

**Investigating the effectiveness of mindfulness programs in the development of empathy in  
social situations among IB Primary Years Program (PYP) students**

Rowan Sta. Maria  
Domuschola - An IB World School, Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines

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Authors' Note

Rowan Sta. Maria, High School Graduate Candidate, Philippine Department of Education General Academic Strand, Domuschola - An IB World School, Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines.

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## **I. Introduction**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Learner Profile aims to nurture internationally minded individuals guided by a set of principles both in academic and non-academic settings. One of these principles is “Caring” with the caption “We show empathy, compassion and respect. We have a commitment to service, and we act to make a positive difference in the lives of others and in the world around us.” (International Baccalaureate Organisation). A definition of a key term in the caption: “empathy” is “The psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another” (Dictionary.com); the following definition exemplifies why it is an essential characteristic for the IB to distil in its students. Further, this ideology carries over to the IBO’s commitments to service for others and to inspire positive change as empathising with another’s feelings is a fundamental step in the process of interpersonal understanding and sensitivity.

Additionally, beyond the ideology of the IBO, empathy is regarded as an essential factor in the performance and dynamic of a workplace. According to the Harvard Business Review: “If You Can’t Empathize with Your Employees, You’d Better Learn To” as “Empathy enables us to connect with others in a real and meaningful way, which in turn makes us happier and more effective at work” (Annie McKee, Harvard Business Review). This reinforces the importance of distilling empathetic practices to an individual at a young age as it is a transferable quality needed not only during an individual’s early development but also in an individual’s professional development.

## **II. Background Information**

“Mindfulness Month” is a month-long program conducted by a Primary School Guidance Counselor of an IB World School in the Philippines for August 2017. The general objectives of “Mindfulness Month” are as follows:

- To define and understand empathy.
- To learn skills on how to develop empathy.
- To develop a whole-school approach in promoting the concept of empathy.
- To prevent further bullying incidence by allowing them to experience different activities that will let them realize what is it like to be in other people's place and by sharing other people's thoughts and feelings.

*Extract from Mindfulness Program Syllabus (Refer to Appendix A)*

Further, the goal of the program was to encourage empathetic behaviour among Upper Primary students composed of students in Grade 3 -6 through means of practicing different mindfulness strategies such as self-reflection and examining a social situation to determine the most appropriate response and course of action.

An example of an activity conducted during “Mindfulness Month” is the introduction of children to activities that involve a group’s division due to differences such as personal preferences and opinions (Appendix B Slide 3 - 8). A debriefing follows the division by the supervising counsellor and faculty discussing and presenting different techniques for the students to deal with an individual's differences (Appendix B Slides 9-14). Some of these techniques are, but not limited to: meditation and mindfulness techniques such as breathing and listening to others (Appendix B Slides 18 - 24).

Additionally, the facilitating guidance counsellor provides the program's operational definition of empathy is "the ability to understand or share the feelings of other people" (Appendix B Slide 16).

As an IB World School, the creation of "Mindfulness Month" does not only address a school-wide approach on the promotion of empathy or the principles set by the IB Learner Profile, but it also serves as an approach towards issues that may arise due to the absence of empathy. Such matters addressed by the program include but are not limited are bullying and hindered interpersonal development, both of which are issues encountered in many school settings worldwide.

Given the program conducted and the ideological framework and beliefs an IB World School follow, the following are questions and topics of discussion investigated in this thesis:

- How effective are programs promoting mindfulness in the development of empathetic behaviour among Upper primary years children? Are there any evident or noticeable changes in a child's empathetic behaviour?
- Do the educational style, ideologies and teaching methods of an institution affect the effectiveness of programs promoting mindfulness and empathetic behaviour?
- Are mindfulness programs appropriate for all educational settings to promote empathetic behaviour?
- If any, do mindfulness programs have a personal significance for its participants? (contribution to knowledge and understanding towards social interactions)

### III. Review of Related Literature

Empathy and emotional intelligence: What is it really about?

*Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, Alexander Technological Education Institute of Thessaloniki*

*Published in International Journal of Caring Sciences, 1(3):118-123*

A journal article by Ioannidou and Konstantikaki published in the International Journal of Caring Sciences titled “Empathy and emotional intelligence: What is it really about?” provides the following operational definition for the word “Empathy”:

*“Empathy is the "capacity" to share and understand another's "state of mind" or emotion. It is often characterized as the ability to “put oneself into another's shoes”, or in some way experience the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself.”*  
*(Ioannidou & Konstantinaki - Abstract).*

Further, the following journal article covers multiple subject topics highlighting the significance of empathy with sections focused on the “Characteristics of empathy that affect learning”, “Emotional hearing”, “The concepts and types of Emotional Intelligence” and impacts on “Social Education”.

In regards to “Characteristics of empathy that affect learning”, the journal suggests that empathy is “crucial in developing ideas and solutions, effective communication and avoiding or preventing conflicts”. This suggestion explains that empathy is essential since learning is a process in which there are the spread and sharing of concepts and ideas. Observable examples of

this suggestion are “developing scientific and professional discussions and disagreements”.

Another example is an individual's ability of “understanding how another person feels and what he/she wants to achieve” (Boeree CG 1998) which in effect will create a sense of confidence and reinforcement of one’s ability to learn and communicate.

Another relevant concept to this thesis suggested by the journal article is the construct of “Emotional Intelligence” and its different representations. According to the report, emotional intelligence is:

*“ The ability to control someone’s wishes and to delay their fulfilment, to regulate others’ mood, to isolate feeling from thinking, to place you into another’s shoes and to hope. Also, it includes a range of skills such as self-control, persistence, zeal and ability to motivate others (Davies M et al 1998).”*

In recent times, Emotional Intelligence is labelled as EQ or Emotional Intelligence Quotient measures in addition to the definition above the following: an individual’s ability to understand another’s feelings, the ability to listen and feel others and to express oneself appropriately. The aforementioned is now an essential skill set to many application processes such as job interviews and even school admissions which heightens the social significance of building one’s emotional intelligence.

The article also emphasises the impact of empathy towards a child’s education as it suggests that the concept of “emotional intelligence” is a skill that can be learned much like another topic in school. Further, the authors also argue that both modern and traditional educational methods lack focus and emphasis on the mental development of the child but instead

focuses on the dissemination of knowledge and facts. This argument is demonstrated in the author's explicit criticism of present educational systems by stating that:

*“The educational approach neglects the development and training of social skills and communication through which an empirical system can be achieved including: recognising and handling emotions, communication and empathy, and social and emotional development of children as parallel educational objectives equal merit with their academic progress (Van der Zee K et al 2002).”*

This criticism presents a suggestion where there should be a constant revolution and push for an educational system in which the priority is the holistic development of students. This call is due to a paradigm shift wherein the former mentality of the regurgitation and memorisation of facts is no longer the only valid measure of success, but rather personal development and personality is just as, if not, more essential in the learning process of an individual.

Though the article can identify and define the definition of empathy, the various contributing factors and its significance to a child's development thoroughly, the report presents limitations. One of the limitations presented in this article is the overarching bias and focus of empathy to its target audience: healthcare professionals with the goal to call for the fulfilment of their professional responsibilities such as dealing and tending to patients with needs. This bias is present in the introductory sections of the article wherein it discusses the pillars of empathy as basic conditions that should be fulfilled to communicate as a healthcare professional. This bias is shown further by providing descriptions centred on the healthcare professional's perspective such as following examples:



*“• Emotional understanding: health care professionals understand the problem through the patient’s point of view*

*• Respect: recognition and full acceptance of the patient as a person” (119)*

As a whole, the article can contribute to the focus of this thesis by outlining and explaining the concept of “empathy”; its different aspects and how it is significant to an individual’s development. Additionally, it calls for an emphasis of the revolutionization and revision of current educational systems to call for the social and emotional development of children, both of which are neglected by the current commonly-used instructional methods in favour of the dissemination and memorisation of information.

The Development of Empathy: How, When and Why

*Nicole M. McDonald & Daniel S. Messinger, Department of Psychology, University of Miami*

*Published in Free will, Emotions, and Moral Actions: Philosophy and Neuroscience in Dialogue.*

*In press.*

A journal article by McDonald & Messinger published in a press publication titled “The Development of Empathy: How, When, and Why” by the Department of Psychology of the University of Miami provides the following operational definition for the word “Empathy”:

*“Empathy can be defined as the ability to feel or imagine another person’s emotional experience. The ability to empathize is an important part of social and emotional development, affecting an individual’s behavior toward others and the quality of social relationships” (McDonald & Messinger 2)*

The journal article investigates the different factors to the development of empathy among children citing psychological theorists as primary pieces of evidence, and the social outcomes from childhood to adulthood associated with an individual’s empathetic ability. The introductory chapter presents the initial psychological assumptions by developmental psychologists as the basis of the author's studies. Some theories that served as initial assumptions for this article cite developmental psychologists Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget whose theories suggest that children were too egocentric therefore unable to experience or display empathy. However, the authors argue that children much like adults also experience empathy and that it is a fundamental part of their development by citing numerous psychological studies and theories

supporting the notion that children can develop empathetic behaviour during their developmental stages. This is mostly done by examining a child's response when exposed to another person's distress.

Tables 1-2: Selected proposed psychological theories and studies referenced by McDonald and Messinger showing the development of empathetic behavior of children during their development

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Theory / Action</b>                    | Cognitive Empathy Gains  |
| <b>Studies and/or theories referenced</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Wellman <i>et al.</i> 2001</li> <li>● Liu <i>et al.</i> 2008</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Age of individual</b>                  | Early Childhood (4 – 5 years)  |
| <b>Suggestion of action/ theory</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Empathy has emotional and cognitive factors. They can be experienced simultaneously or separately.</li> <li>● Emotional empathy refers to experiencing another’s emotional state</li> <li>● Cognitive empathy (Theory of mind) is a skill developed at this age where an individual is able to accurately imagine another’s experience. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Increased language capacities facilitates empathic reflection among children</li> <li>○ Presentation of <i>false belief tasks</i> in educational settings indicating child’s abilities to the perspective of other individuals.</li> <li>○ Allows children to carry out more effective helping strategies to others</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Theory / Action</b>                    | Stability of Individual Differences in Empathy Related Behaviours  |
| <b>Studies and/or theories referenced</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Eisenberg <i>et al.</i> 1999</li> <li>● Knafo <i>et al.</i> 2008</li> </ul> |
| <b>Age of individual</b>                  | 4 – 20 years   |

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Suggestion of action/ theory</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Suggests that empathy is conceptualised as larger prosocial personality trait developing helpful behaviours from childhood to adulthood.</li> </ul> |
|-------------------------------------|--|

*Table 3: Selected proposed contributing factors and studies referenced by McDonald and Messinger showing the development of empathetic behavior of children during their development*

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Contributing Factor</b>                | Neurodevelopmental Factors   |
| <b>Studies and/or theories referenced</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Preston &amp; de Waal 2002</li> <li>● Iacoboni &amp; Dapretto 2006</li> <li>● Decety &amp; Jackson 2006</li> <li>● Iacoboni 2008</li> <li>● Waal 2008</li> <li>● Gallese <i>et al.</i> 2009</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Suggestion of Contributing Factor</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reference to Perception-Action Model of empathy by Waal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “Viewing another’s emotional state automatically and unconsciously activates one’s personal associations with that state, causing, in the absence of inhibition, one to react to another’s experience as one would to one’s own” (Preston &amp; de Waal 2002).</li> <li>○ Action is hypothesised to be a higher form of empathy</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

Developing Empathy in Children and Youth

*Kathleen Cotton, Northwestern University*

*Published in School Improvement Research Series*

A journal article by Kathleen Cotton published in the School Improvement Research Series titled “Developing Empathy in Children and Youth?” provides the following operational definition for the word “Empathy”:

*“The ability to have insight into the motives, feelings, and behavior of others and the ability to communicate this understanding” (Cotton 1).*

The article aims to investigate the different factors that contribute to the development of empathetic behaviour among children and proposes strategies and programs to further develop this empathetic behaviour with reference to numerous published studies. For this thesis, this section will analyse the sections of this journal article focusing on “Empathy Training” and “Classroom Strategies and Program Designs” to develop empathetic behaviour among school children.

This article had a significant contribution to this thesis as the observations and suggested proposals/action plans are based on prior published work; therefore this would aid in the investigation for other educational institutions and settings if there are components of the programs they implement have parallel suggestions to those being suggested by this author. However, as the author heavily bases her analysis and suggestions on psychological research,

this begs the question whether the findings from both the published studies and the analysis presented in this journal article will be reliable and applicable given a future context.

#### **IV. Methodology**

The study in this thesis involves two stages. The first stage is a self-report survey to be answered by Upper Primary (Grades 3 - 5) teacher advisers gauging their advisory class' general empathy quotient. Some questions in the survey include describing the advisory's general empathetic state and who are the most empathetic students in the advisory (Refer to Appendix D). This survey also determines the participants of the second part of the study. Students recognised as "most empathetic" by their adviser will be invited to a counselling session with other selected students in their grade level to an informal and spontaneous focus group discussion about "empathy" led by the researcher and supervised by a Primary School Guidance Counselor.

The focus group discussion aims to determine the understanding of the concept of "empathy" among Upper primary students, where they learned the concept and reasons and attribution of their empathetic behaviours. Additionally, there will also be questions asking their memory of "Mindfulness Month" as to what they remember, and the content. As the focus group discussion is spontaneous and not a formal, structured interview, the questions asked by the researcher are dependent on the nature of the responses given by the participants.

After conducting all focus group discussions, the researcher will transcribe and review all focus group discussions and self-report surveys submitted by upper primary teacher advisers. The goal of this exercise is to analyse the collected data both as an individual data point and as a part of a collective whole. The choice of interpreting each response as an individual and part of a whole is to determine its relationship with the other responses and if a trend or common response present is suggesting the general understanding of "empathy" of IB PYP Students.





## **V. Logistics of Study**

For this study, consent from school administration, specifically, the Primary School Principal is needed as some primary school students, and faculty will be involved in this study. This is accomplished through a formal letter describing the premise of the research and explaining its purpose of determining if the proposed study can be performed considering all potential implications such as scheduling conflicts and ethical implications as minors are involved.

When approved by school administration, the study should be guided and supervised by the Primary School Guidance Counselor, so that the study done is a school-approved activity therefore not requiring additional parental consent. Once given the final approval by the primary school guidance counselor, the self-report survey created for this study will be distributed to all upper primary (Grades 3 - 5) class advisers and they will be requested to return the survey after a maximum of two days. Depending on the recommendations for empathetic student given by the upper primary class advisers, a guidance counselling appointment will be set when it is convenient for the children. During the set counselling session the researcher supervised by the primary school guidance counselor will carry out the focus group discussion regarding empathy which would last approximately 30 minutes.

## **VI. Presentation of Results**

### **A. Upper primary class adviser self-report survey (Refer to Appendix E)**

All respondents to the survey are Upper Primary (Grades 3 - 5) class advisers in an IB World School in the Philippines. All surveys were given the study's operational definition of "Empathy" in the start of the survey (Refer to Appendix E). The first question of the self-report survey for upper primary class advisers asks the adviser to describe the empathetic state of their advisory class. Almost all of the responses by the class advisers describe that most students in their advisory class generally display empathy in class. Some responses provide additional detail by saying that a few students struggle with empathy with a response further elaborating on this claim by saying "there are still some who still needs prompting in order to understand the cause of their action and be open-minded to others' perspectives" (Appendix E p. 12). On the contrary, there are also responses that provide additional detail by sharing that there are some students who are more empathetic described as "individuals who display empathy more evidently" or students who "show a deeper level of empathy" (Appendix E p. 7,9).

The second and third questions of the self-report survey are focused on the topic of "Mindfulness Month". The second question specifically asks the class adviser to briefly describe the premise of "Mindfulness Month". Almost all of the responses by the class advisers describe "Mindfulness Month" as a program that provides exposure for students that will require students to empathise with others (Appendix E p. 3,5,7,9,11). There is also a response that discusses how "Mindfulness Month" part of a series of programs created to develop the attitudes presented in the IB Learner Profile which was mentioned previously in the introduction of this thesis

(Appendix E p. 7). The third question of the self-report survey asks the class adviser if there were any changes in the behaviour of their advisory student, both positive and negative, after undergoing “Mindfulness Month”. There is no general consensus or trend on the effects of “Mindfulness Month” across all class advisers who responded to the self-report survey as there is a spectrum of answers with some being very positive, some reporting no change and some giving a mixed reaction. A response displaying favour and positive change for the respondent’s advisory discussed how “Mindfulness Month” had a positive impact after a class conflict, and that the interactivity of the program as a whole was applicable to their situation (Appendix E p. 2). On the contrary, there is a response that reported no change to the empathetic state of the class after undergoing “Mindfulness Month” to the adviser’s perspective. The respondent explains that this happened as empathy is a skill that should be fostered and developed over time, and that one program will not garner any changes unless it is a program sustained over an extended period of time and on a regular basis (Appendix E p. 4). The remainder of the responses provide mixed reviews on the changes “Mindfulness Month” has created to the empathetic state of an advisory class such as the “short-lived” positive effect of the program (Appendix E p. 10).

The final portion of the self-report survey asks advisers to name the most empathetic students in their advisory class and describe the qualities that make them empathetic. All respondents were able to identify the most empathetic students in their advisory class. Interestingly, all respondents present different contributing factors and reasons as to why they perceive the named students as the most empathetic in their class. A respondent mentions a child’s ability to share and understand the feelings of others as a primary reason as to why the named students are perceived to be the most empathetic (Appendix E, p. 2). Another response

attributes the most empathetic students' behaviour to their upbringing and the manner their parents raised them as a primary factor in the development of the students' empathetic state (Appendix E, 14). The last variation of response discusses the named students' common behaviour of helping others when they are in a situation requiring other's assistance or help such as when a peer gets hurt, and these students are the first to check if the peer is feeling alright (Appendix E, 6).

#### B. Transcript of Grade 3 Focus Group Discussion (Refer to Appendix F)

This focus group discussion is composed of three third grade students from the same advisory class in an IB World School in the Philippines, the principal researcher acting as discussion facilitator and a primary school guidance counsellor serving as supervisor. When the principal researcher asked if they remember "Mindfulness Month" which took place roughly nine months before the focus group discussion, all students responded that they remembered "Mindfulness Month". All students immediately began discussing the concept of Stop. Breathe. Listen. Respond. or S.B.L.R. which was one of the main of the main strategies introduced by the facilitators of "Mindfulness Month" (Refer to Appendix B Slides 18 - 21). When asked by the principal researcher of the significance of this strategy, all three students collectively reply that S.B.L.R. should be done to help and support another who needs assistance because not responding will make another feel "alone" (Appendix F, p. 3-4). One of the children then introduced the word "empathy" as a key term of "Mindfulness Month" commonly defined as a behaviour in which an individual is "being kind and caring" towards others (Appendix F, p. 4).

The researcher then asks the students when do they think did they first personally encounter empathy. A common response is that the word “empathy” was first encountered during their schooling. While the behaviour and empathetic mindset were first experienced and nurtured at home and before “Mindfulness Month” there was a lack of a better term to describe the sensation they felt in the past which they now associate with the word “empathy” (Appendix F, p. 5-6). All students mentioned that empathy is an important attribute for an individual to have citing an example in a professional work environment wherein empathy is needed to compromise easier with others (Appendix F, p. 7). The researcher then asked if there are any other activities the students remember from “Mindfulness Month”. All students respond “no” but rather focused on another IB Learner Profile disposition “Principled”, which was also covered at a later program by the same facilitating primary school guidance counsellor (Appendix F, p. 7).

The researcher then presents two situations for the students, asking how each student would respond or react to the given scenario. The first scenario presented by the researcher was the student seeing their parent or family member having difficulty carrying many bags. All students had varying responses to the given situation. One student responded they would help without hesitation (Appendix F, p. 8), another student said that they would ask if they need assistance but they would internally want to express their disinterest in helping as they would like to focus on themselves firstly (Appendix F, p. 9), while the remaining student responds that it depends on which family member is requesting the help as some family members such as those suffering from physical conditions require greater assistance compared to those who do not (Appendix F, p. 9). The second scenario presented by the researcher was the student seeing an old woman who needs assistance crossing the road and deciding whether they would help or not. All responses from the students were partial and were leaning more towards not helping the old

woman and that they would only help the old woman in specific circumstances such as time constraints, perception of need of assistance of the person deemed in need of assistance and the attention of the student themselves (Appendix F, p. 10).

The researcher then facilitated an open discussion based on the responses of all students in the two given scenarios. As the students responded they would not help all the time in both situations, the students were asked if they believe an individual can still be empathetic even if they do not take action or help all the time. All students responded yes as collectively they think that being too caring and kind regarding actions do not generally go back to the giver, hence influencing the responses the students gave during the scenarios (Appendix F, p. 10).

The researcher then shifts back the focus of the discussion to the localised school context, “Mindfulness Month” and other school experiences associated with empathy. The researcher asked the students if empathy was a common topic discussed in class by their teachers. There is a split reaction to the question with one side answering that the reiteration of the importance of empathy is done whenever there is an interpersonal conflict in class such as insulting another individual (Appendix F, p. 11-12), while a student does not recall any instances where the concept of empathy was discussed post-mindfulness month.

When asked whether “Mindfulness Month” should be conducted in the following school year or be done in a more frequent basis, there is also a mixed reaction with one side arguing for the more frequent facilitation of “Mindfulness Month” as much like many lessons, they are often forgotten after extended periods of time such as vacation and breaks (Appendix F, p. 13). On the other hand, there is also the stance that “Mindfulness Month” should be a one-time workshop for new students who have not gone through the program as it would otherwise be a regurgitation of the same facts and information given in the past program (Appendix F, p. 14).

### C. Transcript of Grade 4 Focus Group Discussion (Refer to Appendix G)

This focus group discussion is composed of three fourth grade students from the same advisory class in an IB World School in the Philippines, the principal researcher acting as the discussion facilitator and a primary school guidance counsellor serving as supervisor. When the principal researcher asked if they remember “Mindfulness Month” which took place roughly nine months prior to the focus group discussion, When the principal researcher asked if they remember “Mindfulness Month” which took place roughly nine months prior to the focus group discussion, all students responded that they somewhat remembered “Mindfulness Month” remembering details such as the presence of a “blue slide” and a video showing the qualities of being “acknowledging, caring and the concept of empathy” (Appendix G, p. 3).

The researcher then asked each student of their definition of empathy, a typical response given was “putting yourself in one’s shoes” and “showing compassion” which were heavily referred back to for the remainder of the discussion (Appendix G. p. 3). The researcher then asks the students when do they think did they first personally encounter empathy. All students respond that the word and concept of “empathy” were encountered during their schooling, and the behaviour and empathetic mindset was also first experienced at an educational environment, specifically during “Mindfulness Month” (Appendix G, p. 4).

The students then share what specific actions and qualities make an individual empathetic, all students answered by mentioning that they try to understand another’s feelings and by providing help are qualities and actions taken by someone deemed as empathetic (Appendix G, p. 4). Regarding the importance of empathy, all students believe empathy is



essential as it not only allows for one to understand another's feelings but it can also be used a preventative measure against harassment towards other individuals (Appendix G, p. 5).

The researcher notices a trend in the responses of the students where empathy is often present to help those in need of assistance. Therefore, the researcher asked the student participants if it is still possible for one to be empathetic without assisting another person (Appendix G, p. 5). All students reply that it is possible to have empathy without helping another often referring to examples wherein there is a shared or mutual feeling towards a particular subject. An example of this given by a student is “it's someone's birthday, and they're really happy so I'm also happy for them” (Appendix G, p. 6).

The researcher then shifts back the focus of the discussion to the localised school context, “Mindfulness Month” and other school experiences associated with empathy. The researcher asked the students if empathy was a common topic discussed in class by their teachers. There is a split reaction to the question with responses leaning towards the students not recall any instances where the concept of empathy was discussed post-mindfulness month. The students mention that whenever their adviser decides to bring up “Mindfulness” and empathetic behaviour, they are unsure of the motivations or reasoning as to why it is being discussed in the class at a particular time (Appendix G, p. 7).

The researcher then presents two situations for the students, asking how each student would respond or react to the given scenario. The first scenario presented by the researcher was the student running around, chasing their best friend who suddenly trips, then the students are asked what would be their first reaction to the scenario. All students responded by immediately asking whether their friend was feeling well and if not, they would either assist them to the school infirmary where they can get medical attention or they seek for a person of authority such

as a teacher who can help in the situation (Appendix G, p. 8). The second scenario presented by the researcher was the student in a mall seeing someone having difficulty carrying many bags who need assistance and deciding whether they would help or not. All responses from the students involved having either a parent or chaperoning adult who is with them at the time to also help and assist them as they offer support to the stranger in need (Appendix G, p. 9).

The researcher then facilitated an open discussion based on the responses of all students in the two given scenarios. As the students responded they would help in both situations, the students were asked if one should show empathy at all times. All students answered yes due to the potential positive impact it could create for another's life. However, the students also shared that one should also be aware and mindful of situations where it is better not to take any immediate action, such as when one expresses a desire to be alone (Appendix G, p. 9).

When asked whether "Mindfulness Month" should be conducted in the following school year or be done on a more frequent basis, there is a collective reaction in which all students felt it was appropriate to have the frequent facilitation of "Mindfulness Month" and related programs while also balancing other programs and content covered by the IB Learner Profile such as the concept of a student being Principled (Appendix G, p. 11).

## VII. Analysis of Results

The first topic of discussion covered in this analysis is in regards to the effectiveness of “Mindfulness Month” in the development of empathetic behaviour among Upper Primary school students. A common trend among the self-reported surveys and transcribed focus group discussions is the recurrence of the positive response towards “Mindfulness Month” in terms of its intentions but along with it the desire and for it to be a program that should be taught more often, a perspective shared by many of the Upper primary students and class advisers who participated in this multi-stage study. Additionally, the effectiveness of the program as a whole was questionable for some of the respondents for multiple reasons and the consistency of this perspective runs through both faculty and students citing extracts such as:

*“There was no change in the empathetic state of the students. In my perspective, developing empathy to students won’t change immediately after the week or days of the implementation. A program like this should be done in a regular basis so it will be successful, though changes might be seen over a period of time” (Appendix E, p.4).*

*“I think it should be done more because after vacation they don’t think about school anymore and then when they get back they’re like I don’t know what to do anymore” (Appendix F, p. 14).*

However, despite the somewhat negative feedback by some of the respondents, there are also responses that recognise that there are noticeable positive changes brought by “Mindfulness

Month”. An example of where this can be seen is cited in the following extract where a class adviser responds that “Mindfulness Month”

*“Actually affected the students of Grade 5 especially they had their conflict. The presentation used and the activities presented to them were very interactive that were able to apply it to their situation.*

Further, the trend recognised from the self-reported surveys and transcribed focus group discussions also serves a connection with Ioannidou & Konstantikaki’s emphasis on the impacts of empathy on a child’s education. Specifically in the development of an individual’s “emotional intelligence” which is now a highly sought-after skill set in across many industries and professions. Therefore, in connection with this argument, the creation of “Mindfulness Month” can establish primarily, on paper and practice, the approaches of an IB World School guided by the principles of the International Baccalaureate Organisation do not fall under the modern and traditional methods that have been criticised by Van der Zee K et al. This is because there are actual efforts towards the focus and emphasis on the mental development of the child, not only the dissemination of knowledge and facts. However, the extent that this line of thought is true or valid is blurred by the partial reactions and reviews towards “Mindfulness Month” by both the students and class advisers.

In connection to the question of whether educational style, ideologies and teaching methods of an institution affect the effectiveness of a program both in a general sense and specifically in promoting mindfulness and empathetic behaviour; it is evident that the ideology of the school, specifically an education guided by the International Baccalaureate Organisation,

influences the attention and value students give towards specific topics. This observation can be seen by citing a response of a student respondent who shares that although they expressed their desire to have “Mindfulness Month” taught again, the respondent says:

*“I want to learn about other profiles” (Appendix G, p. 11).*

In which the profiles that the participant was referring to is the IB Learner Profile which consists of the values the IBO wants to distil in its students. This concretises the influence of a specific educational structure and the behaviour of an individual towards specific forms and beliefs about knowledge and its acquisition. Therefore it can be inferred that the effectiveness of a program, in this case, “Mindfulness Month” would only be effective or would reach its full potential in a localised setting or other educational settings which share the same ideologies and beliefs towards education, most likely other IB World Schools or educational institutions that follow the prescribed IB curricula. Therefore, with this inference, mindfulness programs as a method to promote empathetic may not be appropriate for all educational settings as it may not be in line with the practices and beliefs of a specific institution. Though it may be arguable that mindfulness programs could still be successful across varying educational settings, there may be differences in content, methods and scope of the subject which is dependent again on the pre-existing structure of a specific educational institution.

This analysis towards the suitability of mindfulness programs to encourage empathetic behaviour in varying educational settings leads to continuous efforts and researches by psychologists and educations published in journals such as the “School Improvement Research Series”. Continually proposing action plans that are developed based on updated published and

reviewed psychological studies to ensure information and proposals are reliable and amenable to further research and developments.

In regards to the question, if the conducted mindfulness program has a personal significance for its participants, there were insightful points of consideration that were brought up by some of the student participants regarding the significance of an individual having empathy and also its impacts. Citing an extract of the response of a student when asked why having empathy is essential, the student replied:

*“If you are not kind like cause like pretend you’re older and like working in the office, you need to be kind to other people so you can compromise easier.” (Appendix F, p. 8).*

From the perspective of the researcher this was an unprecedented response due to the level of maturity present at a relatively young age by recognising real-life implications encountered by an older age group. This reaction was also generated due to the fact that was no prior leads or suggestions prior to the answer besides the researcher asking why having empathy is important. Upon looking at the age group of the student participants (8 to 11 years old) they fall under McDonald and Messinger theory of “Stability of Individual Differences in Empathy Related Behaviours” (Psychology Department, University of Miami). This theory of empathy suggests that individuals ages 4 - 20 years old's empathy is a larger prosocial personality trait developing helpful behaviours from childhood to adulthood. This theory provides a potential insight or review combining the different attitudes and actions one would associate as empathetic behaviours, such as the desire to help others in need of assistance which was not only explicitly

mentioned by the student respondents but also class advisers when they were asked why they labelled specific students as the most empathetic in their class.

Interestingly, the response above also relates to a supplementary study done by Boeree CG in 1998 for Ioannidou & Konstantikaki's analysis on the subject of Empathy and emotional intelligence under the section "Characteristics of empathy that affect learning" where empathy is "crucial in developing ideas and solutions, effective communication and avoiding or preventing conflicts" (Boeree CG 1998) which can be seen in the aforementioned response by the student. This also presents a connection in "Mindfulness Month" in which one of the activities highlights the importance of self-reflection in the decision making process, in which in this response the decision to be kind towards another leads to an easier time for people to compromise in workplace environments.

## VIII. Evaluation of Research

\_\_\_\_\_ A limitation of the research as a whole is that the researcher has not taken part or has not been exposed to the workshops presented in “Mindfulness Month” and is only using the statements and documents given by the students, upper primary class advisers and facilitating guidance counsellor. Therefore to an extent the basis of the research for an individual who has not gone through “Mindfulness Month” is straightforward and concrete (in the form of proposals and presentations), it presents the limitation of subjectivity whether what was stated on the proposals and documents truly reflects what took place which would not accurately encapsulate all the experiences of those involved in the program as each has their unique perspective, memory and experience with the program.

Another limitation of this research is that since the researcher did not observe one of the attributions made by a class adviser towards providing a reason as to why a child is very empathetic such as parental influence. Parental influence and attributions are factors that could open a different perspective towards empathy which would include socio-cultural factors and its role in the development of behaviours, in this case, empathy. This would require presumably questionnaires and interviews with parents who are willing to disclose their parental practices. This does not only need more time, but it may also break ethical codes such as one’s right to privacy. However, a socio-cultural approach towards the development and manifestation of empathy could be beneficial to this research study at hand.

The fact that the most empathetic students from each advisory class are selected to participate in the focus group discussion also presents a limitation. This is a limitation as these children are already considered to be very empathetic individuals before “Mindfulness Month”



being conducted, it would be challenging to see if the program they have undergone created noticeable or evident changes to their behaviour. This assumption is made in comparison to a student who is considered as “not as empathetic” where hypothetically changes in behaviour may be more evident as they are also the target of the program which is to encourage empathetic behaviour.

## **IX. Conclusion**

The development of empathy is crucial to a child's development as it contributes to a child's ability to comprehend complex emotions and perspectives, allowing the reinforcement of skills such as collaboration in diverse environmental and social situations. The related literature suggested that a child's experience which includes the educational styles they are exposed to are significant contributing factors towards the development and manifestation of empathetic behaviour. Further, empathetic behaviour is not only limited to an individual's early stages of development but also into one's adulthood, thus reiterating the literature's stance on the importance of introducing empathy during earlier stages of development.

An IB World School in the Philippines guided by the International Baccalaureate Organisations' principles conducted "Mindfulness Month", a program target to Primary Years Program (PYP) students which aim to develop a student's understanding and demonstration of empathetic behaviour.

The researcher conducted a two-stage study composed of a self-report survey for Upper primary (Grade 3 -5) class advisers gauging their advisory's empathetic state, and three focus group discussions with a total of eight upper primary students considered as some of the school's "Most empathetic students" questioning their understanding of "empathy" and their perspectives on "Mindfulness Month". The results suggest that the program was a whole was to an extent a success due to the majority of respondents recognising the value of the intentions of the program in the holistic development of a student-guided by the principles of the IBO. However, the success of the program is also variable in the internalisation of the information given, hence,

suggestions for the program to be done more frequently was often mentioned by both class advisers and student respondents.

Further, the researcher suggests that the success of a mindfulness program is also dependent on the educational style/structure and ideological framework followed by an institution as each structure emphasises on specific values and practices. Some of these values and practices are the institutional emphasis of one's holistic development or academic excellence therefore likely garnering different degrees of success and receptions towards efforts of fostering empathetic behaviour among Upper primary aged school children.

A recommendation for extension for this research is to conduct mindfulness programs at different age groups of students (e.g. Lower primary, secondary years etc.) as it was argued earlier that empathy is an essential ability for an individual to have until adulthood. This should be done to determine if conducting mindfulness programs promoting empathy have the same impact and effect as those investigated in the Upper primary age group. Another possible recommendation for extension of this research is to introduce “Mindfulness Month” to other IB World Schools or schools that follow a different educational structure/system. This should be conducted so that there would be concrete observations and evidence that would either support or disprove the hypothesised scenario of “Mindfulness Month” having a differing impact due to the different values emphasised by different educational systems.

## **X. Appendix**

- A. [Mindfulness Month Proposal and Syllabus](#)
- B. [Mindfulness Month Presentation for Primary Years Students](#)
- C. [Consent Letter for Upper primary advisers](#)
- D. [Self-report survey for Upper primary advisers](#)
- E. [Self Report Survey Responses](#)
- F. [Focus Group Discussion Transcript of Grade 3](#)
- G. [Focus Group Discussion Transcript of Grade 4](#)

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