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# Mindful inclusion: strategies for holistic wellbeing in schools

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Mental health remains a pressing and persistent concern within educational discourse, influencing the decisions of policymakers, practitioners, and school communities alike. A growing number of children and young people are presenting with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and behavioral difficulties within school settings. Despite the implementation of various wellbeing initiatives, access to appropriate mental health support services across England remains inconsistent and often inadequate. As a result, teachers are frequently left to manage complex mental health needs without sufficient training or resources. While interventions such as mindfulness programmes aim to foster mental wellbeing, they are not always rigorously evaluated or effectively integrated into broader approaches that consider the holistic relationship between body and mind. This paper investigates the multifaceted and interconnected nature of wellbeing, with a particular focus on the dynamic interplay between physical and mental health. It further explores the role of mindfulness practices in educational contexts, considering how such initiatives might extend their impact beyond emotional regulation and metacognitive development. The analysis aims to identify opportunities for developing holistic, inclusive, and sustainable strategies that empower young learners to make healthier, more informed life choices. Ultimately, this paper poses critical questions about prevailing research priorities and the methodological approaches used to define and assess the effectiveness of school-based interventions designed to support and enhance children's wellbeing.

## KEYWORDS

holistic wellbeing, mental health, physical activity, mindfulness, inclusion, promotion

## Introduction

Recent data highlights a continued rise in mental health issues among children and young people, especially since the pandemic. According to [NHS Digital \(2023\)](#), around 20% of those aged 8–25 are likely to have a mental health condition. Globally, [UNICEF \(2025\)](#) reports a steady decline in child wellbeing across high-income nations. Using data from [OECD \(2024\)](#), UNICEF assesses wellbeing through six indicators: mental health (life satisfaction and youth suicide rates), physical health (child mortality and obesity), and skills (academic and social competencies). Among 36 OECD and EU countries, the UK ranks 27th in mental health, 22nd in physical health, and 15th in skills, highlighting the urgent need for stronger national efforts to support young people's wellbeing. Although mental health is increasingly acknowledged in policy and educational discourse, this article brings together recent research on mental health provision, physical activity, and mindfulness. Grounded in the first-hand experience of a former teacher, it anchors the discussion in the day-to-day realities of classroom life. The aim is to explore how schools can move beyond narrow, outcome-focused mental health initiatives toward more integrated, holistic strategies that genuinely nurture pupil wellbeing.

The following review of literature employed a systematic approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research and policy related to school-based mental health interventions primarily within the UK. Comprehensive searches were conducted across ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar using a combination of keywords, including mental health, wellbeing, school interventions, mindfulness, physical activity, children and adolescents. Key data including research objectives, methodologies and findings, were extracted and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and trends. Although all studies underwent quality appraisal, inclusion criteria merits further reflection to ensure transparency and rigor.

My positionality, shaped by 25 years of experience as a primary school teacher, informed the lens through which this review was conducted. With a background in leading Physical Education, PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education), and initiating whole-school wellbeing strategies, I bring a perspective that values the integration of theory, classroom practice and implementation within school settings. Priority was given to peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic reviews, and policy documents employing diverse methodological approaches however practitioner-led research and gray literature were also included to offer valuable insights into lived experiences and challenges. This inclusive strategy aimed to balance academic rigor with practical relevance, supporting a nuanced and contextually informed synthesis of the evidence. This article critically examines school-based mental health and wellbeing initiatives, with a particular focus on their inclusivity, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability. Although centered on the English education system, the findings may offer broader insights, aligning with global efforts to enhance the wellbeing of children and young people (World Health Organisation, 2018).

## Critical considerations for supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools

While mental health services are fundamentally designed to prevent, manage, and support mental health challenges (Norwich et al., 2022), they remain inadequate for many children and young people in England (Lowry et al., 2022). Children's Commissioner (2025) reports that the NHS in England can only meet the needs of around one-third of diagnosed children, with regional inequalities in access, funding, and waiting times further compounding the problem. Teachers, alongside GPs and social workers, are responsible for early identification and referral however limited specialist care has led to growing reliance on educators to support a wide range of needs (Lowry et al., 2022). While NHS England (2023) emphasizes the importance of early support for emotional distress, even in the absence of a formal diagnosis, teachers' daily interactions with pupils uniquely position them to identify and respond to emerging concerns (Lowry et al., 2022). Research also links strong pupil-teacher relationships to improved long-term health outcomes (Kim, 2021). Consequently, educators must be equipped not only to address mental health challenges but also to actively foster wellbeing through a comprehensive, whole-school approach (The Association for Child Adolescent Mental Health, 2024).

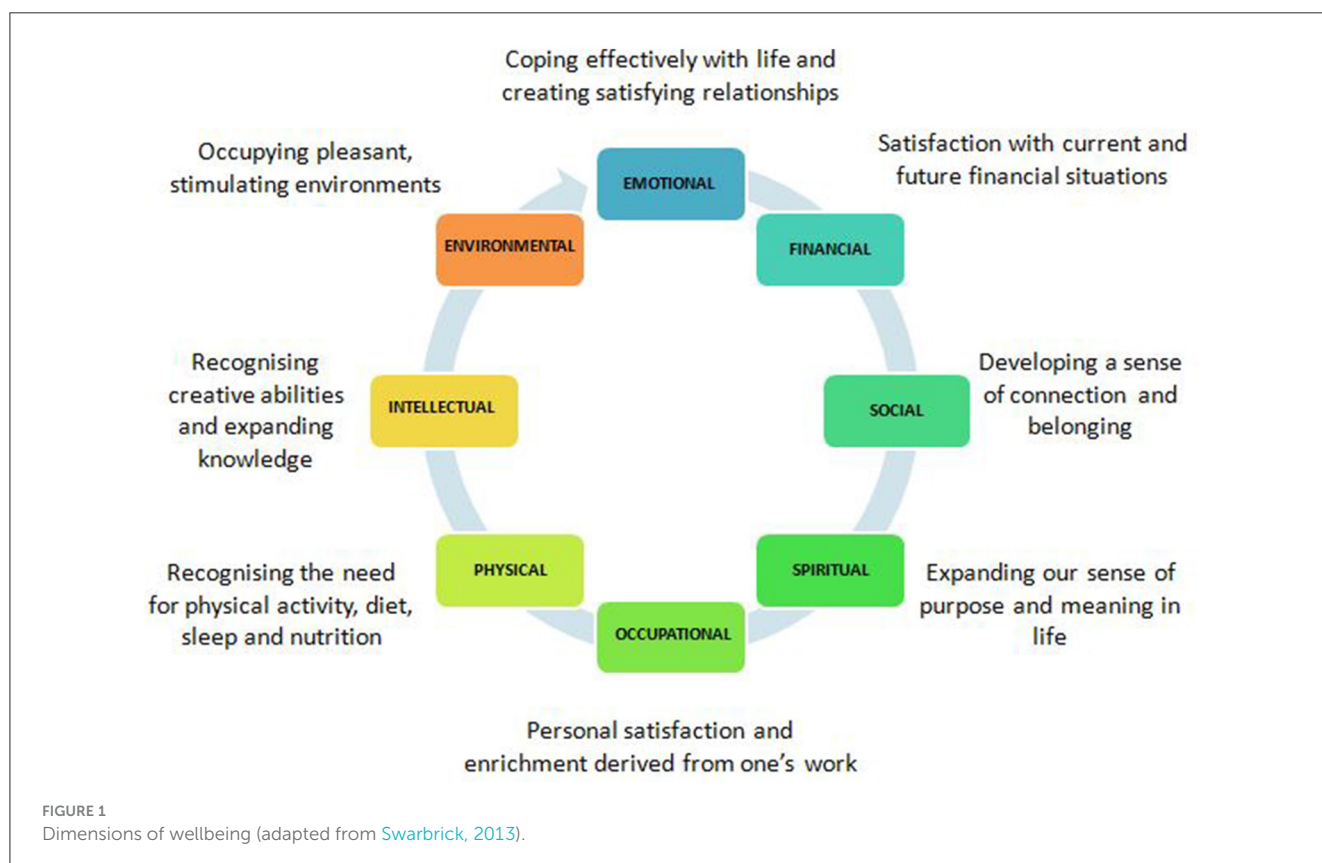
The Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing (Public Health England, 2021) is a widely utilized model (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2025) actively endorsed by the UK government. The approach outlines key factors including identification of need, targeted support, and appropriate referral pathways. Additional priorities highlight the role of active leadership, staff development for personal and pupil wellbeing, meaningful engagement with parents and carers, pupil voice in decision-making, and the cultivation of an inclusive school culture that values diversity. The final dimension relates to teaching and learning, specifically the promotion of resilience and social and emotional learning. In this context, mental health is framed through the lens of emotional wellbeing, with an emphasis on prevention, early identification, timely support, and access to specialist services. While schools are increasingly called upon to support pupils' mental health, this expanded role should not overshadow their core educational mission to integrate academic learning with the development of skills and dispositions necessary to lead flourishing, meaningful lives (Norwich et al., 2022). The following model serves as a valuable guide in this regard.

## Concepts of holistic wellbeing for supporting both body and mind

Swarbrick's (2013) Wellness Model (Figure 1) illustrates eight interrelated dimensions of wellbeing. While some aspects naturally progress as a child grows, and others may be significantly shaped by external factors, each dimension is meant to be recognized, cultivated, and developed over time. When used as a guiding framework, this model illustrates how many components of a broad, balanced and creative school curriculum can nurture holistic wellbeing.

Literature emphasizes the interconnectedness of wellbeing, particularly the relationship between mental and physical health. NHS England (2022) identifies five key actions to promote wellbeing: connecting with others, being physically active, learning new skills, giving to others, and practicing mindfulness, the latter discussed in more detail below. These actions align with UNICEF's (2025) three core domains of wellbeing: mental, physical, and cognitive/social. Mind (2025) highlights the positive impact of physical activity on mental health, advocating for inclusive, non-competitive approaches tailored to individual preferences. Wolf et al. (2021) demonstrate that regular exercise can reduce anxiety and depression, improve sleep, and enhance both cognitive and emotional functioning. Reflecting on Swarbrick's (2013) model, physical activity can also contribute to social connection, a sense of belonging, creativity, and learning, reinforcing the multi-faceted nature of wellbeing.

Although regular physical activity is widely linked to positive health outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2019), sedentary behaviors are on the rise (Guthold et al., 2018). While adult-focused interventions often show limited long-term success (Macali et al., 2025), school-based programmes targeting children tend to yield more promising results (World Health Organisation, 2021). Despite clear guidelines, over 80% of school-aged children globally fall short of the recommended 60 min of daily moderate-to-vigorous activity (World Health Organisation, 2022). Contributing



factors include reduced outdoor play, increased screen time (Palmer, 2015), and barriers such as low confidence, peer pressure, and body image concerns (Youth Sport Trust and University of Manchester, 2025). Although students recognize the benefits of physical activity, persistent digital distractions and self-esteem issues hinder participation. The report calls for more curriculum time, funding, and staff training. Complementary strategies like mindfulness may help boost motivation, confidence, and long-term engagement in healthy behaviors.

Mindfulness, often referred to as present-moment awareness, is identified as one of the five key actions for enhancing wellbeing (NHS England, 2022). While gaining significant prominence across scientific, educational, and public domains, conceptual clarity remains limited, with understandings often appearing vague or inconsistent (Roychowdhury, 2021). Originating in ancient Eastern spiritual traditions and cultivated through disciplined practice, mindfulness has more recently been critiqued for its commodification, superficial application and portrayal as a universal solution to a wide range of issues (Purser, 2019). These tensions remain the subject of ongoing debate (Konishi et al., 2024) and will be explored in more depth later in this article. Nevertheless, mindfulness programmes are increasingly being adopted in educational settings worldwide, supported by a growing body of evidence (Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2024a). A widely accepted definition describes mindfulness as “the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 45). This framing highlights the intentional and reflective dimensions of mindfulness, aligning closely with educational aims to foster self-awareness,

emotional regulation, and metacognitive development in learners. A more nuanced understanding may suggest that intentional living, cultivated through self-awareness and self-regulation, has the potential to enhance all dimensions of wellbeing.

## Recent initiatives and reported evidence of effectiveness

The UK government expects schools to select, implement, and evaluate mental health interventions based on robust evidence, ensuring they are effective and contextually appropriate (Department for Education, 2021). This guidance promotes a whole-school approach and recommends appointing a designated mental health lead. Although the government has committed to providing Mental Health Support Teams in all schools by 2030 (Department for Education, 2025a), training funding is currently paused. While resource hubs and toolkits are available, they can be overwhelming and time-consuming to navigate, especially for busy staff, making it difficult to identify tools tailored to specific school needs. Additionally, questions remain around what constitutes a valid evidence base.

Two major quantitative studies currently shape the UK's understanding of mindfulness in education. The MYRIAD project (Kuyken et al., 2022) was an eight-year study that implemented a 10-lesson mindfulness curriculum in secondary schools, delivered by classroom teachers using structured instructional manuals. The results found negligible benefits compared to standard social and emotional learning. Weare and Ormston (2022) critique these

findings heavily, highlighting that the teachers involved were not adequately trained. More recently, a large-scale evaluation by the UK Government Social Research team (Department for Education, 2025b) examined mindfulness interventions across primary and secondary schools. While some small positive effects were observed in secondary settings, the overall impact on pupils' mental health and wellbeing was not statistically significant or consistent. Weare and Bethune (2024) highlight numerous qualitative research projects that illustrate contrasting perspectives in both detail and results.

Considering the interrelated dimensions of physical and mental wellbeing, Weare and Bethune (2024) emphasize that while mindfulness is often framed as a mental discipline, its core practices are rooted in bodily and sensory awareness. Techniques such as breath-focused attention, body scans, mindful eating, and walking cultivate a deeper connection to physical sensations, highlighting the embodied nature of mindfulness. An expanding body of research supports the role of regular mindfulness practice in fostering healthier behaviors (Howarth et al., 2019; Allen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Present-moment awareness helps individuals pause before reacting to impulses, such as cravings or avoidance of activity, enabling more intentional choices. Enhanced bodily awareness also improves recognition of internal cues like hunger, fatigue, or tension, promoting healthier responses. Given the strong link between chronic stress and unhealthy behaviors, mindfulness may reduce stress, improve sleep, and support emotional regulation. Fully engaging in activities like eating, resting, or exercising can also increase enjoyment and motivation, encouraging sustained participation in health-promoting behaviors. Further studies link higher mindfulness levels with increased physical activity (Sala et al., 2019), healthier eating (Murphy et al., 2012), better sleep (Bogusch et al., 2016), and greater self-efficacy for behavior change (Gilbert and Waltz, 2010). However, the majority of existing research focuses on adult populations. Within school settings, mindfulness studies have primarily examined emotional and mental health outcomes although systematic reviews are beginning to explore mindfulness interventions for children with physical health conditions (Hughes et al., 2023).

## Mindfulness developments in school—Connecting mind and body

The Mindfulness in Schools Project (2024b) offers a range of training programmes for educators to deliver mindfulness curricula to children and young people aged 3–18. Alongside pupil-focused content, there are courses designed to support staff wellbeing. Classroom modules typically span 6–12 h and combine PowerPoint presentations, video clips, discussions, and experiential practices. Activities include mindful movement such as stretching and walking, body scans, and sensory exercises like mindful eating, all aimed at enhancing bodily awareness. A growing body of research in both secondary (Sanger and Dorjee, 2016; Wilde et al., 2018; Volanen et al., 2020; Kennedy et al., 2022) and primary schools (Thomas and Atkinson, 2017; Wimmer and Dorjee, 2020; Calcutt, 2021; Crompton et al.,

2024) highlights a range of benefits associated with these programmes. Delivery by trained facilitators is recommended, with the long-term goal of embedding mindfulness into school culture. However, challenges such as limited funding and inconsistent staff engagement may hinder sustainable implementation. When successfully introduced, mindfulness can be integrated throughout the school day. Simple yoga poses can support flexibility, balance, and focus, while practices like Tai Chi or mindful walking help children connect breath with movement (Fabian and Davila, 2023). In physical education, mindful breathing and body scans can enhance awareness and readiness for activity (Rohan, 2025). Once foundational principles are established, schools can explore creative ways to embed mindfulness into daily routines.

## Embodied mindfulness: integrity and impact

The core principles of mindfulness require thoughtful consideration, particularly when applied in educational settings. Within the context of the Whole School Approach (Public Health England, 2021), large-scale quantitative studies may frame mindfulness as a mental health intervention. This framing underscores the importance of critically examining how wellbeing is both defined and assessed. Rather than treating wellbeing as a static or uniform state, it should be recognized as dynamic and context-sensitive, with variations across different domains. Relying solely on single-point, quantitative assessments overlook this complexity and fail to capture the evolving, lived experiences of pupils.

As previously discussed, ongoing tensions persist around the application of mindfulness in education (Konishi et al., 2024). Both secular-therapeutic and religious-spiritual interpretations present distinct challenges (Calcutt, 2021). The therapeutic model, which dominates current school-based programmes, often relies heavily on quantitative metrics and frames mindfulness primarily as a tool for building resilience. However, when stripped of its ethical and philosophical foundations, secular mindfulness risks becoming a transmission-based teaching model, vulnerable to appropriation by neoliberal agendas (Forbes, 2019). As Ergas (2019) notes, scientific discourse has redefined mindfulness in terms that align with market-driven priorities, eschewing traditional Buddhist language in favor of economically palatable narratives that fit within constrained educational timeframes.

Flor Rotne and Flor Rotne (2013) and Gilbert (2017), conceptualize mindfulness in education as a holistic way of being; one that nurtures both individual growth and collective transformation within school communities. This perspective aligns with McCaw's (2019) advocacy for a more relational, culturally responsive, and transformative approach to mindfulness. However, Nhật Hạnh et al. (2017) emphasize that meaningful mindfulness must begin with educators themselves. Their personal embodiment of mindfulness not only supports personal wellbeing (Emerson et al., 2017) but also serves as the ethical and relational foundation from which it can evolve into a pedagogical stance, characterized by noticing, reflecting, and responding calmly and effectively



with present moment awareness. Dispositional mindfulness, also referred to as trait mindfulness, describes a sustained form of awareness or consciousness that extends beyond formal practice (Tomasulo, 2020; Rau and Williams, 2016). In this view, mindfulness is not merely a temporary state achieved during practice, but a consistent quality of being. It involves recognizing and expanding the space between perception and response, a space that becomes more accessible once acknowledged. Cultivating dispositional mindfulness in everyday life invites individuals to notice and widen this gap, fostering greater intentionality in thought and action.

In educational settings, this approach aligns with Cotton's (2013) emphasis on deliberate teacher behaviors, such as modeling empathy, attributing positive traits to pupils, and articulating alternative perspectives along with their possible outcomes. Similarly, Dix (2017) advocates for a calm and consistent teacher presence, encouraging practices like active listening, restorative dialogue, and problem-solving conversations throughout the school day. These behaviors reflect a mindful stance that supports both teacher wellbeing and the social-emotional development of pupils.

## Conclusion

The mental health of children and young people continues to be a global concern, with wellbeing levels in the UK notably lower than in many other countries. This article offers recommendations for schools, researchers and policy makers. As access to specialist services remains limited, schools are increasingly expected to identify and support pupils experiencing emotional distress. However, a broader, more proactive approach to wellbeing is needed, one that moves beyond reactive interventions. Although the terms mental health and wellbeing are often used interchangeably, their relationship is rarely defined (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008). If schools recognize wellbeing as a multifaceted concept, this understanding should meaningfully influence both curriculum design and school culture.

Mindfulness, as a voluntary and intentional practice, requires thoughtful integration into the daily life of a school. When aligned with a school's culture and ethos, as outlined in the Whole School Framework (Public Health England, 2021), it becomes a gradual process of exploring and understanding emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors to support personal development and human flourishing (Konishi et al., 2024). However, for mindfulness to be fully embedded, it must be explicitly taught and consistently practiced, helping children develop healthier, more integrated relationships between body and mind. While initial resistance may be encountered within school communities, programmes such as the Jigsaw PSHE scheme (Wolstenholme et al., 2016), and Mindfulness in Schools curricula (Thomas and Atkinson, 2017; Calcutt, 2021) receive positive feedback for including mindfulness within a broader framework of social and emotional learning. This integration enhances both conceptual understanding and practical application, potentially marking the beginning of a school's journey toward authentic and sustainable practice.

Given the time and resource constraints faced by schools, the use of evidence-based strategies is essential to ensure both impact and efficiency. Although some large-scale quantitative studies have questioned the effectiveness of school-based mindfulness, a growing body of research presents a more nuanced view, highlighting a range of potential benefits. This underscores the need for researchers to reflect on how wellbeing is defined and measured. Rather than being seen as a fixed state, wellbeing should be understood as dynamic and context-dependent, fluctuating across different domains. Single-point assessments, particularly in quantitative research, can fail to capture this complexity. To fully understand the impact of mindfulness in education it is crucial to incorporate and synthesize qualitative research that explores pupils' lived experiences across multiple dimensions of wellbeing. Such insights can provide policymakers with a richer, more holistic understanding of how mindfulness supports children's emotional, social and physical development within real-world school contexts.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

JC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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