MINDOUT MAYO

The implementation of a social and emotional learning programme in post-primary schools.

Executive Summary

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Katherine Dowling and Margaret M. Barry

Health Promotion Research Centre
National University of Ireland Galway

NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh

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Mental Health Ireland

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The promotion of children and adolescents' mental health and wellbeing is essential to ensure healthy development and positive social and health outcomes in adulthood. [1] School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions are proven to be one of the most effective universal mental health promotion strategies for young people. SEL programmes demonstrate a range of positive outcomes for school students including; improving social emotional skills, mental health and well-being and academic outcomes, as well as reducing negative health and social behaviours. [1-5] However, variable and poor-quality implementation can impact negatively on the outcomes that can be achieved from well-designed and evidence-based programmes. [6, 7] Programme evaluations require further attention to assessing the implementation process and the multi-level factors that lead to stronger or weaker implementation quality. By identifying these factors, strategies can be designed to create more optimal conditions for programme delivery that will increase the likelihood of achieving programme outcomes.

This study reports on a process evaluation of the implementation of the MindOut social and emotional learning programme in six post-primary schools in Mayo. MindOut is a universal SEL programme for post-primary school students (15-18 years old) in Ireland and was designed to be delivered by teachers through the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. The findings from this study are informed by the perspectives of key school stakeholders, including teachers who are providing the programme, students who are participating in the programme, and school principals who are supporting the programme. A partnership with Mental Health Ireland, Mayo MHA, Mindspace Mayo, HSE Health and Wellbeing and the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway was created to support the implementation and evaluation of the MindOut programme in Mayo schools. This project was commissioned and funded by Mental Health Ireland. The findings reported here should be considered and interpreted within the context of implementation during COVID-19 school restrictions, which impacted significantly on programme delivery.

AIM &OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to monitor the level of implementation quality across participating schools and identify the factors that acted as facilitators or barriers to the effective implementation of the programme.

The key objectives of this study are:

- To monitor participating schools' level of implementation quality across several implementation dimensions (e.g., dosage, adherence, adaptation, quality of delivery, participant responsiveness).
- To identify the contextual factors that impact on implementation quality based on a guiding implementation framework (CFIR).
- To propose strategies that can target these influencing factors in order to enhance future implementation quality of the programme.

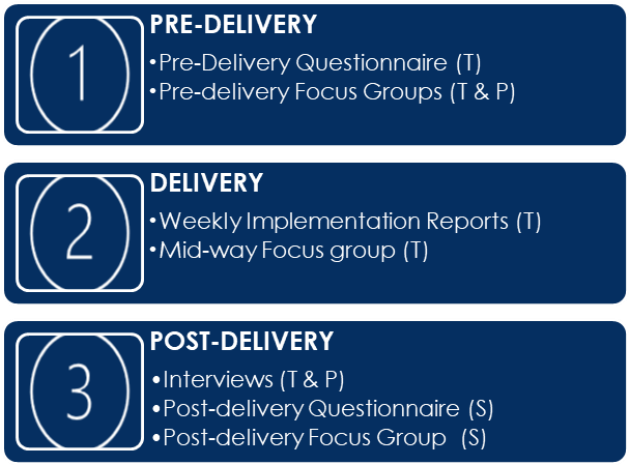
METHODS

This study involves a process evaluation, employing a mixed methods approach to investigate the implementation of the MindOut programme in post-primary schools in county Mayo. Data were collected from teachers, principals and students across three different time-points: pre-delivery, delivery and post-delivery. This study draws on a variety of different quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., questionnaires, focus groups, interviews) from multiple sources. This research was carried out with six schools and is based on data collected from teachers (n=11), school principals (n=6) and students (n=88) across the six school locations.

MEASURES

A mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in the study. The quantitative measures included the Teachers' Pre-Delivery Questionnaire and Weekly Reports and Student Post-Delivery Questionnaire. Qualitative measures included pre-, mid- and post-delivery focus groups with teachers (pre- & mid-), principals (pre-) and students (post-) as well as post-delivery interviews with teachers and principals. An overview of the different measures used across each of the study time-points (pre-, mid- and post-delivery) is shown in the figure below. Quantitative methods were used to answer the first study objective in relation to the schools' level of implementation quality across multiple dimensions, while the qualitative data provided insights into the second study objective by identifying the multi-level contextual factors that impacted on implementation quality according to each of the participant groups.

Figure 1: Overview of measures used in the study



*T= Teachers; P= Principals; S= Students

ANALYSIS

A number of indicators were selected from the quantitative instruments based on their ability to reflect the core dimensions of implementation (e.g., Dosage, Adherence/Fidelity, Adaptation, Quality of Delivery & Participant Responsiveness). [6-8] School classes were scored across each of the indicators and scores were compared across schools. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques [9], and the main themes were mapped onto the constructs for the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR). [10]

FINDINGS

Demographics

A total of six schools were involved in the process evaluation in the process evaluation, involving data collection from11 teachers, 6 principals and 88 students. All of the teachers (n=11) that participated in this evaluation were female. There were four female principals and two male principals involved in this study. Of the 88 students that completed the student questionnaires, 63% were female, 35% male and 2% identified as 'other'. The mean age of participants was 17.4 (SD=.58).

Quantitative Results

Dosage

Due the COVID-19 restrictions, which resulted in a later start to the programme as well as school closure for three months, one school (two classes) was required to cease delivery of the programme after five sessions. Only one class was able to complete the programme in its entirety. A majority of schools (n=7) completed at least eight sessions and the average number of completed sessions was M=8.4 (SD=2.8) ranging from 5 to 13.

Adherence

In relation to the sessions that were implemented, teachers reported adhering to an average of 77% of the session activities. However, this score ranged across the schools and classrooms from the lowest adherence of 47% to highest adherence of 100%.

Adaptation

The average score for adaptation across the eleven participating schools was 48.8% (SD=31.7) (range = 0%- 100%). This indicates that on average, schools adapted almost half of the completed programme sessions. Based on the qualitative feedback from the questionnaires, it became clear that these adaptations related mainly to adjustments to accommodate the pandemic restrictions on physical distancing in the classroom.

Quality of Delivery

The average rating by teachers of quality of delivery was 79% (range = 58%-98%). All scores from students from the same class were averaged for a total score. The average rating of quality of delivery according to students was 72% (range = 42%-98%). Correlations were completed between the student and teacher ratings of quality of delivery; however, these were not found to be correlated, (r (97) = .523, p=.149).

Participant Responsiveness

Teachers were asked to rate students on their interest and engagement across all completed sessions on a five-point Likert scale. The average interest score was M=3.97 (SD=.67) and the average engagement scores was M=3.96 (SD = .78). Students were asked to rate the programme across four items related to responsiveness (e.g., relevance, understandability, usefulness and interest) on a five-point Likert scale. These scores were combined for a total score and this was averaged across students from the same class. The average score of these items across schools was M=3.35 (SD=.84). Students were also asked to rate their experience of the programme overall from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent). The average rating for overall experience according to students was 6.7 (range = 4.9- 9.2). Correlations were conducted to determine the relationship between students' rating of their teachers' delivery and their rating of their overall experience showing a strong correlation, (r (88) = .80 p=<.001).

Qualitative Results

Through this qualitative process, factors that might have facilitated or hindered implementation quality of the programme were identified. All of the codes and themes that emerged from the data were mapped onto 23 of the 39 CFIR constructs across all five domains (Characteristics of the Innovation; Characteristics of the Individual; Inner Setting; Outer Setting and Process). One additional domain 'Characteristics of the Participants' and four additional constructs (Relevance; Delivery Methods; Provider-Participant Relationship; and External Environment) were also created based on the study data. The six domains and 23 + 4 constructs are reported below.

Characteristics of the Innovation

- Design quality & packaging *(quality of materials; access to all resources; additional requested resources)*
- Adaptability *(ability to adapt sessions for needs)*
- Complexity *(user-friendly)*
- Relevance* *(age-appropriate; relatable content)*
- Delivery Methods* *(engagement through videos; interactive activities)*

Characteristics of the Provider

- Knowledge and beliefs about innovation *(attitudes; enjoyment; perceived benefits; interest)*
- Self-efficacy *(confidence)*
- Other personal attributes *(level of preparation; skills; facilitation style; previous training)*
- Provider- participant relationship* *(relationship with students; relatability; awareness of students)*

Characteristics of the Participants

- Knowledge and Beliefs about the innovation *(values towards the programme; mindset; attitudes)*
- Other Personal Attributes *(group comfort levels; group dynamic; group resistance; class size)*

Inner Setting (School)

- Networks and communications (awareness of students' needs)
- Culture (supportive of wellbeing; supportive environment)
- Implementation Climate (whole-school awareness; shared responsibility; internal MH support)
- Tension for Change *(need to prioritise wellbeing in school; Senior Cycle needs)*
- Compatibility *(alignment with wellbeing policy; alignment with other resources)*
- Relative Priority *(need to prioritise wellbeing as much as academics; level of importance)*
- Leadership engagement *(reliance on teachers; lack of awareness; level of support; communication with management)*
- Available resources *(time; space; IT)*
- Access to Knowledge and information *(information about supports; information about the programme)*

Outer Setting

- External Policy *(wellbeing; academic prioritised)*
- Cosmopolitanism *(awareness of local organisations; access to support services; relationship with local organisations)*
- External environment *(Covid restrictions; school closures; Covid impact on student engagement; Covid impact on teacher pressure; school crisis)*

Process

- Planning *(timetabling; space; class size; group dynamic; staffing)*
- Engaging *(training)*
- Champions *(person of responsibility; SPHE/wellbeing coordinator)*
- External change agents *(implementation support; delivery support planning support; school visits)*
- Formally appointed internal implementation leaders *(team of teachers; gender balance; qualities and experience)*
- Key stakeholders *(parents; guidance counsellors)*

Implications & Recommendations

In interpreting the study findings, it is important to take into account that the study was undertaken in a particularly challenging year for schools, with closures and disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted severely on programme delivery and completion. Despite this, the findings indicate some key components and factors of implementation that that supported good quality implementation. While research, practice and policy continue to focus on, and prioritise, the use of effective evidence-based interventions, there are other critical elements that are equally important for the success of a programme, including effective implementation and the promotion of enabling contexts. Effective implementation is composed of a combination of multiple dimensions including dosage, adherence, adaptation, quality of delivery and participant responsiveness. Therefore, the assessment of implementation within programme evaluations needs to use multiple measures and multiple informants to better capture what is actually happening. The study findings also demonstrate the applicability of all of the CFIR's domains to capture the contextual factors that impact on the implementation of MindOut in complex school settings. Using these findings, stronger enabling contexts can be created by using strategies that enhance facilitating factors and reduce the barriers identified by participants. Based on the data, a number of practical strategies and recommendations can be identified that have direct implications for practice and policy. These are presented below.

Practical Strategies and Recommendations

Characteristics of the Innovation

1. Programme Quality: Utilising programmes that include good quality, structured materials, which are user-friendly.
2. Programme Relevance: Selecting a programme that is relevant to the needs of the target population.
3. Programme Strategies: Ensuring programmes for young people include a variety of different teaching strategies.

Characteristics of the Provider

1. **Staff Selection:** In selecting teachers/staff members to deliver the programme, consideration needs to be given to their personal attributes is important.
2. **Programme Training:** Training is vital in preparing teachers to effectively deliver the programme and building their self-efficacy.

Characteristics of the Participants

1. **Increasing Students' Attitudes and Beliefs**: Improving students' attitudes towards, and value placed on, the programme is an important factor for strengthening participant engagement and responsiveness.
2. **Group Selection:** Consideration of the particular group of students that the programme is being delivered to is important to increase participation levels.

School Context

1. **Supportive School Environment:** Wellbeing is not only promoted at a curriculum level but also through the policies, culture, ethos and environment of the school.
2. **Leadership Engagement:** Leadership engagement is a strong factor leading to implementation quality and programme success. While the principal is the main leader within the school, leaders at other levels such as champions (e.g., SPHE coordinator, guidance counsellors) may also engage in leadership roles around the implementation of the programme.
3. **Whole-School Buy-in:** There is a need for strengthening whole-school buy-in of the programme by a wide variety of stakeholders including staff, students and parents.
4. **Programme Prioritisation:** The level of importance attributed to the programme and its prioritisation alongside other more academic subjects is important for quality implementation.
5. **Access to Resources and Information:** Resources which are necessary for programme implementation need to be readily accessible. This includes sufficient time to prepare and deliver the programme. Other resources that are important to this programme include adequate space for programme delivery and access to technology resources.

External Environment

1. **Policy Alignment:** Aligning programmes with clear national and school-level policies is key for programme success.
2. **Community Partnerships:** Efforts to strengthen partnerships between the school and community is important as these community partnerships can provide implementation support to schools. Additional funding, resources and structures are likely to be needed from Government and national bodies to ensure that this support can be provided.

Implementation Process

1. **Planning for Delivery:** Important planning considerations include adequate timetabling, including a dedicated space in the timetable, access to required resources, class size, group dynamic, year group and staffing arrangements.
2. **Implementation Team:** Having a strong implementation team of diverse individuals who are dedicated to the implementation of the programme is crucial. Selecting a strong programme champion to lead the team, drive and sustain the intervention is also key to its success.
3. **Programme Providers:** Appropriate selection of teachers to deliver the programme is key to quality of delivery and implementation quality overall. It is also important that there is a team of teachers (two or more) trained within the school to deliver the programme to not only act as a source of support for teachers involved but to also help with sustainability of the programme year to year.
4. **Implementation Support:** Providing external ongoing implementation support and consultations to schools will lead to higher quality implementation and programme sustainment. Relationships between the school and the external implementation support team should be identified and established early on to allow for ongoing support during planning, delivery and long-term implementation of the programme.

The above key lessons from the findings of this evaluation are especially important for those working in practice and who plan on implementing or supporting the implementation of MindOut or other SEL programmes in schools. By considering the multi-level factors that impact on implementation quality and identifying practical strategies to control for these, the school contexts will be more enabling, implementation will be more effective, and both of these factors will help lead to greater programme success.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of a range of factors in influencing the quality of implementation in schools. In the context of a particularly challenging year, the provision of implementation support by local partners assisted with ensuring continuity of programme delivery by providing support to teachers and principals. The findings point to the importance of implementation support to ensure high quality implementation of school-based SEL programmes. This support is critical to maximise programme impact and to ensure that positive outcomes can be achieved. A number of other strategies were also identified which aim to strengthen facilitating factors, while reducing the presence of barriers to implementation. A combination of these strategies, alongside a strong implementation support system, are recommended for high quality implementation that leads to positive programme outcomes.

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