yeah.	
That's fantastic.	
Yeah.	
And I've worked with another, you know, babies, wobbler toddler preschool, and now we're preschool	
Yeah.	
So busy busy out with them. And would you share with me your understanding of mindfulness	
What does mindfulness mean to you?	
Yeah.	T1 construct internal T2 awareness of self
So, I think it's, I suppose, like your awareness. Of your feelings, being present in your day you know, so not that wondering and worrying about the past but that present moment. I suppose as well that awareness that being aware of external distractions as well as my own thoughts when practicing mindfulness. Yeah. Yeah. I think and bringing myself back.	T3 present moment T4 concept of time T5 external awareness T6 internal awareness T7 Back to the present
So yeah, I have much experience that I've just kind of recently, probably in the last couple of years, you know, doing some yoga and finding a bit of meditation and stuff like that, you know.	T8 multitude of practices T9 multitude of practices
But yeah, so I think it's kind of that's to do with that and yeah and yeah.	T10 uncertainty feelings
Yeah, that awareness and absolutely you mentioned there about that.	

1



You've done a little bit of meditation and yoga, so could you tell me a little bit about that practice?

Yeah.

I don't know why I'm always kind of drawn to it, but I just love kind of the feeling after you just feel kind of relaxed. Sorry with the yoga it really calms me and centres me but really, I think. Yeah, it is The meditation as well with some breathing.

I've really enjoyed that the breathing practices and trying to clear my mind and just bringing it into my life here and there. It really helps with my anxiety for sure. Yeah. The big or small practices I will try it all. But if you always feel good after you know kind of a bit of a clear mind and things like that. Yeah.

So that's really, I'll just a little bit here and there. It is something I need for myself and yeah I think I am doing mindfulness practices for I think since about 2018.

And that's it. Thank you for sharing that with me.

So, when you do these meditations, you know, even if they're small or big

Can you tell me how it feels in your body and in your mind when you're doing these practices?

I I suppose like it's a release of like tension and you know, definitely I think there's the mind and you know, especially if you're feeling a bit, you know, overwhelmed in the week especially in the industry like you know early years is so stressful. I can be quite overwhelming sometimes.

So, I just found you just I did it on a Monday and it just kind of started the week, you know, nice just felt a bit more relaxed going into week, a bit more open minded, a bit more. Yeah, and chill with yourself. And you know how you feel, I suppose.

I love that. Thanks how it sets you up for the week. Thank you for sharing that with me.

Yeah. It really changes my attitude and being more in tune with me and others and yeah, does that make sense.

That is a lovely reflection thank you for sharing that with me about being in tune, yeah yeah that is interesting thank you.

Do you think that's important in the early years to have that in your, in your work practice any particular attitude for mindfulness?

T11 connection to mp
T12 relaxing impact
T13 centreing impact
T14 variety of mp
T15 personal impacts
T16 internal impact / reg
T17 back to the present
T18 - psychological impact
T19 - positive association
T20 - regulation
T21 - motivation
T22 - commitment to mp

T23 relaxing impact
T24 - personal regulation
T25 - stressors of role
T26 - overwhelment

T27 - intentional practice
T28 - personal transformation
T29 - attitude impact

T29 - attitude impact
T30 - personal connection
T31 - connection to others

Yeah, 100%. You need to be open. And it's it's part for staff. And it's part for the children. If you are calm and open, they will be as well.

I think as well not being so judgmental about things is really important as well and be carefree about it. I think when you you kind of practice that and you're just like more open to things than just accept situations for us. I suppose that's why I think I always try to just kind of take things as they come and then right away even see where it goes. But just be. Yeah, I think it helps with all that. You know.

Umm.

With children, especially because you can have your your good days and your bad days and children are just who they are. You just got to ride that wave with them and see where it goes.

So, what they they don't pretend, they are who they are so really helps with that, I think.

And I really like that there about ride the wave and see where it goes. I love that. That's great.

That's fantastic. Thank you for that. And could you tell me about how you were introduced to mindfulness or was it somebody that introduced you to it? Or how were you introduced?

Well, I'm seeing it kind of more on social media over the years, so maybe before COVID, I think it is hard with all that. Yeah. About 6 years. I think I found things on social media. And then.

I suppose the CALM app I definitely seen that kind of really introduced me to like, you know, doing the yoga and things like that.

But yeah, definitely think social media would have been how we found out about it first really and I just started with some breathing first. So I find those breathing breaks and giving a moment.

I learned to go online as well about breathing for children and stuff like that and they always use that and, in my job, then I brought it to the children with the breathing and bits like that. They like it.

I absolutely, absolutely. Could you share with me so some of the mindfulness practices you've used with children you spoke there about that you do the breathing with them?

Yeah. So, I always feel like that's good for kinda getting them to help with some situations. They need to feel calm and settled. Can be, you know, minor things even but it really helps them out,

Hmm.

T32 - openess
T33 - relationality aspect
T34 - impact of educator
T35 - non judgment attitude
T36 - sense of playfulness
T37 - value of self practice
T38 - acceptance feelings
T39 - acceptance mindset

T40 - impact on children
T41 - openess to possibilities

T42 - authentic practice

T43 - learned practice

T44 - social media presence
T45 - breathing opportunities
T46 - breathing for presence
T47 - breathing natural progression children
T48 - motivation to share

T49 - intervention approach
T50 - regulation

I can see even with them they just need you to stop and hug them. Just listen to them and be there.

And they kind of reaction sometimes can be big and dependent on, you know, what they're dealing with themselves.

So I always find like if I get them to concentrate on their breathing and helps them communicate a little bit better, you know, and probably dealing with situations and some children actually, if you just tell them you know, we used to do it with some children and then if you just say to them and they they're like, you know, they started, which is really good.

And then the other thing would be like we'd have sometimes like a little relaxation time and depending on how the room is and we've kind of turned the lights off, please. So nice music. Just get them all to, you know, chill out. Breathe. Relax, have spaces themselves, and yeah, that that does it works sometimes and other times it doesn't and that is ok too. But even if they are painting or building something, I find having the calming music on keeps them engrossed as well. But it doesn't always have to be. You know. Yeah. And then and the other kind of practice I use would be like more kind of deal like movements kind of. You know, like the Bunny Hopper, you know, stretch like a giraffe and things like that, you know, to kind of get them to use their energy.

Absolutely. That is lovely to hear all the different types of practices you are using.

And that way, if they're they're all gone left, you know, to bring them back a little bit or push the wall or something, yeah. Just let them be free in that movement they need to move. They need that freedom as it can be in the quiet time and the freer crazy moments. It is in it all. It doesn't matter what the activity is, the running, the dance. Art with the calming music even. It is flexible and in it all really.

And that's lovely to hear because you know, that's mindfulness. Yes, it can be in the Meditations and the breathing, but it also can be in the movement and the dance and art and music. It can be an absolutely anything.

Yes. And knowing your children as well what they like or what works.

Umm. So how often do you do these practices with children?

I'd say in one way or another, it must be all the time, it is within the day all the time so I can't really say. It is just really apart of everything in our day with the children.

T51 Exhibiting mindful presence

T52 - cues of dysregulation

T53 - attunement to children

T54 - combatting stressors

T55 - informal mindful atmosphere

T56 - music for relaxation

T57 - creating mindful spaces

T58 ~~acceptance of~~ flexibility of mind re: practices

T59 - integrated approach

T60 - nurtures flow

T61 - multitude of approaches

T62 - mindful movement

T63 - respecting childrens choice

T64 - flexibility of MP.

T65 - adapting r knowing.

T66 - favour an embedded approach

Umm T67 You know, whatever the kind of practice is, whether it is like dance or relaxation and breathing, it definitely is done daily in different ways, I guess. What with by themselves T68 they do it as well, go over and see them in the corner taking a breath or doing a bunny hop. With us, you know, and some children T69 even ask for things you know, like, can we do relaxation time? And others are like, let's dance. You know, so yeah. Or we can do breathing, and the children will go over themselves T70 as well when they want it. Isn't that amazing that you've seen children initiate themselves and to ask. Yeah, it's really good. It's really good. I think T71 it's really benefits children's great approach to you know, them dealing with their emotions and things like that. And their energy and all the and how to regulate themselves. And some children. Yeah. They just know. They need that. And you know we have this T72 wonderful opportunity in early years to teach this skill of mindfulness that can have a positive impact for life. You know, when you think T73 about it is an unusual opportunity or unusual thing really as I think when it comes to skills there aren't many transferable skills that can T74 have this huge impact. I have seen it benefit the children. Yeah. And have you seen though you've seen the have you seen those benefits or impacts with the children? Yeah, like you know, if that if I say they some children breathe now themselves, you know, I'm saying one girl does that. She's really funny and you should feel to you're kind of getting there and she would like, just breathe. And she's like, I'm breathing, and she inhales. Like she's saying it and then she is calmer, so you see that. So, it's really good. Like you know, she's she's like, I know. I know this will help me. Yeah. You know, it's really good awareness for her, I suppose. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, the awareness she has and now it is great. And that's brilliant there you mentioned she has this awareness at this young age, fantastic thank you. I mean, they could teach adults a lot, I think, couldn't they?	T67 - embedded approach T68 - children initiating mp T69 - children prompting T70 - autonomy T71 - emotional regulation T72 - early years opportune time T73 - advocating for early years T74 - transferable T75 - children leading mp T76 - sense of awareness

Yeah, definitely. The fact that they see stuff. They feel it they are so aware.	T77-children awareness
Wait until I tell you, I think the biggest moment for me was when one day I was feeling overwhelmed and a child looked at me and said I think you need to take a deep breath, that was something else and I knew our mindfulness practices were taking root not as individuals but between us all.	T78 moving to a collective T79- positive impacts
Thank you so much for sharing that wonderful experience. Wow children can really be teachers to us. Thank you for that. Do you feel there are any reasons not to practice with children or certain ages you couldn't use mindfulness.	T80 - parental awareness T81respect for parents difference
No not really there aren't any reasons but to be aware of parents. Like our parents are open to help and strategies but maybe they could be a problem and maybe a reason but not really. No no if you know it works why wouldn't you. But you need everyone yeah yeah. Yeah, all the educators. I have seen it with babies with the light and the music, and it is calming so even for babies we are giving it giving it the mindfulness. I think that some parents may think it's a religious thing but telling them and showing them what it is will solve that.	T82 - adapted for babies. T83 - religious barrier T84 - partnership with parents
Thank you for that and sharing that potential barrier, that is very interesting, have you experienced this or any other barrier?	
Me personally I haven't really, we include parents, and they know what mindfulness practice is and why we do it and we share strategies with them so we are fine, but I can imagine if others were against it Yeah Oh my God, yeah yeah that would be hard. We haven't had any barriers to be honest it is just how we teach really you know.	T85 - sharing with parents. T86 - lack of barriers.
Thank you for that insight and hearing about your embedded approach. So just in the literature, they're kind of like 2 approaches to mindfulness with young children. An embedded in everything or So, it's a task approach of going in doing a mindfulness activity.	
OK, it's mindfulness time. I would not really like that. But, you know, let's get this activity done or maybe it could be a child that's that that needs that extra support. I think that a task or set approach is needed sometimes if a child needs that support, but I would hate it to be all set and formal as then it won't be done and it is how to be not to do. Am I making sense?	T87 - distaste for formalised T88 - need for intervention T89 - risk of being left

Oh, absolutely thank you for sharing that, have you used a structured approach yourself

I think like well, first of all, I have when a child was dysregulated and upset and did some intervention work and we would do some breathing at circle time to kind of set the day off. I think children have to understand that negative feelings and emotions are natural and normal and we need to find ways to show them that. That for me is where mindfulness practice really kicks in, just in the everyday chats of noticing our feelings, sharing and talking about them and yeah. You know. Yeah even. Let me think. Even that they are like clouds that come and go. But I think you do this more in an embedded into the day and that would be my preference and slowly but surely, I think people are kind of you know introduced to it. So, we need to know it so we can introduce it to them. So maybe it is task at the start to show the children and then it becomes your way.

With regards to the curriculum you follow do you feel mindfulness like aligns or not aligns with it I'm interested in your ideas on this.

Yeah. I follow Aistear the curriculum framework Yeah. Well, I suppose it's o do with like wellbeing, and I think it could align with Aistear as emotional wellbeing is crucial now for us all, but it is a pity it doesn't actually say it or give us training.

You know, so I would think that it does aligns with Aistear and that sense like it's really good for children's mental health, especially as they get older as well.

But we really need to I guess gives them little pointers on how to deal with situations from young age.

And so, yeah, it's, I think there's probably more areas and you know communication maybe you know I'm and yeah, social skills and that but it doesn't really say oh here ya this is mindfulness. But we could be clearer I think, but sure we be waiting for that now wouldn't we. We never get training.

What are your thoughts on mindfulness training?

Yeah, I think that would be really good. Yeah. Like I only did a few workshops online and I want to do more, I think for me to be calm first. I suppose you need to be calm. And then mindfulness for children and show us what to do. I have really. I think. I have used what I have learned and read myself.

T90 - to support children

T91 - impermence of feelings

T92 - relationality

T93 - emotional literacy

T94 - impermert analogies

T95 - integrated preference

T96 - value of knowledge

T97 - ~~not~~ formal at initial stage

T98 - curriculum approach

T99 curriculum alignment

T100 - need for explicity

T101 - support childrens wellbeing

T102 - resiliency.

T103 - need for clarity

T104 - eager for explicitly mentioned.

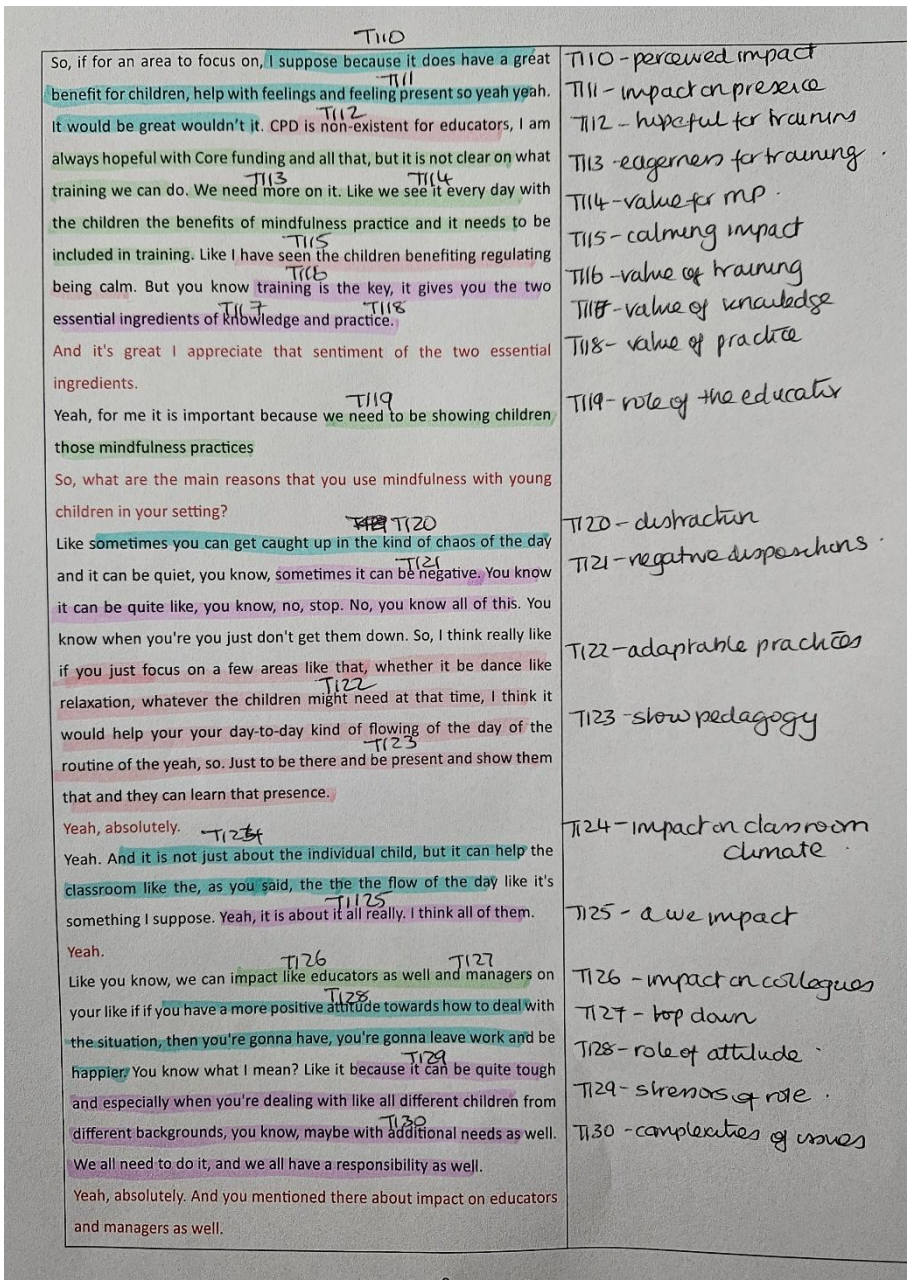
T105 - training barrier

T106 - eagerness for training

T107 - value of self practice

T108 - personal impact

T109 - application of mp



So, if for an area to focus on, I suppose because it does have a great benefit for children, help with feelings and feeling present so yeah yeah. It would be great wouldn't it. CPD is non-existent for educators, I am always hopeful with Core funding and all that, but it is not clear on what training we can do. We need more on it. Like we see it every day with the children the benefits of mindfulness practice and it needs to be included in training. Like I have seen the children benefiting regulating being calm. But you know training is the key, it gives you the two essential ingredients of knowledge and practice.

And it's great I appreciate that sentiment of the two essential ingredients.

Yeah, for me it is important because we need to be showing children those mindfulness practices

So, what are the main reasons that you use mindfulness with young children in your setting?

Like sometimes you can get caught up in the kind of chaos of the day and it can be quiet, you know, sometimes it can be negative. You know it can be quite like, you know, no, stop. No, you know all of this. You know when you're you just don't get them down. So, I think really like if you just focus on a few areas like that, whether it be dance like relaxation, whatever the children might need at that time, I think it would help your your day-to-day kind of flowing of the day of the routine of the yeah, so. Just to be there and be present and show them that and they can learn that presence.

Yeah, absolutely.

Yeah. And it is not just about the individual child, but it can help the classroom like the, as you said, the the the flow of the day like it's something I suppose. Yeah, it is about it all really. I think all of them.

Yeah.

Like you know, we can impact like educators as well and managers on your like if if you have a more positive attitude towards how to deal with the situation, then you're gonna have, you're gonna leave work and be happier. You know what I mean? Like it because it can be quite tough and especially when you're dealing with like all different children from different backgrounds, you know, maybe with additional needs as well. We all need to do it, and we all have a responsibility as well.

Yeah, absolutely. And you mentioned there about impact on educators and managers as well.

T110 - perceived impact
T111 - impact on presence
T112 - hopeful for trainins
T113 - eagerness for training
T114 - value for mp
T115 - calming impact
T116 - value of training
T117 - value of knowledge
T118 - value of practice
T119 - role of the educator
T120 - distraction
T121 - negative dispositions
T122 - adaptable practices
T123 - slow pedagogy
T124 - impact on classroom climate
T125 - awe impact
T126 - impact on colleagues
T127 - top down
T128 - role of attitude
T129 - stressors of role
T130 - complexities of issues

So the research is saying this kind of a few different ways of of implementing mindfulness in the early years, and there's this idea of a whole school approach that it, you know, it shouldn't just be one teacher or, you know, one group that it should be the manager, the owner, the educators, the children, the parents, that whole school approach to mindfulness. What are your thoughts on that?

Yeah, I think that's really good. And because if you change your attitude, you know that's going to filter down to the children. And I think mindfulness is all about that being more open minded, non-judgmental. You know, be more aware I'm present to you know, so yeah. We need to have that positive attitude and we need the manager to be on board, so everyone is singing off the same hymn sheet. We have a responsibility as well if we are doing these practices. You know. Yeah. Like if educators and settings who are using it need to advocate and support that evidence base, like document the benefits, what you are doing and stuff as well and support others and show those bloody inspectors when they arrive.

Umm, absolutely. There is a level of responsibility with sharing. So, and what are your thoughts on sharing mindfulness with parents and families? Is there something you've done already or something you consider doing?

I suppose yes, we have parents on board here with mindfulness as we have shared with them from day one and they love it too. Yeah, because we share those practices with them, they can use at home.

Right. That sounds very empowering, thank you.

I think for me when I was thinking about this interview it is, mindfulness is important for all the staff. Looking after them as well you know because it is a stressful job and knowing someone is looking out for the, yeah yeah. And then you know they be less stressed, but it goes beyond us really.

Yeah. Could you explain more what you mean there about it goes beyond us.

See for me we can do so much in early years, but it has to begin with policy makers and government bodies to understand and have value in mindfulness in order for everyone else to wake up to it and I think everyone would take more heed then of mindfulness practice and what it can do. Because we need that.

T131 - flexible attitude.
T132 - modelling
T133 - open attitude
T134 - non-judgmer
T135 - personal awareness
T136 - collective approach
T137 - ethical responsibility
T138 - responsibility for advocacy.
T139 grassroots value
T140 - partnership with parents
T141 - from ~~school~~ setting to home
T142 - a we approach
T143 - self care r valuing the educator.
T144 onus on policy makers.
T145 - impact of top down

Now that's really interesting thank you of sharing about a top-down approach as that is something that has come up time and again in these interviews.

Yeah. We need everyone on board, and it can trickle through. Because it is about us all and how we live it is not something just fluffy for early years. Because some educators are just not willing or want to engage in mindfulness practice and that is annoying

How do you think we could overcome that challenge of maybe people, people challenge to mindfulness?

I think more education and maybe some training, you know, on mindfulness and obviously the proof that it also impact, you know, they need that training as that is where they learn about it and get to practice as you need that time to practice to understand it. And find ways to bring it in. The practice is the important part though.

I'm going to do like a wellbeing week I, we are and I'm thinking of doing like one with the staff where we just pick something every day that we're you know, every week that we kind of do whatever be or like separately. So, getting them on board as well.

Yeah. Thank you for that about the training. So, you mentioned there about practice, do you feel that is important the practical side of training?

Look you can have all the training in the world, and I love a qualification but if you not experiencing it or practicing it that cert goes down the toilet really. Yeah, I think I think, yeah, accredited one would be really good, but I think both like even if there's, you know practice or like you know classes maybe that and we could all do you know like the way you do together you know. That practice is more important for sure. Umm. And but like it costs, you know, every couple of years that you do the new techniques on how to handle children's behaviour, you know, different things and or your own yourself like, you know, and I think more awareness that mindfulness practice is essential for everything for your own wellbeing and that of the children. There isn't much out there that benefits us all and beyond the classroom, it not just for children. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. No, that's that's brilliant. Thank you. One of the findings that came from my survey was educators that don't practice mindfulness with children. One of the main reasons was their self-confidence to practice with children.

T146 culture of mp.
T147 - challenging the narrative
T148 - value of education r training.
T149 - practical training.
T150 - finding opportunities.
T151 - practice is crucial.
T152 - a culture of w/being
T153 - tension between qualification r implementation
T154 - eagerness for training
T155 - shared practice.
T156 - cost barrier
T157 - competing priorities
T158 - practicality of mp.
T159 - universality of mp

Yeah. Probably because they don't know. You know, they probably don't know what mindfulness is, you know, so. It goes back to training and practicing and mentoring as well, you need strong leaders and a manger as well to support so it doesn't be a fad. Your own time to practice is important to connect it to yourself.	T160 – uncertainty with mp. T161 – mentoring T162 – time for self practice
Umm. Yes. Interesting. Thanks. And one of the questions is what is your thoughts on educators own practice of mindfulness, do you think that is important in order to teach mindfulness to young children?	
Umm. Yes 100%. You need to experience it and feel it because how else can you show children to be present. And experiencing the benefits it is so important because then you will be more likely to do it then.	T163 – value of self practice T164 – mindfully being. T165 – experiential practice
Uh. Yeah.	
I didn't realize how much I was doing of mindfulness until I had this interview so thank you so much for that. I didn't realise I am such a leader of it really.	T166 – reflective pause.
Sure. No, absolutely. I am so glad you had that time to reflect	
One of the things that came across from a lot of the and people I'm interviewing at the moment if people brought up that the idea of there is link coordinators in services so like you know the the inclusion coordinator and link but they a few people said why couldn't there be a mindfulness coordinator that looks after kind of supports everybody's wellbeing what are your thoughts on this?	
Yeah, that'd be really good. Like I I think there's definitely a benefit to mindfulness and like, you know, like I said, I struggle with anxiety at times and to have someone in the service to lead and mentor mindfulness it would be great as we then would have that holistic view.	T167 – value on mentor T168 – holistic perspective
And holistic wellness for all. Yeah, that would be amazing because if we feel present, we will be much happier, and the kids imagine them too and like someone there to kinda that's overall, that would be kind of really good and to encourage it	T169 – create mindfulness culture
Yes, it could be be a very beneficial role, so if you had an early year's educator say to you today, OK, I want to introduce mindfulness to young children. What advice would you give them?	
And., I suppose just, you know, take it one step at a time. Not all children respond the same, you know, approach and some children are different. Practice yourself, do your research, get some training and experience it all first. Umm.	T170 – gentle approach T171 – acceptance if goes wrong T172 – value of self practice T173 – training opportunities T174 – experiential embodiment
Umm.	

T175 And yeah, just take your time to figure out that, oh, and some children have sensory, you know, issues and things like that. Some children just don't like certain things. So yeah, that would be my advice.	T175 - flexible for children
Know the children. Know why you want to even do it as well. T176	T176 - role of mentor
And just to, I suppose I'm speaking to parents as well and kind of explain what your you're doing and you know, yeah. And the benefits of what I suppose yeah. And just begin then. There is no right way. T178	T177 - sharing with parents T178 - not a perscriptive approach
You need to feel those benefits yourself I think anyways. T179	T179 - feeling the impacts
Yeah. Knowing the benefits as well, thank you	
So, in relation then, if you had another manager so manager rang you up today and said right, I want my service to implement mindfulness. I don't know anything about it. What advice would you give to the manager?	
Umm. Hmm. Umm, so it definitely you tell them to kind of, you know probably speak T180 to somebody or even like look T181 some things up online you know and so they can educate T182 themselves a little bit even on it first as they will be the ones bringing it in. And maybe find another service that are already doing mindfulness probably T183 where they might not know and then just to kind of have like a I suppose it. Look T184 at what you are doing. I think start with yourself first and then introduce T185 slowly slowly to the team get them on board.	T180 - engagement T181 - be a researcher T182 - start with self T183 - communities of practice? T184 - self audit T185 - slow pedagogy
Yeah.	
Like in in I don't know the right words like you need to T186 develop your own personal approach to it as otherwise the team be like no way, who is she telling me. So, develop yourself first then bring it in and T187 research the benefits so you have that back up of that proof of it. So yeah, that would. Start with a T188 workshop and ease them in so they don't run away, fun and interesting.	T186 - overcome resistance from staff T187 - value of research T188 - value of experiential practices
Yeah.	
And yeah, absolutely kind of having that taster approach, isn't it kind of like a kind of a small thing, make it fun, make it interesting.	T189 - gentle approach
Kind of let people dip their toe T189 in a little bit to it and see. And I like that T190 a sprinkle of it at the start.	T190 - a sprinkle of mp!
It's it's. Yeah. And then T191 go into the more detailed training then so they get more knowledge.	T191 - build capacity
Yeah, absolutely.	
So, we are nearly at the end of the interview, if I gave you a magic wand today with unlimited money for mindfulness to implement mindfulness	

into your service, what three things would you focus on for mindfulness in your service?

Three things. I would focus on. So, it's probably have like maybe someone get fully fully trained to lead it in the service that would be amazing. They could support the other team with it and help. That will make it not be a once off silly fluffy fad. You get me. And I just love to build a space. Sensory you know, room for relaxation. All of that with all the bells and whistles in it. Do you know what I would love to have a space for a retreat for people all of us to experience mindfulness and to bring back to implement into the centre. So, everyone experiences it and knows this is our way of being.

OH, I'd love that. That sounds great.

Yes, we can do it together and then all experience it so then it would work.

My goodness that is lovely. Absolutely, that sounds great. And so, as we, I suppose, right, nearly at the end of this, is there anything that we haven't mentioned today or is there any key message about mindfulness that you'd like to get out there?

And I suppose. If you, you know, just to have patience with yourself and with others, and you know and mindfulness just it really does have benefits for both yourself and children. It is befriending yourself first and it allows you be kind to yourself and to the children then. You will see the impact so just give it a try. It is like just start and you won't regret it.

That's great. Thank you for taking the time to meet me today. How have you found this experience today of me interviewing you?

Thank you so much. It has been wonderful to be given time to reflect and think and be mindful, you are so calm and lovely. I am so motivated now to continue developing our practice.

I'm going to stop recording now. Thank you

T192 - mindfulness champion

T193 - a sustained practice

T194 - value of space.

T195 - moving to a 'we'

T196 - value of community

T197 - patient attitude

T198 - patience for others

T199 - sense of value bMP

T200 - personal connection

T201 - self compassion

T202 - compassion building.

T203 - positive disposition for MP

T204 - eagerness / motivation for MP

Appendix T Table of Final Themes and Codes

Theme 1: Mindfulness as a multi-dimensional experience	Theme 2: Practicing with Intention	Theme 3: Cultivating a mindful teaching approach	Theme 4: Nurturing mindfulness across the systems
Complexity of views	Self-care strategy	A shared practice	Importance of government supports
A soft skill	Internal impacts	Educator willingness to explore MP	Commitment to holistic educator wellbeing
Acceptance	Personal regulation	Value of pre-service training	A whole school approach to MP
Internal & external awareness	Relaxing impact	Value of knowledge	Sustained support & knowledge sharing
Sense of slowness	Mindful living	Building educators capacity	A shared understanding of MP
Concept of time	Personal connection	Need for formal support	Variances in priorities
Present moment	Prioritising own wellbeing	Connection with training & confidence	Extending MP beyond classroom to home
Importance of understanding MP	Lifelong skill	People challenges	Importance of mentoring
Navigating formal & informal approaches	Personal & professional alignment	Demand for relevant & practical training	Mapping the impacts
Choice & autonomy	Importance of personal intention	Importance of attitude	Onus on external stakeholders
Early introduction to MP	Develop responsive strategies	Mindful language	A culture of mindfulness
Being in nature	Experiential practice & learning	Embodying playfulness	Moving to a we approach
Flexibility & adaptability	Personal transformation	Attitude of openness	Importance of curriculum alignment
Sense of respect for MP	Distaste for structured MP	Educators modelling mindfulness for children	Mindfulness within all education
Connected to own values	Attunement to children	Barrier of time	MP across healthcare
Being with children	Value of MP for children	Barrier of self-efficacy	Role of educator
Conceptual ambiguity	Emotional regulation	Attitude of curiosity	
Feelings of hesitancy	Creating MP opportunities	Prioritising training for early childhood	
Role of invitation	Combatting stressors	Lack of confidence and belief	
Navigating misconceptions	Observing the impacts	Strategic integration of MP	
Mindfulness V Meditation	Mindfulness for connection	Eager for mindfulness pedagogy	
Developing gratitude	Learned compassion		
Integrated teaching approach	Variances in MP approaches		
High pressured role	Concentration & attention		
Inclusive practice	Compassion impacts		
Children as beings	Trauma informed		
Children as becoming's	Children initiating practices		
Physical environment supporting MP	Benefits for children with additional needs		
Universality of mindfulness	Value of task approach		
Partnership with parents	Importance of predictability		
Religious connotations	Long term impacts		
An embedded practice	Developing curiosity		
	Impermanence of feelings		
	Building friendships		
	Attitude impacts		
	High workload leading to stress		
	Emotional literacy		

Appendix U Emails to Focus Group Participants

Email number one

Good afternoon,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Leesa Flanagan, I am a PhD student in DkIT, and I am reaching out to ask if you would be interested in participating in an online focus group in January 2025 as part of my PhD research study, "Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland".

For this final stage of my research, I am hoping to invite a group of thought leaders (5-8 participants) in Ireland who are advocates and leaders in early childhood to have a collective discussion regarding my findings to date. In phase one, I conducted a questionnaire with early childhood educators in Ireland (n=744) and in phase two, I conducted 27 interviews with early childhood educators who use mindfulness with young children (n=27). The findings and recommendations are novel that warrant further exploration.

As you are working as ___ in ___ and as an advocate and leader for early childhood education in Ireland, I was hoping that you could offer deep insight and perspective to this discussion.

Please let me know if you are interested and if so, I will email you the information sheet and consent form. It is hoped the online focus group will take place on Wednesday 29th of January or Wednesday 5th of February, or an agreeable time that works for you and the other participants.

With gratitude,

Leesa

Email number two

Good morning,

I hope that you are keeping well and thank you for your interest in participating in my research study, your knowledge and expertise is greatly appreciated and will be invaluable to me.

This focus group will be conducted via Teams, with a panel of "thought leaders", I hope with 5- 8 individuals who have knowledge and experience in early childhood education in Ireland.
I was provisionally looking at Wednesday 4th of February at 6pm. If you could please come back to me and let me know if this works for you.

Please see attached the participant information sheet and consent form, so when you get a chance over the next few weeks, please have a read over and come back to me with any questions you may have.

Again, I wish to thank you for your interest in this focus group as it will be a wonderful opportunity to discuss my findings and allow some further insight from the panel.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,
Leesa

Email number three

Good morning,

I hope that you are keeping safe and well after the awful impact of the storm. I just wish to confirm your attendance at my focus group on **Microsoft Teams on Wednesday 5th of February at 630pm**. I will email you and the other panel members a link the day prior. Thank you for sending your signed consent form.

On the evening, I will provide you with a brief overview of my findings to date and pose a few questions for a group discussion. Please accept my gratitude for you sharing your time and insight with me and I am looking forward to which I am sure will be a rich discussion.

With warm wishes,
Leesa

Email number four

Good morning,

I hope that you are well and that you had a lovely bank holiday weekend. I just wish to gently remind you about the focus group at 630pm tomorrow evening, Wednesday the 5th of February. A Teams link will be sent to you and the participants shortly. I look forward to having a rich discussion with you all. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Have a lovely day,

With gratitude,
Leesa
Email number five

Good afternoon,

I just wish to thank you for contributing last night in my focus group "Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland". Your insight and participation are greatly appreciated and added such breadth to my research study. Please note if you wish to withdraw your data, you can do so by emailing me within the next two weeks. Please see attached debriefing letter for your records.

If you would kindly email me your address and Eircode, so I can send a small token to you.

With gratitude, Leesa

Appendix V Participant Information Leaflet

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education"

Researcher Name: **Leesa Flanagan**

Telephone number of Researcher: **08XXXXXX**

Email address of Researcher: **leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**

Research Supervisor's Names: **Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor**

You are being invited to take part in a research study to be carried out at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT). Before you decide whether you wish to take part, you should read the information provided below carefully and, if you wish, discuss it with your family, friends, or colleagues. Please take time to ask questions – do not feel rushed and do not feel under pressure to make a quick decision. You should clearly understand the risks and benefits of taking part in this study so that you can make a decision that is right for you. This process is known as 'Informed Consent'. Your participation is voluntary. You can change your mind about taking part up to two weeks post focus group. Please contact me by email within two weeks of the focus group to let me know you wish to opt out, and your data will not be included in this research study.

Why is this study being done?

This study's overall aim is to explore early childhood educators understanding of mindfulness, explore educator's use of mindfulness-based practice regarding their own personal practices and their use of mindfulness-based practice with young children in early childhood education. I am carrying out a focus group with a panel of "thought leaders" to discuss the findings from phase 1; an online questionnaire conducted with early childhood educators in Ireland (n=744) and findings from phase 2; semi-structured interviews conducted with early childhood educators who are using some form of mindfulness with young children in their settings.

Who is organising and funding this study?

This research is being conducted by Leesa Flanagan, a PhD student at DkIT, this research is being conducted for the purpose of obtaining a PhD qualification. This PhD studentship comprises of receiving a stipend and contribution towards research costs affiliated to the study. This is co-funded by the Higher Education Authority's Technological University Transformation Fund and DkIT. Participants will not receive any remuneration or payment for taking part in this study. However, I will gift each participant a small mindfulness resource as an act of reciprocity for giving their valuable time.

Why am I being asked to take part?

I am being invited to take part in this research study, as I am considered a thought leader regarding early childhood education in Ireland. As a participant, I am invited to take part in a focus group facilitated by Leesa Flanagan to share my insight, opinion and expertise in early childhood education. My participation in this research study is voluntary. I will not be asked for any identifying information. To stop or withdraw from the focus group, I can choose to stop at any stage and withdraw. I can also choose to withdraw up to two weeks after the focus group takes place, and I can contact Leesa by email to inform her of my choice to do so. I do not have to explain my reasons for withdrawal.

How will the study be carried out?

Approximately 6-8 participants will be asked to participate in an online focus group conducted via Microsoft Teams. This will be audio and video recorded.

It is envisaged it will take approximately 60- 90 minutes in duration.

What will happen to me if I agree to take part?

If I volunteer to participate in this research study, I will be required to participate in an online focus group via Microsoft Teams. An agreed time will be organised that is suitable for all participants.

The information sheet and consent form will be emailed to me two weeks prior to the focus group taking place. The focus group will be audio and video recorded as per Microsoft Teams settings, I note this will not be anonymous due to the collective nature; however, data will be anonymised, it will also be erased after data analysis. I understand that I can opt to switch off my camera prior to the recording or at any stage. I understand that Leesa is the only person to have access to my data and will be stored securely on her password protected laptop which is secured in a locked cabinet to which she has the only key.

The responses collated will be used only for the purpose of this research study and a pseudo name will be used to ensure my anonymity. Only Leesa and her research supervisors will have access to this data. For any publication purposes, all data will be anonymised.

What are the benefits?

Although you may not directly benefit from participation in this research study, you will be contributing to a greater understanding and collective discussion about mindfulness-based practice in early childhood education in Ireland. Furthermore, I would like to highlight to you that you are central to this study, sharing your insight and opinion is fundamental to this research study. As an act of reciprocity, I will offer all participants a mindfulness resource of formal/ informal activities as a thank you for giving your valuable time.

What are the risks?

The potential risks of participating in this research study are limited, however you should be aware that you are free to stop at any stage and to withdraw from the focus group. If you wish to take a break from the focus group at any stage, you have the right to do so. You may also choose not to answer a particular question, and you have the right to do so if you wish. All information shared is confidential. While anonymity is not possible due to the nature of Microsoft Teams with the video and audio recording functions. However, all participants will be reminded of the importance of sharing personal and sensitive data in the consent form and also reminded at the beginning of the focus group. In addition, I will have the only access to this recording and will be protected on my password protected laptop which will be stored in a locked cabinet. This recording will be erased after my data analysis. Whilst I can guarantee that all data will be retained on DkIT encrypted OneDrive files, however with any data systems there is always a risk of a data breach.

Due care and diligence have been undertaken to ensure the questions do not place participants under stress or experience emotional distress.

You will also be provided with a debriefing letter inviting you to contact me with any queries or concerns you may have after the focus group has taken place.

What if something goes wrong when I'm taking part in this study?

Please be assured there are no right or wrong answers, and the hope is to gain a collective discussion to discuss the findings from phase 1 and phase 2 of the research study. While this focus group is unlikely to cause distress, please feel free to email me with any concerns you may have. If you wish to withdraw from the focus group, please inform the me straightaway and you can exit the focus group. If you decide upon reflection after the focus group that you wish to withdraw, you are free to do so up to 2 weeks after the focus group takes place and please email me to inform me of your decision to withdraw.

Will it cost me anything to take part?

Participants will not incur any costs to participate in the focus group, however I understand that your time is valuable, and I will provide you with a mindfulness resource which includes formal/ informal mindfulness exercises as an act of reciprocity.

Is the study confidential?

Confidentiality of the participants are of utmost importance and will be adhered to at all times. All data collected and through the use of pseudo names will ensure that no participant is identifiable.

Data generated from the focus group will be interpreted by myself as researcher and will only be accessible to myself and the researcher's supervisors on this research project. The data will be stored securely in password-protected files on DkIT's encrypted Microsoft OneDrive on my password protected laptop. The laptop will be securely locked in a cabinet to which I have the only access.

I as the researcher will adhere to the policies of DkIT and GDPR guidelines regarding the retention of data.

Data from recordings from Microsoft Teams will be erased after data analysis.

Data will be retained up to two years post competition of this PhD research study to allow further analysis and potential peer review of this study. After a period of two years, all data will be destroyed/ erased; both hard and soft copies and no additional copies will be retained.

You may wish to be informed about the final findings of this research study, once complete, an option to provide your email will be provided. This is voluntary and your email will be stored securely and separate from your responses.

Where can I get further information?

If you have any further questions about the study, or of you wish to opt out of the study, please contact me on

Name: Leesa Flanagan
Email: *leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie*
Address: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth, A91 K584.
Phone No: 085 xxxxxxx

If you wish to raise a concern regarding the study, please contact the research supervisors on

Name: Dr. Jemma Mc Gourty and Dr. Catherine O'Connor
Email: *jemma.mcgourty@dkit.ie Catherine.oconnor@dkit.ie*
Address: Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dublin Road, Dundalk, Co. Louth, A91 K584.

Appendix W Participant Consent Form

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education".

I have read and understood the **Information Leaflet** about this research project. The information has been fully explained to me, and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	**Yes** □	**No** □
I understand that I don't have to take part in this study and that I can opt out at any time during the focus group and up to 2 weeks post focus group. I understand that I do not have to give a reason for opting out.	**Yes** □	**No** □
I am aware of the potential risks of this research study.	**Yes** □	**No** □
I am aware of the collective nature of the focus group; therefore, I agree to a privacy pledge whereby I agree to protect the confidentiality of my fellow participants.	**Yes** □	**No** □
I have been assured that information about me will be kept private and confidential.	**Yes** □	**No** □
I have been given a copy of the Information Leaflet and this completed consent form for my records.	**Yes** □	**No** □
Storage and future use of information: I give my permission for information collected about me to be stored or electronically processed for the purpose of research and to be used in related studies or other studies in the future but only if the research is approved by a Research Ethics Committee.	**Yes** □	**No** □

| | |

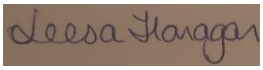
Participant Name (Block Capitals) | Participant Signature | Date

To be completed by the Researcher:

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Researcher's Name: LEESA FLANAGAN

Researcher's qualification: BA ECEC, MA Leadership & Advocacy.

Researcher's signature: 

Appendix X Participant Preference Sheet for Focus Group

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland"

Please fill in your preference in the boxes below and I will try to accommodate where possible
Thanking you for your valuable contribution to this study.

Participants Name	

What time will the focus group take place?	
Between 9am – 12pm	
Between 12pm- 3pm	
Between 3pm- 6pm	
Between 6pm- 9pm	

What day will the focus group take place?	
04/02/2025	
05/02/2025	
06/02/2025	
10/02/2025	
11/02/2025	

Dates I am not available

Please email me this completed form and the signed consent form to leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie and I will get back to you as soon as possible with date. With gratitude, Leesa

Appendix Y Post Focus Group Debriefing Letter

Study title:

"Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education"

Researcher Name:	**Leesa Flanagan**
Telephone number of Researcher:	**085 xxxxxxx**
Email address of Researcher:	**leesa.flanagan@dkit.ie**
Research Supervisors Names:	**Dr. Jemma McGourty & Dr. Catherine O'Connor**

Dear Participant,

I wish to thank you for your valuable contribution to my research study "Exploring mindfulness practice in early childhood education". The purpose of this research study is to explore early childhood educators understanding, experience and enactment of mindfulness practice in early childhood education in Ireland. It is hoped these findings will contribute to the evolving field of mindfulness practice in early childhood. Thank you for contributing to the focus group and generating a collective discussion regarding my data collected. If you have any queries or questions post focus group, please don't hesitate to contact me. If you wish to withdraw your data, please email me within two weeks of this focus group taking place.

Thank you for kindly giving your time to this research study.

With best wishes,

Leesa Flanagan

Appendix Z Photo of Gift to Focus Group



Appendix AA Focus Group Interview Guide

The focus group will commence by the researcher reading through the participant information sheet and consent form to ensure informed consent and the participant fully understands their role. Furthermore, it will be reiterated to the participants to respect the confidentiality of individuals partaking in the focus group. I will introduce myself, the purpose of the study and also the ground rules of mutual respect consideration. This time will allow the participant an opportunity to seek clarification or ask questions. Both the consent form and participant information sheet will have been signed by the participant prior to the focus group taking place. (5 minutes).

Questioning Sequence

Icebreaker/ Opening (60 seconds per participant)

Would you like to introduce yourselves and share one fun fact about yourself.

Introductory question (60- 90 seconds per participant)

Could you share in one minute or 90 seconds, what comes to mind when you think of mindfulness being used in early childhood education.

Transition question (1- 2 minutes per participant)

One key finding was educators mentioned that early intervention is key for young children and that teaching young children the “skill of mindfulness” will benefit them not only in the here and now, but throughout their life course, what are your thoughts on this?

Main question 1

One of the main findings from phase two, whereby educators shared that having a slow pedagogy, being present with children is the most important skill. They expressed if educators and children are not calm and present, how can any learning or development take place? What are your thoughts on this finding?

Main question 2

The educators shared, for mindfulness to be an integrated practice and not just an ad-hoc intervention, that educators should be learning this skill of mindfulness within their own education. Some suggested that in 3rd level it should be taught so preservice educators to have that skillset going into practice. What are your thoughts on including mindfulness within third level education, what could this look like in education?

Main question 3

Educators spoke about a whole-school approach to mindfulness, whereby the wellbeing of educators, children and parents are key. They suggested having a similar role to the Linc coordinator within each service, perhaps a mindfulness champion or mentor to support the wellbeing of all and keep wellbeing as a priority, what are your thoughts on this role?

Main question 4

Another interesting finding was that educators felt that a top-down approach or a multi systems approach was also warranted; if policy makers and agencies such as DCEDIY, Tusla, Better Start etc held value and priority to using mindfulness, it would be more likely to be embraced in early childhood and remove some of the barriers to practice, what are your thoughts on this suggestion?

Closing (60 seconds per participant)

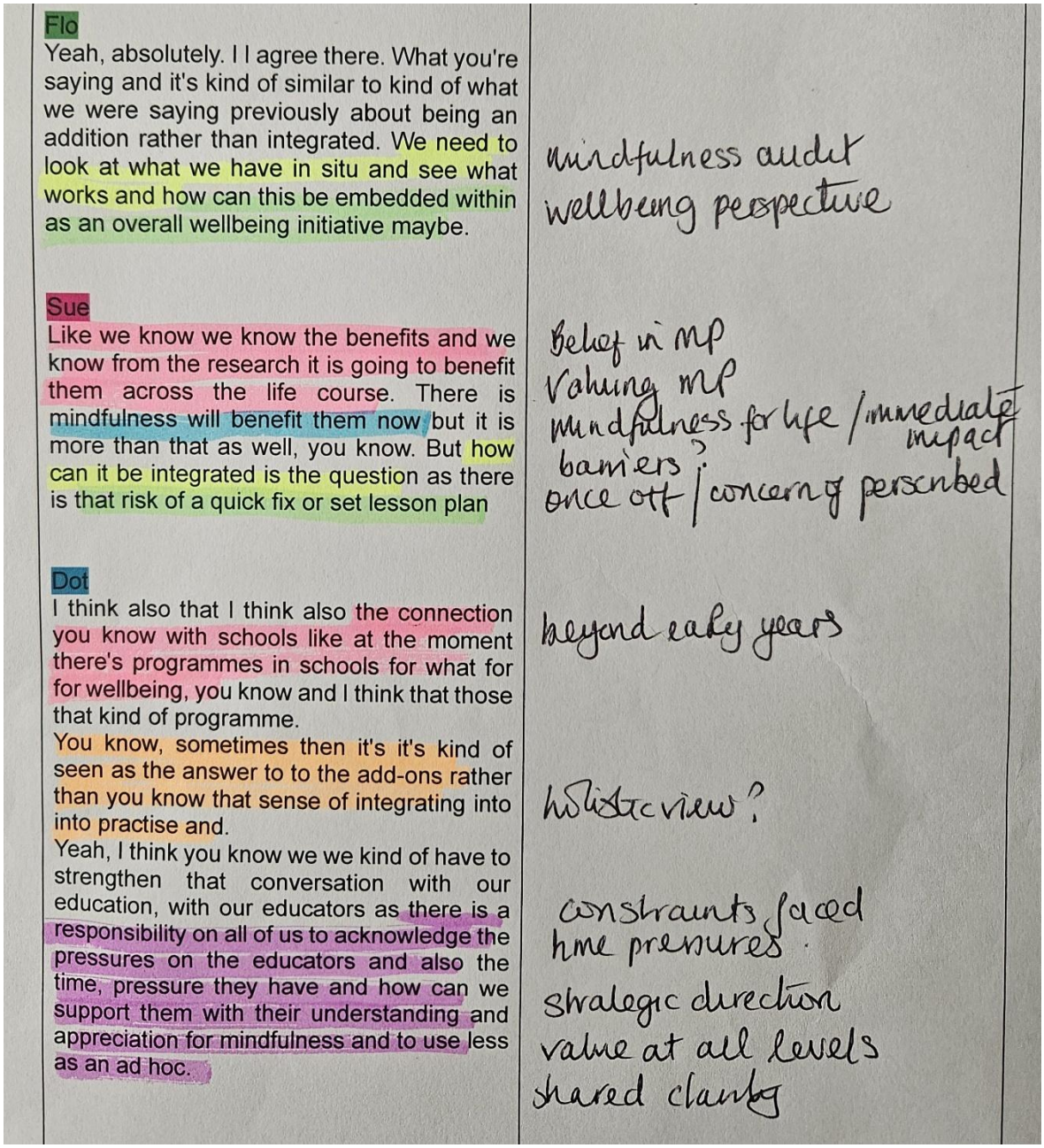
If you could share one key idea/ thought in one sentence what would that be?

Wrap up and thank you (2 minutes)

Sample probes to use throughout

- Does anyone have something to add to what (person) has said about …
- Could you tell me more about that?
- What do you think about what (person) has shared?

Appendix BB Sample Focus Group Coded Transcript



Flo
Yeah, absolutely. I I agree there. What you're saying and it's kind of similar to kind of what we were saying previously about being an addition rather than integrated. We need to look at what we have in situ and see what works and how can this be embedded within as an overall wellbeing initiative maybe.

mindfulness audit
wellbeing perspective

Sue
Like we know we know the benefits and we know from the research it is going to benefit them across the life course. There is mindfulness will benefit them now but it is more than that as well, you know. But how can it be integrated is the question as there is that risk of a quick fix or set lesson plan

Belief in MP
Valuing MP
mindfulness for life / immediate impact
barriers?
once off / concerns perscribed

Dot
I think also that I think also the connection you know with schools like at the moment there's programmes in schools for what for for wellbeing, you know and I think that those that kind of programme.
You know, sometimes then it's it's kind of seen as the answer to to the add-ons rather than you know that sense of integrating into into practise and.
Yeah, I think you know we we kind of have to strengthen that conversation with our education, with our educators as there is a responsibility on all of us to acknowledge the pressures on the educators and also the time, pressure they have and how can we support them with their understanding and appreciation for mindfulness and to use less as an ad hoc.

beyond early years

holistic view?

constraints faced
hme pressures
strategic direction
value at all levels
shared clarity

Ria
Valuing the silences. Valuing the stillness. And it didn't. So I think it's that understanding of when you say following the child's lead.

valuing mp.
children autonomy

Flo
Yeah yeah. Children are mindful, you know, if if they're left to their own devices in a space where they feel safe, they are very mindful and it's best not then to disturb them. You know. Following a bug on the path, or if they're doing something, do you know, is natural thing of mindfulness like little habits that we all do, like I doodle all the time. So but like, that's a form of mindfulness it kind of settles you. So I think, you know if children have the space to be able to figure out.
Where their calm space. What works for them and allowing their their opinions. They are great.

Childrens capacity to be mindful
mindful play

Children's autonomy
perspectives

Ria
And even thinking it calm, because I think a lot of people think of that word slow pedagogy and they might think of mindfulness, and it is a big feature for a lot of children that are dysregulated, you know, and maybe.

slow pedagogy connection to mp.
suppor children dysregulated

Abi
Yeah.

Sue
I think mindfulness is more than slow.

Beyond slowness

A lot of the time, you know, if it's like mindfulness is around, calmly thing, everything being calm, but actually it's about being calm, but also alert, you know, being able to tune in, what's going on for me,

Being present
awareness / internal sense

Abi
And space and time to be able to do that and look at there's a raft of challenges around around that. Umm, you know, for educators but. We need to look at their wellbeing as well and there is a responsibility on policy makers. I think there is that risk of it being the in thing and as we are saying, I think we can all agree an integrated approach but that comes from above as well.
Yeah, I I think there is something in that in that sense of like, what is it that we actually, you know, as policymakers or researchers and and experts in the field like what is it that we want it to be, you know, for for the sector and that we make sure that it doesn't become that programme or that Aistear hour type, that would not work for mindfulness, it needs to be part of the way.
You know, don't you?

Dot
It is looking at it all really. And and the policy narrative like what is going on there as well so it doesn't become that add on either. I think it is leveraging what they have already as mental health is kind of the national narrative; we can have mindfulness part of that and then it becomes the norm rather than a train that moves on again to the next cycle. Using those words of mindfulness and wellbeing having that same language from policy and also from the educators as you can see those words in Aistear really.

Flo
Yeah. And I I think even with with the the updates Aistear, do you know having those words of like the stillness and the silences and being curious, do you know, it's really, I suppose it lends itself to kind of I I suppose to reframe the intention of the educator of being calm and still and kind of thinking. Well, what am I doing? I don't have to be doing something. Just being present do you know and. That slow pedagogy piece. That is so important and it is a good time really to support their understanding of mindfulness and slow pedagogy and that connection for their pedagogy.

baniers.
holistic wellness
responsibility shared
embedded practice
policy alignment
collective action
value at all levels.
alignment.
Risk of ad hoc approach

policy alignment
national wellbeing perspective
normalising MP
alignment
connect with this lack

Connection to MP & Aistear

Intentional educator
attunement & presence
slow pedagogy

what's going on in my surroundings, what's going on in the world around me, you know, so that alertness, I think, is maybe. So there are many ways really.

Abi
Yeah

Ria
So it doesn't have to have, as you said, there might be some people that I think it's just all about being calm. It can be in dancing, jumping around the room. It can be in anything at all. It can, you know, it can be in anything but having that. It can be in the louder moments of music and dance.

Sue
Yeah. You know it can be in nature taking a walk without interruptions, being intentionally present in that walk really. There are so many ways really.
It's more of being present, being intentional and being there really for ourselves and for educators to be present in what they are doing and allowing opportunities for that wellbeing piece for themselves and for the children and understand it and buy into it and why it is important.

Awareness
many ways of MP

Beyond shyness
many ways of MP

authentic engagement
presence
self well being
valuing MP.

Appendix CC Focus Group Coding Processes

