A case study on the multi-faceted application of Mindfulness-Based Interventions in a Hong Kong Secondary School

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1 Introduction

1.1 Setting the Stage

A recent report out of The University of Hong Kong found an alarming increase in suicides among students aged 15 to 24 between 2012 and 2016 (The HKU Centre For Suicide Research and Prevention 2021, para. 4). The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups found that of the four thousand students surveyed, 52.2 percent of them self-reported stress levels that were a seven or above on a one-to-ten scale (The Standard 2021, para. 2). The average stress level of Hong Kong secondary students is on the rise, and the concern of parents and administration is growing. In the complex environment of a school campus, there are myriad factors that could be contributing to the matter. In addition to academic stress, the complexity of adolescence is certainly a catalyst for emotional and social issues. As such, many interventional modalities exist to tackle issues pertaining to stress management and emotional well-being. This hybrid case study will be investigating a modality that is relatively new to the education sector – mindfulness. Due to its fairly recent study among academics, the state of Mindfulness-Based Intervention (henceforth MBI) is nebulous. As will be shown, the literature indicates that MBI's hold great promise in a variety of interventional capacities, but a concrete top-down understanding of how to implement an MBI from a methodological standpoint is lacking. As such, this study will examine the piecewise approach to MBIs found in a Hong Kong Secondary School.

1.2 Mindfulness in Education

Dating back almost twenty-five hundred years, modern mindfulness techniques have their origin with the historical Buddha. They are particularly rooted in two key teachings of early Buddhism: the *anapanasati* and *satipatthana* discourses (Thanissaro 2013, MN 118), (Thanissaro 2013, DN 22)[1]. During the time of the Buddha, these techniques were being taught not merely for the management of stress, but for the ultimate cessation of suffering. A small aside on the origins and purpose of these techniques in their original ideological milieu will be presented in the Literature Review. The import of mindfulness into the modern age has it combatting similar issues of stress and dissatisfaction, albeit in a less metaphysically significant capacity. Jon Kabat-Zinn was the first person to study mindfulness in a Western scientific

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[1] All early Buddhist discourses are compiled in five collections known and abbreviated as: *Digha Nikaya (DN), Majjhima Nikaya (MN), Samyutta Nikaya (SN), Anguttara Nikaya (AN), and the Khuddaka Nikaya (KN).* The citing convention for these discourses involves using the abbreviated name of the collection to which it belongs, followed by a number denoting its location in the text.

context (Kabat-Zinn 1982, pp.33-47). His definition of the practice is as follows: "the psychological capacity to stay wilfully present with one's experiences, with a non-judgemental or accepting attitude, engendering a warm and friendly openness and curiosity (Zenner 2014, para. 1). As will be explored, Kabat-Zinn found great success using his intervention to treat patients with chronic pain. As such, it is natural that such a successful technique would be tried in other landscapes. While the study of mindfulness in education is nascent, the promise is great. The literature is varied on what exactly an MBI targets and as such, many mindfulness programs may lack high-level strategy and methodological standardization. It is precisely this element that this case study explores.

Given the multi-faceted application of MBIs in Secondary Schools, an embedded single-study case study design has been adopted. Studying MBIs in their current state is well suited to such an approach as the notion that there are "multivalent realities operating in a situation" (Cohen et al 2017, p. 377) is especially relevant. It is impossible to capture the nuances of MBIs through solely quantitative or qualitative means – as such a mixed-methods case study using questionaries, non-participant observations, and staff interviews has been used. Due to limitation imposed by COVID-19, the original scope of this study had to be amended. However, for the purposes of this hybrid case study, results obtained will be expanded upon *as if* they were truly representative of the Secondary School population. As will be explored in depth – it was found that MBIs varied with regards to several parameters including: instructor experience, duration, push-in/pull-out, group size, perceived purpose of the MBI, and teaching technique.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Origin of Mindfulness

It is important to acknowledge the historical and ideological heritage of mindfulness. Furthermore, by returning to the root of these teachings, solutions for downstream issues such as the implementation of MBIs in education can potentially be discovered. As such, a brief survey of the canonical literature will be given. There is a three-tiered approach to literature used in this study. First, the historical texts which expound the original teachings of mindfulness. Secondly, texts concerning the exportation of these teachings into a modern scientific framework. Thirdly, the application of these teachings to the education system.

Historically, mindfulness stems from a meditative framework know in Sanskrit as *Satipatthana*. The scholar monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu has translated this term as either "foundation of mindfulness" or "establishing of mindfulness" (Thanissaro 2013, DN 22). To summarize these so-called foundations of mindfulness, Manu writes in his 2020 dissertation that: "There are four experiential loci that one must establish mindfulness in through the practice of *satipatthana*. These are: body, feeling, mind, and mental objects" (Manu 2020, p. 34). This practice, along with its various idiosyncrasies, is done to accomplish the Buddhist soteriological goal. Scholar Walpola Rahula writes that the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism give a "fairly good and accurate account of the essential teachings of the Buddha according to the original texts" (Rahula 1978, p. 27). In summary, the 'truths' explain the origination of suffering and stress and outline how one can bring cessation to them through practice. The original purpose of establishing mindfulness was seen as nothing less than the "direct path for the disappearance of our pain & distress" (Thanissaro 2013, MN 10).

In bringing mindfulness into the Western scientific paradigm, Jon Kabat-Zinn is a figure of central importance. His seminal Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course acknowledges the primacy of the *Satipatthana* Discourse (Kabat-Zinn 2006, para. 5), and after its success, many other clinical MBIs have emerged from this root text such as Mark Segal's Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al 2013, p. 416). While the field is still in its infancy, and studying these techniques poses a great methodological challenge, many positive results have emerged from the literature. Importantly, Britta Hölzel and colleagues found in their 2015 study that regular MBSR practice involves changes in brain structure in regions associated with emotion regulation, self-referential processing and mind wandering (Hölzel et al. 2012, pp. 36-43).

Mindfulness programs in schools offer not only a low-cost intervention, but have a myriad of potential benefits for students. However, as will be further investigated, it is precisely this lack of focus which can be detrimental to MBIs. Several pilot studies and meta-analyses already exist with regards to mindfulness in schools. One of the larger meta-analysis was done by Zenner and colleagues in 2014. They found that despite the promise that mindfulness holds with regards to resilience, stress, and performance, the diversity of study samples and teaching methodology poses a challenging in separating the essential from the circumstantial (Zenner 2014, p. 1). As was observed, there is a great heterogeneity surrounding mindfulness. A recent study out of Harvard cites that the most significant outcomes of an observation of MBIs in a Boston school group were: "improvements in sustained attention and a reduction in self-reported perceived stress" (Gutierrez et al. 2019, p. 8). A 2010 study found that MBIs may

improve self-regulatory capacities and responses to stress such as rumination and intrusive thinking (Mendelson et al. 2010, pp. 985-994). The language used throughout studies regarding mindfulness in education is consistently tentative, made evident in the first published meta-analysis of MBIs with youth by Zoogman and colleagues. They write in summation that, "mindfulness appears to be a promising intervention modality" (Zoogman et al. 2014, pp. 290-302).

In relation to the usage of MBIs in Hong Kong specifically, a dissertation has just been published by Wong (2020) studying the effects of a mindfulness intervention on a group of secondary students. One of the two studies, which implemented the dot b protocol, in fact contradicted the researcher's hypothesis. On this he writes: "on the contrary, the experimental group had significant drop of self-reported emotion regulation, positive affect and positive relationship. The dot b program failed to enhance mindfulness of the participants." (Wong 2020, p. 50). He conjectures that low home practice compliance is a likely reason for this. (Wong 2020, p. 51). The 'promise' that mindfulness shows is clear, but a lack of perceived cohesion and expertise among facilitators, lack of home practice compliance or direction, and lack of coherent teaching methodology are hindering its success in an educational context.

3 Methodology

This study will be investigating the various 'micro-MBIs' taking place across a Hong Kong Secondary School. The primary goal is investigative, and aims to explore who is running interventions, how they are running them, and what learning need facilitators are targeting. The case-study will be conducted keeping in mind that the literature already appears to indicate that high-level cohesion is essential for student buy-in and benefit, and that stress management is one of the most targeted issues.

Studying the multi-faceted application of MBIs and understanding the rationale behind this piecemeal approach is well suited to a case study approach. As Cohen and colleagues write in their text *Research Methods in Education,* the key feature of a case study is its rejection of a single reality and emphasis on multiple, multivalent realities operating in a situation. (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 377). In this case study, the actual teaching of mindfulness was observed through non-participant observations. The internal motivations of facilitators was then assessed through interviews and questionnaires. This mixed-methods approach is well suited for an embedded single-case study design (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 384). It is especially valuable for this study as mindfulness, as with any behavioural intervention, is multifaceted. Namely, relying on either quantitative or qualitative data sources greatly limits your access to the true complexity of the

situation. This is seen through this simple toy example. Suppose a facilitator instructs a practitioner to focus on their breathing. Through non-participant interviews, one can ascertain the intention behind the instruction. Through participant interviews[2], one can understand the internal state of the practitioner, and how well they understood the technique and to what degree they developed competency. Finally, a survey can assign a number to a given parameter such as perceived stress – but it is only through the other methods that the number is given contextual relevance.

The subtleties and challenges of educational research are exacerbated when the intervention modality to be studied has only just breached the mainstream. On top of this the limitations imposed on Hong Kong during the COVID 19 pandemic have been substantial. As such, a hybrid case study has been conducted. This means that despite the minimal data collected, results will be extrapolated as if they are representative of the overall case (which in this context is the Secondary Student population).

One of the most important elements of research was the structured non-participant observations. It was through observing the beginning to end implementation of various MBIs that the overarching structure of these sessions became apparent. The observations took the form of semi-structured field notes (Cohen et al. 2017, p.383) A further method used was a questionnaire which was designed taking BERA guidelines into consideration – particularly those on consent and non-responses (BERA 2018, p. 9). Finally, an open-interview style was adopted for the staff interviews.

4 Data Collection

4.1 Non-Participant Observations

Push-In MBI #1: MBI's that took place at varying times *during* class. The first MBI took place in the middle of a class with twenty-one Year 7 students. The session began with students watching a video entitled "One Breath One Mind" to inspire them for the upcoming practice. They were then asked to discuss the video through targeted questioning and a short group discussion. Students were then prompted to sit with a correct meditation posture (straight back, eyes closed) and a YouTube video guided meditation was played. The video consisted of sufficiently advanced instructions (notice the difference in temperature of your in-breath and

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[2] These were *not* conducted for this case study – this is merely an illustrative example.

out-breath). After five minutes of practice the students were prompted to share their experience. Class then resumed as normal.

Pull-Out MBI #1: The following observation took place during a period (known as Flexi) in which students are able to choose from ten options what to partake in. This MBI had a group that consisted of fifteen Year 12/13 students. It began with a short preamble of 'meditation tips' followed by a twenty-minute session using the app Headspace. The practice was centred around generosity and the facilitator only interjected before and after the guided session. Afterwards, students had a short debrief about how they felt throughout.

Pull-Out MBI #2: This observation also took place during the aforementioned Flexi period. Students engaged in a Yoga practice where mindfulness of the body was stressed. This was fully led by the instructors who were able to consistently deliver cogent instructions on body placement and where to hold one's awareness.

4.2 Staff Interviews

Multiple interviews were conducted with a variety of MBI facilitators. It was evident that multiple teaching paradigms are utilized. Some of these include the dot b protocol, MBSR, Headspace, YouTube, and personal experience. Other key anecdotal findings included the opinion that students do not enjoy too much theory and prefer to simply proceed with the practice.

4.3 Questionnaire

Due to severe limitations this semester, there were only a total of four survey respondents. However given the hybrid nature of this case study – their results will be assessed as if indicative of the majority of facilitators within the Secondary School. 75% of facilitators had no formal training or retreat experience. 75% of facilitators taught mindfulness of their own volition and would do it regardless of a top-down mandate. The primary purpose of MBIs according to the facilitators was stress-regulation and attention, however many other possible benefits were cited. All of the respondents noted that their MBI does not follow a rigid structure and is often organically altered to the needs of students (particularly the Push-In interventions).

4.4 Conclusion

The mixed-methods data collection revealed that the MBIs in place at this Secondary School lack standardization across several key parameters including: teaching methodology, duration, push-in/pull-out, class size, facilitator experience. However, all facilitators demonstrated a marked enthusiasm for their MBI and its expected benefits. If more time allowed, interviews with high-level administration would have been conducted to reveal the presence or lack of a global strategy with regards to MBIs specifically.

5 Data Analysis & Discussion

5.1 Unpacking Observations

Given the strength of the data, it is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions. However, despite the limited responses and data streams – some coherence with the literature was found. In studying the multi-faceted application of MBIs, it was made clear that no overarching or cohesive framework was present. The piecemeal nature of the MBIs included divergence across numerous parameters including duration of mindfulness practice, type of mindfulness practice, facilitator experience, duration period of the intervention, and clear experiential objectives. The lack of standardization of MBIs is also evident in the lack of learning objects and success criteria observed during sessions. This section will explore three areas of growth that future MBIs can incorporate: top-down bespoke curriculum adhering to classic curriculum design principles, increased facilitator experience, and emphasis on home-practice compliance by participants. These are in agreement with the conclusions of the aforementioned Harvard study whose core suggestions are: build consistency through school wide buy-in, give teachers dedicated time to practice themselves, give time for student practice (Gutierrez et al. 2019, pp. 10-11).

The MBIs observed in this case study do not target specific students who deviate from behavioural norms, but are rather taught to entire classes. As such, classical lesson and unit design principles should be considered. *Understanding by Design* is a seminal text by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe touting a backwards design philosophy. The guiding principle is aptly summarized as: "our lessons, units and courses should be logically inferred from the results sought" (Wiggins and McTighe 2008, p. 15). As another line of guidance, they write that, "without explicit and transparent priorities, many students find day-to-day work confusing and frustrating" (Wiggins and McTighe 2008, p. 16). In their current state, the case study

conducted highlights that there is no singular outcome sought by the various MBI programs in place at the studied Secondary School. This is however in agreeance with the literature – as the implementation of MBIs has been linked to numerous positive behavioural changes but has yet to be used to target a specific learning need. A 2009 study by Broderick and colleagues wrote that participants reported decreased negative affect increased feelings of calmness, relaxation, and self-acceptance. Improvements in emotion regulation and decreases in tiredness and aches and pains" (Broderick and Metz 2009, p. 1). The divergent state of MBIs is apparent in the data as well as in the literature.

As such, a backwards design philosophy cannot take place, and concrete success criteria cannot be developed. Clear objectives must be set for students or they will fall into a pitfall identified by Wong in his doctoral dissertation– low home practice compliance (Wong 2020, p.51). Alongside a coherent curriculum, instructor familiarity with mindfulness is essential. One would rightly expect a physics teacher to have used Newton's Equations before. Similarly, one would expect that if students are being made to study a biology textbook, their facilitator has personal experience with the material. The same goes with mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn writes that: "In our experience, unless the instructor's relationship to mindfulness is grounded in extensive personal practice, the teaching and guidance one might bring to the clinical context will have little in the way of appropriate energy, authenticity, or ultimate relevance, and that deficit will soon be felt by program participants" (Kabat-Zinn 2003, para. 25). In order to inspire the confidence to engage in home practice, a minimal degree of expertise, personal experience, and knowledge is required from the MBI facilitators. Tackling misconception is an important part of learning – and especially during the teaching of mindfulness. Such an experiential task can be supplemented by texts and worksheets but should be led foremost by competent instructors who are informed bottom-up through experience, and top-down via a meaningful curriculum with regards to both scope and sequence.

5.2 Frameworks

This section will briefly outline suggested mindfulness frameworks. The inherent challenge in teaching mindfulness is that progress can only be internally/experientially assessed. However, there already exist many schemas that attempt to concretize the practice. One such framework is the result of a thesis from The University of Hong Kong where the technique of *Satipatthana* is broken down into six trainable components: equanimity, concentration, awareness, feeling, diligence, and clear knowing of impermanence (Manu 2020,

p. 38). The elements listed not only agree with historical teachings but can be defined and trained in a concrete fashion. The psychological mechanisms that correlate these specific elements with a decrease in perceived stress are highlighted in this text and are related to training oneself to remain calm and unreactive towards both pleasant and unpleasant sensations arising in the body (Manu 2020, pp. 35-54). However, a more preliminary framework is that of training meditative concentration often taught in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The breakdown of these steps helps to bring structure to the often nebulous and confusing task of focusing one's mind. Given the lack of time given to in-school MBIs, only the first three of the nine stages of mind placement will be explained.
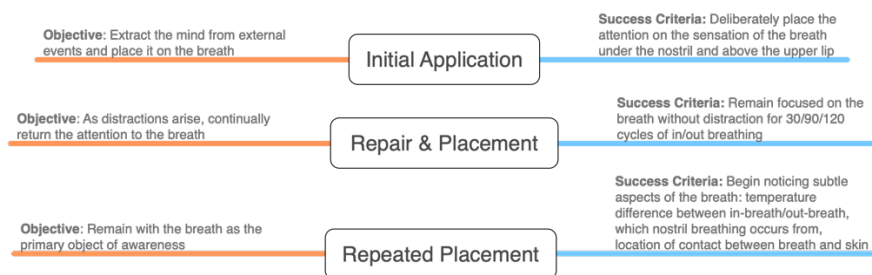

Fig. 1. Stages adapted from (Rinpoche 2003, para. 2)

As shown in Figure 1, clear success criteria exists when it comes to concentrating the mind. There are many such frameworks in existence, and it is the work of a future author to begin constructing bespoke MBI curricula that acknowledge and utilize the great work of delineating inner states that many practitioners have engaged in. A clear dialogue between the intricate meditation manuals of varying Buddhist traditions and the scientific literature can create MBI frameworks that are clear and concise in their theory and results. This would help to curb the occurrence of situations such as what was noted in the first non-participant observation. A guided meditation video instructed the group of students to observe how the temperature of their breath varied from inhalation to exhalation. As shown in the skeletal outline above, such an observation requires sufficiently advanced levels of concentration, and is certainly not something attainable by Y7 students within the first few minutes of beginning a mid-class push-in intervention. There is nothing dangerous in this practice, however its difficulty can lead to lower student engagement and discouragement.

6 In Conclusion

Despite the external limitations placed on this case study, some interesting conclusions were reached regarding the state of MBIs in a Hong Kong Secondary School. These conclusions were found to be in coherence with the literature, and some suggestions were made

combining the observations and the literature suggestions. Three key next-steps were identified: implementing top-down MBI frameworks that utilize standard curriculum planning protocols, higher instructor familiarity with mindfulness, and emphasis on home practice. From a design standpoint, the lack of concrete learning objectives and success criteria leads to low student engagement and is a possible cause of low home-practice compliance. Yet, despite these shortcomings, participants seemed to greatly enjoy the mindfulness sessions. The introduction of such techniques in Secondary Schools continues to show promise, and with a more focused approach, mindfulness certainly has the potential to create calmer and more resilient students.

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Appendix 1 – Data Streams

1.1 Questionnaire Results Sample

Why do you conduct your Mindfulness practice?			
My department took part in a practice that was suggested by wellbeing integrators.			
To address stress and sleep issues			
To give students coping strategies and techniques of control			
I believe it is good for the wellbeing of my students			
When you implement your MBI, what categories would the the intended benefit best fall under?			
Stress-Regulation, Attention			
Stress-Regulation			
Attention			
Socio-emotional, Academic, Behavioral, Physiological, Stress-Regulation, Emotional Regulation, Attention, Self-Management			
Do you have any formal training or retreat experience?			
No			
No			
Yes			
No			
Please explain your history with Mindfulness Based practices - your personal interest/experience - whether you have a personal practice			
I personally do not practice Mindfullness.			
Enjoy the benefits personally for past 20 years			
MBSR And .b courses i practise daily breathing i do art journalling as mindfulness i began using aspects of mindfulness In school when i realised that students are becoming less and less resilient. They are given few chances to fail as parents wrap them in cotton wool			
Just believe it is good teaching practise. I enjoy yoga and being outdoors and in the quiet.			
When you implement your MBI, what categories would the the intended benefit best fall under?			
Stress-Regulation, Attention			
Stress-Regulation			
Attention			
Socio-emotional, Academic, Behavioral, Physiological, Stress-Regulation, Emotional Regulation, Attention, Self-Management			

1.2 Interview Samples

Date: Tuesday November 10th, 2020
Time: 1:00pm - 1:20pm (Lunch)
INTERVIEWEE: REDACTED

- Training:
    - MBSR, dotb, dotbfoundations (is able to train dotb facilitators)
    - Extensive experience and greatly enjoys practice - however does not engage in personal practice as often as they would like
- Does Mindfulness during Flexi, and also facilitates it at the beginning of class, middle of class (Push-In and Pull-Out)
- Notes:
    - Kids don't enjoy too much lecturing on the topic - would rather do
    - Has enjoyed tea
- Trains a variety of students across age groups for varying durations
- Uses expertise to determine how the session ought to progress

1.3 Non-Participant Observation Samples

Date: Monday November 9th, 2020
Time: 10:50 - 11:45 (Flexi)
Facilitators: REDACTED
Students: 15
Year Group: Y12 / Y13

Observations:
REDACTED teaches using **Headspace** guided meditations
- Starts with a preamble consisting of 'meditation tips'
- The session starts (20 minute guided meditation on generosity)
- Has a debrief / discussion (does a great job of not pressuring anyone to speak)
    - Creates a very welcoming and inviting space for students to share
REDACTED says he **speaks more** and does shorter (3 minute) meditations and more focus on **pedagogy**
    - He follows the **dotb** approach and material
- Students were on the roof
- REDACTED has done MBSR 1 day retreats and training - has a personal interest in all of these things (eastern philosophy and such)
REDACTED was facilitator REDACTED seems to act more as teacher
- Pull-Out NON classroom mindfulness session

Date: Thursday November 12th, 2020
Time: 9:40am (in the middle of class)
Facilitators: REDACTED ' class - MINDFULNESS led by REDACTED who joins the class
Students: 21
Year Group: Y7
PUSH IN (mindfulness happens in the middle of the class)
- Starts by playing a video (approx. 3 min)
    - An Oprah video about "One Breath One Mind"
        - Coach of the Lakers talks about building mental strength up - so we can be in consort with one another
- Asks students to discuss the video "What was this video about"
    - Targeted questioning
        - Some students didn't get it - other understood that the point of the video was implementation of mindfulness
- More targeted questioning
    - "From the video, how should we sit in mindfulness"
    - Emphasizes no-sleepy posture
        - Back straight
- We want to be aware of what's happening
- Instructions:
    - Go ½ meter away from the screen
    - Back upright
    - Eyes closed or eyes looking at the ground
    - Plays guided audio instruction (includes nice music)
        - Starts with "bring awareness to the breath"
        - Noticing the air as it moves in and out through the nostrils
            - I don't like this audio (immediately starts with "you might notice that the breath is cooler on the inbreath and hotter on the outbreath - *this is too subtle in the beginning*)
            - THen asks participants to bring attention to the belly
            - Tells people to switch objects 3 times in less than 30s
            - THis audio contains quite a bit of fluff
                - "Let the body find its rhythm moment by moment, breath by breath"
                - "Notice that after every outbreath - the body naturally takes the next inbreath"
    - After 5 minutes of practice - prompts students, asks for discussion
    - "How did you guys feel after this practice?"
        - "Do you feel relaxed"
        - Student: I feel good

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