

An exploratory case study on ‘How does incorporating social-emotional wellbeing strategies in a year 5 class promote self-awareness and emotional regulation’.

**Jessica Hayden – 2300808
4394 words**

Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore how incorporating social-emotional wellbeing strategies in a year 5 class promotes self-awareness and emotional regulation. During my observation days at my current placement school, I noticed several pupils often became dis-regulated during lessons which meant that the learning environment was disrupted for these pupils as well as the rest of the class. As a result, pupils struggled to remain focused and retain information resulting in decreased learning outcomes. This led me to research different wellbeing strategies that could be implemented to help support pupils become self-aware and regulate their emotions.

By choosing to focus on wellbeing for this case study this also links to the professional teaching standards strands of wellbeing and building resilience in learners. This study also links to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 as one of the seven wellbeing goals is 'A healthier Wales'. Within this goal people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and choices that benefit future health are understood. In addition, this study contributes to one of the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales which supports children to become "healthy and confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society" (Donaldson, 2015, p4).

This case study was conducted in a year 5 class in an English-medium primary school in South Wales. Currently, the school has 206 pupils on roll with 179 pupils of statutory school age (ESTYN, 2024, p1). In addition, 21.6% of pupils are eligible for free school meals over a three-year average which is slightly below the national three-year average in Primary of 23.7%. 5.4% of pupils have been identified as having additional learning needs (ALN) which is below the national average in Primary of 13.2% (ESTYN, 2024, p1). In accordance with the guidelines outlines by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in 2018, the designation "School A" will be consistently employed throughout this case study. This deliberate choice is made to safeguard the privacy of the school by upholding anonymity.

My research question is: How does incorporating social-emotional wellbeing strategies in a year 5 class promote self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Overview of relevant literature

In recent decades, an increasing number of children and adolescents have reported symptoms associated with mental health issues and psychiatric disorders. Approximately 10 to 20% of children and adolescents worldwide suffer from mental health problems (Kieling et al, 2011). It is argued that early childhood lays the

foundation for children's perceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them (Honig, 2002). Following on from this, increasing bodies of related literature and research also highlights the significance of early childhood years on overall growth and development of young people and emphasises the importance of educational practices to embody the principles of promotion, prevention, and intervention (Bonkowski & Yanos, 1992).

In addition, OECD (2015) have described schools as a key environment that can help promote children's positive development and growth as well as learning new subjects. More specifically, teachers play an important role in helping to raise pupil's self-esteem and motivation by being a role model, mentor and educator (OECD, 2015). This is supported by Malecki and Demaray (2006) who argue that pupils who are happier often have a good relationship with their teachers and those who feel they have a high level of support from their teachers often exhibit better stress management skills in the classroom. In addition, positive teacher-student relationships are also related to positive peer relationships and emotional regulation (Goldman et al, 2016).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) involves the development and acquisition of a broad range of social, emotional and behavioural skills (Weissberg et al, 2015). Typically, SEL involves the promotion of strength-based skills like developing emotional self-awareness and learning social problem-solving strategies. SEL programmes are commonly integrated onto the school environment and its broader context through a variety of co-ordinated strategies. These strategies include curriculum-based activities, a focus on the overall school culture and environment as well as involvement from families and the community.

On a smaller scale there are a number of SEL strategies that can be implemented in the classroom to support pupils become self-aware and emotionally regulate. A commonly implemented research-based intervention within school settings is a self-management approach known as Check-in/Check-out (CICO). This approach is often used to support students who exhibit externalising problem behaviours (Kladis et al, 2023). Research by Campbell and Anderson (2011) has shown that CICO increased prosocial behaviour, reduces problem behaviour and improves academic engagement and performance. Therefore, pupils are usually identified by teachers for this intervention to take place and it is usually undertaken with another member of staff. SEL is made up of five social and emotional competencies, one of which is Self-Awareness. Billy and Garriguez (2021) suggest that to encourage students to become self-aware a daily check-in with students should take place where teachers ask how they are feeling, this can also help build positive student-teacher relationships.

For my study I wanted to incorporate the use of daily check ins to explore the impact it can have on all pupils to become self-aware of their emotions not just pupils identified as exhibiting externalising problem behaviours. Elias et al (1997) found that by establishing a consistent routine for check-ins at the beginning of each day that gave all pupils the opportunity to share their feelings as well as creating a safe space where pupils feel respected and listen to supported their social and emotional wellbeing.

Another SEL strategy that can be implemented in the classroom is mindfulness. The American Psychological Association defines mindfulness as “a moment-to-moment awareness of one’s experience without judgement (Davis and Hayes, 2012). In this context, “mindfulness in education is directly related to SEL as its goals include self-awareness, empathy, techniques to calm and focus the mind, maintaining mindful communication, and meditation” (Billy and Garriguez 2021, p11). Following on from this Billy and Garriguez (2021) acknowledge that developing a sense of self-belonging can be complicated in today’s society therefore there is a need to address the overall health and sustainability of learning environments that support the well-being of students and educators. Ackerman (2020) suggests a range of resources and activities to implement mindfulness in the learning environment. These include establishing a ritual to highlight positive moments, minimising the idea of failure, using the STOP procedure and focusing on your five senses at a particular moment.

Despite the useful evidence based on the use of CICO I found a majority of research focused on using this technique with pupils who were identified as exhibiting externalising problem behaviours instead of using it as a whole class approach to assess every child’s well-being during the school day. Therefore, this case study will focus on implementing daily check ins with all pupils to encourage self-awareness and emotional regulation. In addition, I will also implement mindfulness strategies to see how they can encourage year 5 pupils to become self-aware and self-regulate.

Explanation of Case Study

According to Yin (2009, p18) a case study constitutes an empirical investigation into a phenomenon within its real-world setting. In case study research multiple methods of data collection are used as it involves a thorough study of a phenomenon. It is important to recognise, as emphasised by Yin (2009) that a case study is not a method of data collection, instead it is a research strategy or design aimed at studying a social unit. Zainal (2007) acknowledges the key role that case studies play in many social science studies and this becomes more significant for studies concerning educational matters, sociological investigations and community-related challenges. Zainal (2007) also highlights a key reason for the recognition of case study as a research method as researchers were becoming more concerned about the constraints of quantitative

approaches in offering comprehensive and detailed insights into the social and behavioural issues in question. By utilising case study methods, researchers can go beyond the quantitative statistical result and understand the behavioural conditions through the participants perspective.

There are a number of benefits to using case studies. First, the examination of the data is looked at in the context of how its used, meaning where and how the activity happens (Yin, 1984). For instance, if a study is focused on how someone understands an authentic text the researcher will explore the strategies the reader uses by observing the participant within their environment such as reading in the classroom or at home. This method differs from experiments which intentionally isolates a phenomenon from its context, focusing on a limited number of variables (Zaidah, 2003). In addition, the detailed qualitative accounts which are often produced in case studies not only help to describe or explore the data in real-life context but also help to explain the complexities of real-life situations which may not be obtained through experimental or survey research. Despite the advantages, Yin (1984) states that case studies are frequently criticised for their perceived lack of rigour. In addition, case studies offer limited support for scientific generalisation due to their reliance on a small sample size, sometimes involving just one subject. Despite the limitations, a case study is useful for my research because it can lend itself well to capturing information on more explanatory questions as well as offering additional insights into what gaps exist (Crowe et al, 2011).

In order to identify participants who are suitable for this exploratory case study convenience sampling was used. Robinson (2013) describes convenience sampling as locating participants who are convenient to the researcher in their proximity, willingness to participate and meet the required criteria. In this case study participants were recruited from a year 5 class in my placement school, at the start of a lesson pupils were asked if they would be interested in taking part in my study as they were the pupils most accessible to the researcher. This sampling technique is beneficial for this study due it's easy implementation, efficiency and low cost (Jager, Putnick and Bornstein (2017). However, one drawback to convenience sampling is sampling bias as explained by Obilor (2023) which can lead to certain groups being under-represented compared to the overall population. Despite this, the use of convenience sampling is justified in this study.

Due to time constraints, I was able to obtain parental consent and assent from ten pupils in the class. This allowed me to observe pupils before, during and after their daily check in and mindfulness session. In addition, pupils completed a questionnaire detailing how they felt about daily check-ins and mindfulness sessions. Through the pupil observations and questionnaires, I hoped to find out how incorporating social-

emotional wellbeing strategies into a year 5 class promotes self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Research Methods

This exploratory case study used a qualitative approach to address the research question. Qualitative research is described by Clark et al (2021) as uncovering deep insights into specific subjects. Qualitative research adopts a predominantly interpretivist approach, meaning that it tries to create an understanding of the social world by analysing how it is interpreted by participants. Collecting qualitative data was useful for this case study as it allowed the researcher to gain deep insights into the participants view of how incorporating social-emotional wellbeing strategies in a year 5 class promote self-awareness and emotional regulation through questionnaires and observations.

Brown (2001, p.6) defines questionnaires as “any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers”. The use of questionnaires is widely used in educational research to collect data about the topic under investigation (Holmes, 2023). Patton (2014) argues this is because they are relatively simple to use, cost-effective and can provide researchers with a vast amount of data in a relatively short period. Another advantage to questionnaires highlighted by Malhotra (2006) is they are ‘self-administered’ so participants can complete them in their own space and time. This could increase the accuracy and honesty of responses as participants are more likely to provide thoughtful and candid responses when they are not being directly observed. In addition, Bryman (2016) argues that questionnaires are reliable and accurate with any accidental bias introduced in focus groups or interviews being avoided. However, it is important to highlight the validity and reliability on questionnaires is dependent on them being designed well with non-biased questions (Newby, 2013). Despite the advantages Holmes (2023) states the main disadvantage of questionnaires is they don’t provide the same level of detail that a focus group or interview can. However, questionnaires were still a beneficial and useful data collection method during this case study.

In addition to questionnaires, the researcher undertook observations to witness and document the implementation of social-emotional well-being strategies in the classroom. Bell (2005) states that observation serves as a valuable tool for uncovering discrepancies between people’s statements and their actions, revealing whether they truly follow through on their words or exhibit the behaviours they profess. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of observation is subject to individuals’ interpretations of the communicated or enacted information. Cotton et al (2010) states that researchers

undertaking pedagogic research may choose to use observation as a data collection method to see first-hand the type of interactions that take place in a classroom setting. One advantage of this is it enables data to be collected on events occurring in real-time, natural situation rather than the more artificial context of a questionnaire, focus group or interview. Following on from this, the data collected through observation is less influenced by the researcher's own agenda and will be relatively free from bias. Observations can also be used alongside other data collection methods; this is known as triangulation. This means the use of more than one data collection method to provide a deeper understanding of the situation. Despite the advantages, Cotton et al (2010) highlights a key difficulty with observational research is the likelihood to collect a large amount of unstructured data presenting practical difficulties for the researcher. Another drawback to using observational research is the potential for participants behaviour to be influenced by the act of observation. However, Cotton et al (2010) state that this may be reduced in situations where the observer is known to the participants. Therefore, as the student teacher in the class where this case study took place it is less likely that the participants would be influenced by the act of observation as they are familiar with me being in the classroom.

The questionnaire was designed to gather qualitative data as the questions focused on gathering detailed and descriptive responses from participants. When designing the questionnaire, the researcher ensured to use predominantly open-ended questions that encouraged participants to provide detailed and personal responses (Appendix 2). This allowed them to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words, providing the researcher with rich qualitative data. In addition, the use of open-ended questions allowed the participants the freedom to express themselves in a way that quantitative methods cannot. This flexibility accommodates a wide range of responses and ensures that the data collected accurately represents the diversity of experiences within the year 5 class. Overall, this questionnaire was useful for collecting qualitative data because it enabled the researcher to explore the complexities of the research question and gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

As well as the questionnaire, the researcher also undertook an observation on participants before, during and after their daily check-in and mindfulness session. To ensure the observation was beneficial an observation schedule was developed by the researcher (Appendix 3). The observation schedule was designed to collect qualitative data by focusing on capturing rich, descriptive information about the behaviours, emotions, and experiences of the participants. By observing participants before, during and after the social-emotional well-being strategies the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the context in which these strategies are implemented. This contextual understanding is crucial for interpreting the effectiveness of the

implementation of the well-being strategies. Qualitative data collection through observation also enables the researcher to capture nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. Overall, this observation was useful for collecting qualitative data because it facilitates the collection of detailed, contextually rich information about participants experiences of social-emotional well-being strategies.

In summary, despite the disadvantages, the use of observation and questionnaires was beneficial for the researcher during this exploratory case study as it allowed the researcher to gain deep insights into the participants view of how incorporating social-emotional wellbeing strategies in a year 5 class promote self-awareness and emotional regulation through questionnaires and observations.

Data Analysis Method

To analyse the qualitative data collected through observation and questionnaires the researcher used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to uncover relevant information that addressed the research question and explore how these insights synthesise to establish overarching themes. Ward and Delamont (2020) state that when conducting thematic analysis, it is crucial not to use generalisations as qualitative data aims to provide unique and deep insights, understanding and explanation which cannot be expressed using generalisations when interpreting data. There are six steps involved in thematic analysis as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2012). These steps involve categorising the information and searching for themes, defining, and naming the themes then interpreting the themes within the final written narrative. Ultimately, the use of thematic analysis to interpret the data was a beneficial approach to use in this exploratory case study as it aims to understand how incorporating social-emotional well-being strategies in a year 5 class promote self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Ethical Considerations

This study's ethical approval was granted by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) ethics board on the 8th April 2024 (Appendix 1). The ethical application considered four key principles: harm, anonymity, deception, and informed consent. Diener and Grandall (1978) developed the definitions of these principles, and they emphasised the significance of avoiding harm to participants. A key part of that is maintaining participants confidentiality and security of records. During this study I ensured participant anonymity and confidentiality by not using any personal details or

any details which can make participants identifiable. In order to protect participants from harm sensitive information was not discussed or collected.

Participant's parents were fully informed to provide consent, they received detailed information about the case study in a participant information sheet (Appendix 4). Participants were also given information on the study to enable them to give assent. Cotrim (2021) describes assent as the procedure to enable the minor to understand what their participation in the decision-making process would involve. Participants and their parents were informed that participation is voluntary therefore pupils didn't have to participate if they didn't want to, and they were made aware that they could withdraw without penalty or an explanation. Deception was mitigated by providing consent forms and clarifying that personal and confidential data would not be shared beyond initial consent and no information would be collected without their knowledge.

To safeguard anonymity, all data collected was processed in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. Participants and parents were made aware that all information collected would be viewed by myself and all electronic data would be stored securely on the UWTSD cloud. Throughout the study all notes were taken anonymously and did not include any personal or sensitive information. The researcher took full responsibility for data deconstruction after the study was completed.

Results and Discussion

This section will summarise the data captured from ten participants using questionnaires and observation. Using thematic analysis, I identified codes from the data which were categorised into key themes including emotional expression and validation, stress reduction and relaxation and enhanced classroom environment.

Emotional expression and validation

There was a clear link between incorporating social-emotional well-being strategies into the classroom and emotional expression and validation. Participants expressed positive feelings about the opportunity to share their emotions during daily check-ins which indicated to the researcher that these activities provide a platform for emotional expression and validation within the classroom environment. One participant responded to the questionnaire stating "I like the daily check-ins because it feels good to share how I'm feeling with my classmates. Sometimes when I'm sad or worried, talking about it during the check-in makes me feel better". Another participant responded "The daily check-ins help me know my feelings are important. When I share how I'm feeling, it's like a weight off my shoulders and I can focus better in class". These participant responses highlight the significant role that incorporating social-emotional

well-being strategies in a year 5 class plays in promoting both emotional expression and validation, which in turn contributes to the development of self-awareness and emotional regulation among pupils. This is supported by Schonert-Reichl (2017) who explored the role of SEL programmes including mindfulness interventions in promoting emotional expression and validation among pupils. It discusses how SEL programmes empower pupils to recognise and express their emotions in a supportive classroom environment.

Stress reduction and relaxation

A strong theme identified from the questionnaires and observation was stress reduction and relaxation. Most participants stated they felt more relaxed after participating in mindfulness sessions, suggesting that these activities contribute to stress reduction and relaxation, helping them manage the pressures of school. One participant responded “I enjoy the mindfulness sessions because they help me relax and calm down. When we do the breathing exercises, I feel less stressed”. Similarly, another participant responded, “After the mindfulness sessions I feel more focused and ready to learn as my mind is clearer and I can pay better attention in class”. In addition, the strategies taught to pupils during the mindfulness sessions have helped them emotionally regulate. One participant stated, “The strategies we’ve learnt in class, like finger breathing, help me calm down when I’m upset or frustrated”. Similarly, another participant stated, “I’ve noticed I’m better at managing my emotions, instead of getting angry or sad I can use the techniques we’ve learnt to calm down”. This shows that incorporating mindfulness sessions has helped pupils become self-aware and emotionally regulate. This supports the research done by Greenberg and Harris (2012) who found that mindfulness practices promoted stress reduction, emotional regulation and overall well-being among pupils.

Enhanced classroom environment

The overall impact of these activities is perceived positively by pupils with many expressing feelings of confidence, happiness, and improved emotional control, suggesting that the incorporation of social-emotional well-being strategies contributes to a positive classroom environment. One participant stated, “I think these activities have made a big difference in how I feel at school, I used to feel worried and stressed a lot, but now I feel more confident and relaxed”. Another stated “The daily check-ins and mindfulness sessions have helped me understand my emotions better and know when I need to take a break or ask for help”. This shows that by creating a supportive environment where emotions are acknowledged and addressed pupils are better able to understand and manage their feelings ultimately enhancing overall wellbeing. This is supported by Jones et al (2013) who emphasises the key role of teachers in modelling social-emotional competence and creating a supportive learning environment to create a positive classroom atmosphere where pupils are ready to learn.

Overall, these themes provide a comprehensive overview of the key insights derived from the questionnaire responses and classroom observation and offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of incorporating social-emotional well-being strategies in a year 5 class to promote self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of incorporating social-emotional well-being strategies in a year 5 class to promote self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Firstly, it was evident that incorporating daily check-ins and mindfulness sessions provided a platform for emotional expression and validation within the classroom environment. Pupils reported feeling supported and understood when given the opportunity to share their emotions, leading to a more positive learning environment. This aligns with existing research highlighting the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for pupils to express and regulate their emotions (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Secondly, the data indicated that these social-emotional well-being strategies contributed to stress reduction and relaxation among pupils. Participants reported feeling more relaxed and focusing after engaging in mindfulness sessions, suggesting that these activities provide pupils with valuable tools for managing stress and promoting overall wellbeing. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating the positive impact of mindfulness practices on stress reduction and emotional regulation among pupils (Greenberg and Harris, 2012).

Lastly, the incorporation of these strategies was associated with an enhanced classroom environment characterised by increased confidence, happiness and improved emotional control among pupils. By fostering a supportive environment where emotions are acknowledged and addressed, teachers can create a positive classroom atmosphere conducive to academic success and overall well-being (Jones et al, 2013).

Despite these useful insights, the researcher acknowledges that the results of this case study were not fully representative of the year 5 class as there were only ten participants. It would have been beneficial to gain parental consent and assent from the whole class to ensure the sample was fully representative. In addition, this case study took place in one primary school in South Wales. It would be beneficial to carry out this study in a number of different primary schools to support the findings in this study. Despite the limitations, this case study has added new knowledge to the field of how

incorporating social-emotional well-being strategies can promote self-awareness and emotional regulation in children.

Moving forward, there are several recommendations based on the findings of this exploratory case study. Firstly, educators should consider integrating social-emotional well-being strategies, such as daily check-ins and mindfulness sessions, into their classroom routines to promote pupil's self-awareness and emotional regulation. Providing pupils with the opportunity to express and regulate their emotions in a supportive environment can enhance their overall well-being.

Additionally, schools should prioritise professional development opportunities for teachers to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement social-emotional learning activities. Training programmes focused on mindfulness techniques, emotional intelligence, and classroom management strategies can empower educators to create a positive and inclusive learning environment that meets the diverse needs of learners.

In conclusion, this study has emphasised the importance of incorporating social-emotional well-being strategies in the classroom to promote self-awareness and emotional regulation among pupils. By prioritising pupils emotional and mental health needs educators can create a positive and supportive learning environment where all pupils can thrive.

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