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RESEARCH REPORT

Perspectives on a participatory action research project

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Abstract

Context: Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing focus on the importance of developing children's cognitive, social, and emotional skills. The Mini Mind programme was created to help children improve self-awareness and self-regulation. This participatory action research (PAR) project aimed to implement the Mini Mind programme in schools to address these needs. The programme was trialled in primary schools in the North East of England, in collaboration with the University of Sunderland and Global Spirit Ed CIC.

Aims: The project aimed to: (1) implement the Mini Mind programme to support children's self-regulation and emotional development, (2) empower schools to set their own goals using PAR, and (3) create a model of co-constructed research that could be adapted for other schools.

Methods: The study employed a participatory action research model, involving nine teachers from four schools, university researchers, and the Mini Mind trainer. Teachers implemented the Mini Mind programme, tracking pupil progress through observations, questionnaires, and field notes. The PAR process involved iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection. Data included classroom observations, children's feedback, and teachers' reflections on their evolving roles as researchers.

Findings: Teachers reported that the children developed a better vocabulary for discussing emotions, improved self-regulation, and showed observable changes in both classroom behaviour and informal settings. Teachers also gained critical insights, enhancing their role as practitioners and researchers. The programme empowered schools by aligning the research with their specific social-emotional learning goals. However, challenges included adapting materials for younger children and ensuring sustained impact beyond the programme's weekly sessions.

Implications: This project highlighted the effectiveness of participatory action research in fostering collaboration between universities and schools, offering a model that allows schools to take ownership of addressing their unique educational needs. It also showed the potential for university-school partnerships to develop impactful research practices that could be scaled to other educational settings, including secondary schools.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research, Mini Mind Programme, Self-Regulation, Emotional Development, Positive Psychology, School-University Collaboration

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Context

Following on from the pandemic, research has shown that the regulation of attention, along with the development of other cognitive, social and emotional resources vital for the 21st century, must find their place alongside more traditional learning (Wear and Bethune, 2021). The evidence base for mindfulness and positive psychology in schools is increasing in size and robustness. Training alone is not enough, what schools value is being able to reflect on their actions in order to refine and redirect their efforts. We know that the most impactful research is that which connects theory to practice in a contextualised way. Through participatory action research (PAR) those who are concerned about an issue take a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it. Pain et al (2019) have used this approach successfully in diverse community groups, in line with the general principle of ‘nothing about us without us’. PAR challenges the way we think about research in schools, where it can sometimes seem like schools are restricted to being consumers rather than producers of research. The typical stages of a PAR project involve recurrent stages of planning, action and reflection, followed by evaluation. This fits well with the ways that teachers and schools already work, building on existing reflective practices.

This research report shares insights from a project undertaken in the 2023/2024 school year: the Mini Mind project. We presented on this at the Nottingham Trent University Close to Practice conference in June 2024, and this report allows us to elaborate on our presentation, which was necessarily brief in order to fit into the allocated time slot. The background to the project arose from our connection at the University of Sunderland with Global Spirit Ed CIC (<https://globalspirited.com/>), an organisation that values engaging with social and emotional intelligence. One of the strands of work underway in the Global Spirit network was around positive psychology – the Mini Mind programme – an established 12-hour scheme of learning structured around nine competencies, under the headings of self, life and the world. The complete programme provided learner booklets, teacher materials and associated teacher training for teachers to engage with the principles of positive psychology themselves, prior to implementation in primary schools (<https://mind-span.co.uk/mini-mind/>).

At the University of Sunderland, we have a Centre for Research in Education and as part of that, The InterAction Unit, dedicated to working with teachers and schools on impactful research (<https://wp.sunderland.ac.uk/interaction/>). When a UKRI funding opportunity arose, we collaborated with Global Spirit on a bid to run a participatory action research project in the North East region using the Mini Mind programme. We reached out to our local initial teacher training partner schools to invite them to a briefing meeting on campus for those who were interested. From there we were able to proceed with a group of schools who had identified that their plans for social and emotional learning could be aligned with the objectives of the Mini Mind programme.

Motivation, focus and questions

Nine staff from four schools (one of which represented a trust of several schools), two university-based teacher educators and the Global Spirit Ed Mini Mind trainer formed the core of our participatory action research team. The school staff were experienced teachers and school leaders, keen to explore the Mini Mind programme and see how it could be implemented to address the schools’ aims to enhance the resilience and self-regulation learning for their pupils. Although

designed to be used in Key Stages 1 and 2, one of our schools was interested in trialling the programme with their reception pupils, which added an interesting new angle to the project, given that most of the other teachers were targeting Key Stage 2 pupils. Global Spirit was very interested to see how the different schools approached implementation, with one of their goals for the project being to identify any improvements needed for either the materials or the approach to delivery. In addition, they were already working on creating a Key Stage 3 version (Mega Mind) for the future. Overall, as a group we were keen to tailor the programme to the needs of each school and embrace the potential to reflect on and learn from the experience.

The general idea was that working with university staff to take a systematic approach to school self-improvement through participatory action research would be able to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The research team would also be able to provide mutual support with co-constructing the implementation plan and goals, and follow up with support before, during and after the implementation of the Mini Mind programme.

Training and support would be followed up with on-site and online support from the research team. An initial collaboration meeting would establish the goals, introduce everyone, and agree project protocols. Following on from the training day, a cycle of implementation and review would be agreed, forming the project basis for the rest of the academic year, with final review and forward planning by June 2024 so that schools could independently take forward their research-based whole-school Mini Minds plans, and consider any other priorities they may have beyond the life of this project, thereby completing the cycle of learning and development.

University staff would not only collaborate in the research, but also collect data about the process for an evaluation report so that findings could be shared within the local, regional, national and international education community.

Inquiry plan and activities

Our research team of two staff from the university's School of Education, nine in-service teachers and the external Mini Mind facilitator (also an experienced teacher) met for an initial day of joint training and reflection using the materials. We shared problems and issues we wanted to tackle in our schools and swapped ideas for timing, implementation and gathering data. We looked at a series of structured questions (see appendix) so that each individual school devised their bespoke version of the research question, identified success criteria and designed their initial implementation and research cycles. We used a standard *plan, act, observe, reflect* action research cycle (see Figure 1), encouraging teachers to do this each session as well as over the course of this first overall cycle with Mini Mind.

Project funding was used to purchase class sets of the printed Mini Mind booklets, the materials that the teachers would be using with the children back in their schools. Recognising that the funding could not cover all of the time needed for teachers to be involved in the project, we were able to make a contribution to school costs. All schools were already initial teacher training partner schools, so we made these payments through the university's placements team direct to the schools. We realised that this existing connection and process was an important and unanticipated benefit of the project and would serve as a useful future model for working with schools.

We designed our research questions using the research question guidance from the Institute for Effective Education Evaluation Handbook (Shaw, 2020) as it gave us a way to articulate the research in a structured and easy-to-understand way. One school's version of this was:

What impact does the Mini Mind programme used with a target small group one session per week have on the way that reception children are able to 'tune in' to their emotions and recognise signals to support self-regulation?

By focusing our efforts setting up the conditions for the research and specifying what might count as baseline data and evidence of a change, we were able to think about ways to collect meaningful data. In this example, it was decided that, building on their baseline knowledge of the children involved, staff would monitor during the week for instances where the strategies taught in the small group sessions were being used independently.

When we thought about data collection and the wealth of potential sources such as the list of over fifty sources in Pine (2009, pp. 253-254), we were able to identify several instances of naturally occurring classroom data, such as class floor books for younger children and the physical Mini Mind booklets used in sessions by the older children. Floor books, for those unfamiliar with the idea, are collaborative scrapbooks kept on the floor for easy access, used to document children's thoughts, questions, and learning experiences through photographs, drawings, and writing. Floor books serve as a record of child-centred play-based learning and encourages shared thinking and reflection. In addition, a questionnaire for the children was provided, which was adapted for use in the different schools. Teachers have kept notes about instances where they could see an impact from the Mini Mind programme: for example, comments that children have made in class and in the playground that related back to the learning. University colleagues were also able to visit each school to gather additional field notes to support evaluation.

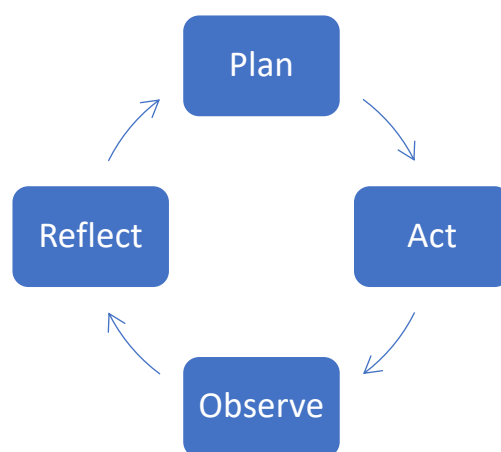


Figure 1: Typical action research cycle, which works well with school academic cycles.

One example of a school in this project was School A. They used Mini Mind with three mixed Year 3 and 4 classes on a carousel for 30 minutes per week, delivered by the same (trained) teacher. Each

class progressed at their own pace. The school was keen to complete the whole programme and was considering using drop-down days to make sure that they had allocated time to do this.

Ethical considerations and relationships

We had to think very carefully about ethics and relationships in this project. For the main part of the project, which was the participatory action research being carried out by the teachers in their own schools, using data that they generated within their teaching, we established that traditional approaches to ethics did not cover the type of work we were doing. By including everyone in the research team, traditional divisions between researcher and participant did not make sense. At the university level, we discussed the PAR project with knowledgeable colleagues involved in ethics application reviewing, convened a separate review of ethics and identified that, as there was no formal handover of data from the school to an external researcher, the most important thing was that the school itself considered the role of research and ethics in their practice. In order to have something written in place, we added a small section in at the end of the planning document (see Appendix 1) to indicate that participation in the project has been agreed by leaders in the school, and that leaders were happy for the teacher researchers to discuss the development of the project with the university in confidence.

Findings

Given the participatory action research approach, findings were generated within in each school and reported by the teachers who had been teaching the Mini Mind programme. The wider analysis of these findings will be reported separately, initially as a research evaluation report currently underway and then as a separate paper on the project. For the purpose of disseminating early findings and insights from the project so far, we were able to summarise the main points being made by the teachers.

Firstly, it was reported that children now have tools to talk with: they have been able to use the language of the Mini Mind programme and this was noted both in the classroom, and also in the playground in informal comments. In addition, teachers reports that they had noticed children's improved relationships, as well as their own awareness having done the training and then teaching the Mini Mind programme. This improved self-awareness was a common feature of the teachers involved. Thirdly, we noted the development of teachers as researchers through their heightened awareness of research issues in relation to curriculum planning. It was notable that the teachers were able to switch between practical pedagogy and critical research issues. The quotes below from a teacher in School A show examples of research-thinking.

"I feel like we've got more questions than answers"

"There's not enough research-driven changes in school. It's difficult when you're in school to access that, but we have these conversations, yeah, like all the time in the corridor."

"[The outcomes] might not be something you can see on paper."

“How they'll retain [the learning] when it's not being delivered weekly will be a test of it.”

Teacher, School A

School A has been able to use the findings and begin considering progression, curriculum design and integration with other provision, for example an NHS mental health-related programme being undertaken in Year 5, as well as how to redevelop PSHE plans to incorporate Mini Mind in the next academic year and review again in a year's time.

The project was not without its challenges. Some schools reported challenges with getting children thinking of examples to share in discussion, which emphasised the need for teacher scaffolding, and for the teacher to adapt or develop bespoke resources to suit the classes they were teaching. Sometimes, teachers were able to do this based on discussions in the classroom, so that the resources were aligned more closely with the experience of the children in that class.

Changes to practice

We have learned a lot through this first participatory action research project. Participatory action research works well with schools as they are actively involved in the research, and it aligns with the way that they already work. We feel that university staff have been able to act as a catalyst, bringing together schools, ideas and funding opportunities to support schools to be part of their own solution for self-identified research questions. Funding is the stimulus for being able to take action with schools – time for university staff to get things set up; being able to make a financial contribution to school time – we have noted that a little funding can result in a wealth of impact. We have noticed that once a teacher gets involved in research, they quickly start thinking like researchers and asking questions about reliability, validity and impact. As one of our teachers said – they now have more questions, and so we now want to find ways to develop our work with schools and teachers. Some of the teachers have been able to attend close-to-practice and practitioner research conferences online or in person, and are enthusiastic about future opportunities. We have been able to network, share our project and invite other teachers to learn from our project. The project has changed the practice of all of those involved: university staff now working more closely with schools and teachers and trying to bring research and teachers closer together in practical ways; teachers being more research-aware and interested in trying things out to meet the needs of the pupils in their schools, and also the university partner organisation getting hand-on experience of working on a research project with the university and its partner schools. This project has set the foundations for future practice.

Reflective evaluation on the process

Getting teachers in schools involved through the existing partnership arrangement worked well. Because it was clear what the project was about, this meant that schools who had already established the positive psychology goal for themselves were able to respond, and we did not waste the time of schools who had other priorities for themselves. An ideal situation in future would be to put out various calls for project involvement as a regular feature of our partnership. Equally, it would be valuable to have a reciprocal way for schools to alert us to opportunities where they may want to establish a team for a project.

It took time to get things started and we were not able to get the initial training in place until January, which slowed the process. In future we would hope to be able to speed up things by promoting opportunities, and getting projects started in the Autumn term, allowing more of the school year for data collection and analysis.

Initially, the project team was quite small, limited to just two university staff. Over time, we developed a parallel project to bring more university staff on board as researchers. If we had these in place earlier on, we could have added another layer of data collection and support so that the teachers could have invited researchers into sessions to support as participant observers, subject to ethical approval of this approach. It is something for us to consider for the future now that we have a larger team to work with.

There is still much to work on now that we have moved to the evaluation report phase. We have a range of data from school visits, field notes and focus groups. While this stage of the research has moved into evaluation rather than participatory action research, there is still plenty of opportunity for our teachers to be involved, depending on their time availability and interest. Those who were able to come to a conference have seen how valuable being able to share insights can be, but of course their time is required for teaching unless we can gain some further funding to release them.

An interesting reflection that university staff had was a sense of potential: there are so many ways that university staff and teachers in schools could work together if only we can pave the way for this kind of work, and in reality, that means finding further funding at a time when finances are very tight in education. It seems like such a valuable way to work as practitioner researchers. While there are schools that specialise in research, most schools do not, but this model of collaboration has the potential to expand our conception of research with schools.

Next steps

So far, we have created a new pathway for impactful research with schools and teacher by inviting schools to participate in PAR project. We have involved nine teachers from four schools, including one multi-academy trust, enhancing their research skills through participatory action research. We have trained nine teachers in the implementation of the Mini Mind approach and materials. Different implementation models in each school mean that we have reached approximately 150 students across those schools. We have impacted on schools' approaches to curriculum design and progression as they look to embed Mini Mind for next year and beyond. We have set up an internal agile research team of approximately 12 additional staff to help work on this project as well as others, thereby enhancing their research skills in parallel. We have expanded communication and engagement with different school communities through sharing the project at conferences and through publications.

Our next steps are to find further funding to enable the work to continue. Initially this is to develop the Mini Mind project to its maximum by disseminating results, continuing to develop further lines of research, creating school champions to support other schools. In the longer term, this could be to extend into partner secondary schools with the Mega Mind project. In parallel, there may be other research opportunities that we can bring to schools, or schools can suggest.

Supplementary resources

To access our presentation from the NTU Close to Practice conference, see

<https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/17825/>.

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About Camtree

Camtree: the Cambridge Teacher Research Exchange is a global platform for close-to-practice research in education. Based at Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge, Camtree draws on high-quality research from around the world to support educators to reflect on their practice and carry out inquiries to improve learning in their own classrooms and organisations. The outcomes of these inquiries, once peer reviewed, can be published within the Camtree digital library under a Creative Commons Licence (CC-BY 4.0). You can find out more about Camtree and its digital library at <https://www.camtree.org/>.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Example planning document from the start of the participatory action research project.

Mini-Mind Project

Part 1 is about what you plan to do – how you plan to use Mini Mind in your school.

Part 2 is about the background to your school getting involved in this project.

Part 1: How you plan to use Mini Minds in your school.

School name and details	
Project lead(s)	
Training for project lead	Briefing session and training day at university
Which pupils will be involved in Mini Mind?	
How and why are they selected?	
Are there any eligible pupils who will not be involved?	
What will happen with those pupils?	
How you plan to run the Mini Mind project, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the length of time over which Mini Mind will be delivered the number, duration, frequency and timing of Mini Mind sessions any expectations beyond the direct delivery of the innovation (eg, homework). 	
The level at which Mini Mind will be delivered (eg, to individuals, groups, classes or whole school).	
Who will deliver Mini Mind (which staff).	
Any training that will be given to those delivering Mini Mind, and any support which will be provided while Mini Mind is being delivered.	
Dates for pre-and post-test using the Mini Mind questionnaire (if known)	
How will this be used with the pupils?	
How will you (the school) monitor and evaluate the Mini Mind sessions? E.g. observations, teacher feedback, work samples, pupil voice.	

Part 2: Getting started – the background and research question

1. What is the single clear problem or issue the school is trying to address by implementing Mini Mind – how would you describe it?	
2. What has led to the decision to try Mini Mind? E.g. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. External evidence b. Teacher assessment c. Routinely collected school data d. Standardised measures e. Staff perceptions f. Pupil views g. Parent views 	
3. Are any groups in particular need of this approach?	
4. Do you have a hypothesis or hunch about what might be causing or sustaining the problem as you see it?	
5. Have you been able to do any reading around the issue?	
6. What would you like to know from the literature/research/existing evidence that would help you with this strategy?	
7. We want to help you develop a research question something like this: What impact does [what practice] delivered over [how long?] have on [what outcome?] for [whom?]]. An example of this might be What impact does Mini Mind delivered for one session per week for six weeks have on the way that Year 6 pupils talk about how they feel about SATs? Can you build a research question?	
8. Can you predict or hypothesise what you expect or hope will happen from the Mini Mind project? This may be based on reading, or you may not know yet, but you may have a working hypothesis even at this stage.	

And finally,

Please confirm that participation in this project has been agreed by leaders in your school	
Please confirm that leaders are happy for you to discuss the development of the project with the university (in confidence until further consent may be needed)	