A Critical Review Of Smiling Mind – A Social Service Program

Smiling Mind is a non-profit organization that provides a variety of programmes & resources to show the positive benefits of mindfulness and skills to cope with mental health issues. Mindfulness is the practise of concentrating attention on the present moment's experience, with an attitude of tolerance, non-judgemental acceptance & curiosity. The Smiling Mind vision and goal is that—they want to change the way we all look after our mental health.

In 2015, Lawrence and a group of researchers reported that an issue with mental health support is the perceived stigma in accessing mental health services (Lawrence et al. 2015) and the shortage of mental-health professionals (Patel et al. 2007) are known to make it difficult for many young people with mental health1 issues to receive adequate support. With reference to Patton's team's research, during adolescence, significant biological, neurodevelopmental, social and psychological changes occur during the early adolescence developmental stage, the period between 11 and 14 years of age (Patton et al. 2016). Important health and social problems either start or peak from early adolescence through to young adulthood (World Health Organisation [WHO] 2017a). The World Health organisation has recorded that Mental health in particular is a concern, with 20% of young people experiencing a mental health problem within any given year (WHO 2017b). Left untreated, mental health issues can have a significant and detrimental effect on students' well-being, functioning and development (McGorry et al. 2014). McGorry 2014 strongly advices that it is therefore, important that early intervention and prevention strategies are developed for this age group.

In schools, smiling Mind deliver a variety of resources and training programmes to promote education through the school communities nationwide. Learning about Mindfulness in schools is an excellent way to also help the teachers understand & cope while they learn with students new coping skills and ways manage the rising mental health issues people may face today.

Smiling Mind offers a variety of programmes and tools designed to make mindfulness accessible, easy to practise and as regular practise a part of your weekly lifestyle. One of their most successful programmes is their mindfulness-based programme through a free mobile app suitable for any age.

The programs that were delivered to students through the app all varied extensively in content, format, structure and duration. While the core elements of mindfulness, 'present moment awareness' and 'breathing awareness' were highlighted in the majority of the studies, that was where the similarities ended.

Bannirchelvam, Bell & Costello in 2017, conducted a qualitative exploration of the school student's experience with Smiling Mind programs in schools and found that Students utilised mindfulness techniques from Smiling Mind for emotion regulation, typically by focusing on their breathing, shifting their attention to the present, and using a smartphone application. (Bannirchelvam, B., Bell, K.L. & Costello, S 2017).

Students in this study reported using mindfulness techniques when they were aware of feeling

"angry" or "annoyed". Julie shared, "I used the Smiling Mind app [a smartphone application] when my sister really annoyed me". Student' responses regarding their practice of mindfulness revealed a number of techniques are utilised including breathing, shifting to the present, and use of the Smiling Mind smartphone application (Smiling Mind 2016).

They found that spontaneous use of a smartphone application was particularly noteworthy given that participants were not introduced to the application as a component of the program. Surprisingly, several students practiced mindfulness using the guided meditations on the Smiling Mind application. This was an unexpected finding, and to our knowledge, this study is the first to report student's spontaneous use of technology to support their practice of mindfulness.

However overall, research and findings from Joyce, Etty-Leal, Zzryn & Hamilton in 2010 suggest that not all teachers are qualified or suitable for implementation of mindfulness based teaching programs. According to Joyce, Etty-leal, Zazryn and Hailton 2010, Previous research has found that many teachers do not know how to deal with students that do not take the mindfulness lessons seriously (Joyce, Etty-Leal, Zazryn, & Hamilton, 2010).

In 2015, Kathy Arthurson discussed the promise of mindfulness could be lost if due attention is not given to maintaining its integrity and addressing issues raised, including about the range, duration and scheduling of activities for children and adolescents, and the background skills and qualifications of those that teach mindfulness based approaches as they are rapidly expanding in mainstream education. (Kathy Arthuson, 2015)

Burrows in 2011 enforced another view in that he found mindfulness to be effective to use a more indirect approach of bringing mindfulness into the classroom through working with teachers first, to develop their own practice. Burrows (2011, p. 5), similarly makes the case for what she terms 'relational mindfulness' described as an integration of mindfulness training, experience and counsellor training to develop a deep awareness of the present relational experience.

A Limitation of the Smiling Mind program is if the school or child has access to the technology to make full use of the smiling mind application. Developing countries may not have access to this program & technology due to less school funding or living in a poor region/area where this technology is not as common to the culture.

To conclude, the way mindfulness approaches are developed, incorporated and taught will determine whether the practices are adopted as a set of holistic processes or whether they just become another set of teaching tools in the classroom linked to better performance.

However, not all students utilised mindfulness techniques for the same undesired emotional states, potentially explaining the inconsistent findings in the literature investigating the impact of mindfulness on specific emotional and behavioural outcome measures in students. Contextualising these findings within current theoretical models of mindfulness and emotional regulation, some of the students' responses reflected misconceptions of mindfulness as a form of distraction.

Significantly, this study was amongst the first to find that students spontaneously access guided meditation through technology to practice mindfulness. The factors of the ease of access to the

smiling mind app and that it was involving the students as a community positively contributed to these findings. Teachers found their students made psychological, behavioural and learning progress over time from practising mindfulness activities (Arthurson 2015; Costello and Lawler 2014).

The most commented-on change was students being relaxed and settled after meditation practices, which reduced disruptive behaviour and increased on-task behaviour as they became less reactive (Costello and Lawler 2014; Joyce et al. 2010). The results of the current study suggest that mindfulness interventions in schools are well received by students and can be an effective tool for emotional regulation.

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