



Research article

Mindfulness-based social-emotional learning program: Strengths and limitations in Vietnamese school-based mindfulness practice

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness practices in schools have emerged as an educational effort that aims to promote the development of the competency and mental well-being of students. Specifically, mindfulness-based social-emotional learning (MBSEL) programs are an educational strategy that focuses on the improvement of social-emotional competence by cultivating awareness of the present moment through mindfulness activities. This study intended to investigate the benefits and limitations of the implementation of school-based mindfulness practice in a developing nation with a culturally diverse and multi-religious population. Using an interpretive phenomenological method, the researchers interviewed eight mindfulness practitioners experienced in teaching or overseeing MBSEL programs in schools. The findings demonstrated how a western-based mindfulness program can be matched with the fundamental concepts of eastern mindfulness practices, as influenced by the Eastern Trinity philosophy. Furthermore, the study emphasized the difficulties that emerged from misconceptions about the concepts of mindfulness practice and the position of school-based mindfulness programs within the scope of school counseling, which impeded the successful implementation of the practitioners of the MBSEL model. These initial findings elucidated the nuances of implementing MBSEL initiatives within the context of a developing country marked by a rich tradition of mindfulness practice and accessible resources for advancing mindfulness studies.

1. Introduction

Since its introduction in 1973, mindfulness meditation has been used in educational settings to improve field independence and reduce exam anxiety [1]. Across the previous five decades, researchers have revealed numerous advantages related to mindfulness practice in school settings [2]. Mindfulness practices, which are based on traditional values, promote the development of empathy, creativity, constructive social relationships, and compassion for oneself and others, which contribute to the lifelong growth of students [1,3]. As a result, mental health professionals, psychologists, educators, and other stakeholders are increasingly interested in supporting the research on school-based mindfulness activities [4–7]. Concurrently, modern educational institutions increasingly prioritize the cultivation of the social-emotional competence (SEC) of students alongside academic pursuits [8,9]. Among the various approaches employed to nurture SEC, social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have attracted significant scholarly attention within school settings. Within the framework of SEL initiatives, mindfulness-based SEL (MBSEL) programs have been developed as a popular way for promoting SEC. These programs aim to improve the social-emotional skills of students by developing their ability to actively

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interact with the present moment with curiosity and nonjudgmental awareness [10,11]. MBSEL programs are increasingly being used to improve various beneficial health, academic, and social outcomes for children and adolescents [12]. As a result, schools have emerged as a fast growing sector for the implementation of MBSEL programs to improve the SEC of students [13]. The growing interest in the impact of school-based mindfulness practices has prompted an increase in research efforts in western communities (where SEL and MBSEL frameworks have primarily evolved) and eastern cultures (regarded as the birthplace of mindfulness). These studies use a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches [2,7,13,14].

The origin of mindfulness is deeply embedded in religious traditions, especially Buddhism. It is conceptualized as the cognitive process of acknowledging and embracing all phenomena occurring in the present moment, which encompass thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. As a meditative practice, mindfulness serves as a practical application of Buddhist philosophy [15]. The integration of mindfulness training within school settings not only holds promise for the enhancement of the psychological and physiological well-being of students but also stands to reshape the dynamics of their learning experiences in a profound manner. Notably, mindfulness emerges as a fitting component of universal prevention programs due to its focus on addressing the overarching vulnerabilities commonly observed in children and youth instead of targeting specific issues [16]. MBSEL represents a mindfulness-oriented approach within this domain, which draws from the theoretical premise that mindfulness practices can expand the capacity of individuals to observe external stimuli and internal responses. Moreover, they foster the development of self-regulatory mechanisms, which enables individuals to pause and contemplate before engaging in deliberate actions [6]. Consequently, mindfulness practice holds promise for complementing school-based SEL programs by providing a pragmatic avenue for nurturing social-emotional competencies. The pattern of studies on the outcomes of MBSEL programs mirrors the broad findings for mindfulness programs, including increases in mental health outcomes [17], academic success [18], social-emotional health [19], and SEC [20]. However, research on this topic has been insufficient. Thus, investigating MBSEL programs that combine ethics and mindfulness can provide insight on this critical potential synergy in school-based preventative or intervention efforts.

Within nations that uphold deep-rooted Buddhist beliefs and enduring traditions of mindfulness practice in the east, Vietnam stands out for its distinct contextual background and rich cultural heritage. The inception of Buddhism, in its broad context and, specifically, in the Vietnamese social settings, traces back to 1010 during the Ly Dynasty. Prior to this, Vietnamese society upheld customs of maternal reverence, ancestor veneration, and adherence to Taoist principles. The advent of Confucianism in Vietnam can be attributed to the Chinese occupation during the 1st century BCE, which subsequently evolve and amalgamated with local traditions to form a unique Vietnamese Confucian religious and educational ethos, which was officially endorsed as a state religion in 1075. The fusion of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in Vietnam has given rise to the concept of the *Eastern Trinity*, which permeates and evolves within the cultural, religious, and educational fabric of Vietnamese society. Consequently, Vietnamese perspectives on education and mental health care diverge from those observed in other Asian countries and western cultures [21]. This fundamental variance in outlook toward education, well-being, and wellness, which is shaped by influences from the Eastern Trinity, extends to their approach to mindfulness practice. Amid the backdrop of globalization in science and technology, the adoption and evaluation of mindfulness programs, research endeavors, or practice models that originate from the west have become inevitable. Notably, scholars, such as Nguyen and Dorjee [13], Tran et al. [14], and Nguyen et al. [22] have utilized the western theoretical frameworks of mindfulness to design studies that focus on eastern participants. Consequently, this aspect raises a novel, pertinent, and intriguing research inquiry regarding the implications of the transposition of contemporary western mindfulness practices and research methodologies into their original Buddhist foundations.

1.1. School-based mindfulness practices in Vietnam

Mindfulness-based practices implemented within educational settings have demonstrated significant potential in fostering the mental health and overall well-being of students [22]. However, despite the increasing interest in examining the impacts of mindfulness programs in western educational contexts, empirical investigations on mindfulness training or school-based mindfulness initiatives within eastern cultural frameworks remain notably scarce [13]. This research gap is particularly evident in Vietnam. With more than half of its population adhering to Buddhism and a rich cultural heritage influenced by Taoism and Confucianism, Vietnam places considerable emphasis on emotion regulation [23]. This cultural background, which is characterized by a preference for emotional equilibrium and restrained response, seemingly closely aligns with the principles of mindfulness, which emphasize non-reactivity to negative stimuli and a non-striving approach to pleasant experiences [13,21]. Consequently, integrating school-based mindfulness practice into Vietnamese educational institutions holds promise for bolstering the well-being and socio-emotional development of students [21,23]. Such an alignment with cultural values offers a distinct advantage, which facilitates the successful adaptation and implementation of mindfulness programs originally developed in western contexts within Vietnamese schools.

After conducting an in-depth investigation of studies and school-based mindfulness programs in Vietnam, researchers have identified several limitations. For example, Le and Trieu [23] examined the feasibility of a mindfulness program for adolescents and young adults in a central Vietnamese city. The authors implemented a mindfulness-based intervention that consists of daily 1-h sessions across 3 weeks and highlighted its potential in alleviating stress and nurturing vital life skills among Vietnamese youth. However, they expressed concerns about funding constraints and the lack of readiness within the fields of psychology, education, and theology in Vietnam to support mindfulness-based practice training.

Nguyen and Dorjee [13] explored the acceptability and efficacy of a mindfulness-based curriculum delivered by schoolteachers for pre-adolescents in grades 3 to 5 within the Vietnamese cultural context. Employing a randomized controlled design, the authors found that school-based mindfulness training may enhance emotion regulation, which can be partially attributed to the supportive role of the Asian cultural context. However, they noted challenges related to the financial burden of the long-term implementation of these

programs such as limited school facilities and the capacity of teachers and mindfulness practitioners to meet practice standards.

Despite these challenges, cultural and religious barriers to mindfulness practice have not been thoroughly investigated. Questions emerge regarding the adaptation of western-oriented mindfulness programs to eastern populations, particularly in countries, such as Vietnam, in which traditional Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist values prevail. This aspect prompts inquiries into the experiences of eastern practitioners with teaching such programs and perceptions of their alignment with cultural and philosophical backgrounds. Furthermore, understanding the perspectives of practitioners on the facilitators and challenges of teaching school-based mindfulness programs can provide valuable insights into improving the implementation and efficacy of the programs.

1.2. The present study

The present study aims to investigate the perceived strengths and limitations of MBSEL practice among mindfulness practitioners in Vietnam. Specifically, the research intends to address whether or not practitioners in an eastern cultural context, which is characterized by the Eastern Trinity of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, encounter particular strengths and limitations when implementing mindfulness-based practices developed within a western theoretical framework.

To explore the experiences of practitioners, the current study utilizes the MindUP program as an intermediary tool. MindUP is a fully developed and manualized program informed by cognitive developmental neuroscience, contemplative science, mindfulness, social and emotional learning (SEL), and positive psychology [24]. Developed by Scholastic Books, the program has been implemented in numerous classrooms worldwide since 2011, which spans countries such as the United States, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Serbia, Australia, Uganda, Portugal, Finland, the United Kingdom, and various countries across Latin America [24].

The MindUP curriculum comprises 15 lessons designed to cultivate mindfulness and social-emotional skills among students. Each lesson integrates mindfulness practices with activities aimed at fostering self-awareness, understanding the impact of thoughts and feelings on behavior, and promoting altruistic behavior. Organized into four main units (i.e., Getting Focused, Sharpening Your Senses, It's All About Attitude, and Taking Action Mindfully) the curriculum progressively guides students from focusing on internal sensory experiences to cultivating empathy and engaging in acts of kindness within their home, classroom, and community [25].

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This study aims to explore the current strengths and limitations of the MBSEL practice of an Asian country influenced by the Eastern Trinity: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The researchers designed a phenomenological research based on in-depth interviews to better understand the practice of Vietnamese mindfulness practitioners of MBSEL in their working schools. When researching a novel topic, rich information is essential for developing the understanding of the field. Little is known about the phenomenon of MBSEL practice in an Eastern Trinity country; thus, the current study intended to explore the experiential data of participants. An interpretive phenomenological study that originates from the work of Heidegger [26] was selected as the appropriate approach for collecting and interpreting the descriptions of the participants. In this study design, the researchers recognized the influence of individual background and account for the influences they exert on the individual experience of being [26]. Therefore, cultural integrity is needed to gain credible results. Based on the cultural integrity framework of Pelzang and Hutchinson [27], the current study observed five principles when conducting this study as follows.

The first principle is cultural relevance, which stems from the key objective of the study to explore the current strengths and limitations of MBSEL practice within the Eastern Trinity country. The researchers recruited experts who not only served as lecturers in psychology but also gained extensive experience as mindfulness practitioners and SEL-training experts. The primary researcher possesses more than 12 years of experience in training and practicing mindfulness-based programs and SEL curriculum along with being a lifelong Buddhist. Furthermore, they have been involved in religious and spiritual activities for more than 20 years, including meditation within the Eastern Trinity. The second researcher holds more than 10 years of research and practical experience in mindfulness, which encompass original Buddhism and the Eastern Trinity, along with expertise in mindfulness school-based and SEL programs, counseling, and psychotherapy. Additionally, this researcher is well-versed in the Eastern Trinity with published articles on Confucianism, Taoism, and Vietnamese Buddhism. Hence, the researchers are well-qualified to conduct an interpretive phenomenological study on MBSEL practice.

The second principle is contextuality and is grounded in the profound knowledge and understanding of the researchers of the Eastern Trinity as well as their personal mindfulness practice experiences, which enable them to approach participants with respect. This study obtained approval from the Research Ethics Board of the Department of Science and Technology of a critical pedagogical university under the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (supervised committee: QD4167-DHSP) and adheres to the Declaration of Helsinki. Access to participants was granted by providing a clear language statement and consent form. The comprehensive understanding of the researchers of mindfulness-based programs, SEL curriculum, and Eastern Trinity theory facilitated successful access to the experiences of the MBSEL practitioners and data collection for the study. When exploring the MBSEL practice experiences of the participants, recognizing and framing mindfulness experiences within the context of eastern mindfulness perception and practice is crucial for investigators. Moreover, they must consider that the MBSEL program originates from western educational frameworks. Thus, examining the perception of eastern practitioners in teaching a western-oriented mindfulness course (MindUP) in a cultural milieu in which traditional Buddhist and Eastern Trinity values and practices prevail could unveil valuable insights into the theory and practice of MBSEL in schools.

The third principle is appropriateness, which emphasizes the use of language that is consistent with that of the participants and meticulous translation practices. Thus, proficiency in the source and target languages and the possession of cultural expertise are imperative characteristic for researchers and translators [28]. Interviews were conducted in the native language (Vietnamese) of the participants, which the second author subsequently translated into English with further review by a native researcher. As a bilingual individual, the second author rendered a culturally nuanced approach to transcription, thus, capturing words or concepts that may not readily translate into English [28]. Data analysis was then conducted within the framework of eastern mindfulness-based practices to ensure faithful rendition and interpretation. To mitigate the risk of mistranslation, the study employed rigorous strategies. The researchers ensured the accuracy and credibility of the interview translations and data analysis by translating Vietnamese narratives into English text using a bilingual translator (second author). Conceptual equivalence and credibility were achieved through a comparison of the translated transcripts with other transcripts. The second author, who possesses expertise in eastern mindfulness-based practices, conducted thematic and content analyses. To strengthen the credibility of findings, the lead author assessed a critical mass of randomly selected interviews. Both researchers engaged in discussions to refine emerging themes during the data analysis to ultimately reach the most credible interpretation of the data.

The fourth principle is mutual respect and is upheld through a systematic recruitment of participants that is consistent with eastern mindfulness-based practices to ensure that the participants possessed experience in implementing school-based mindfulness programs. The participants were given the option to decline participation or withdraw at any point and to choose the interview format (online/onsite) and location. Prior to the study, the lead researcher held private meetings with the participants to provide detailed information and obtain consent. They were required to sign written consent forms and were assured of confidentiality and authorization in the publication of findings. All data collection, including audio recordings, was conducted with the explicit permission of the participants. To further demonstrate respect, the researchers shared the interview questions with the participants at least three days before the interview. After translation and coding, the interview data were sent to the participants for review to ensure accuracy.

Flexibility is the fifth principle, which was demonstrated throughout the interview process. Interviews were conducted in locations and at times convenient for participants, which respects their schedule and availability. The participants were given the option to decline questions that they found difficult or uncomfortable to answer as well as the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point. Notably, no participants declined to answer the interview questions, and no withdrawals occurred.

2.2. Participants

The study used purposive sampling to recruit participants with specific experience in school-based mindfulness practice based on four criteria: (1) experience in teaching or implementing the MindUP program, (2) current employment in a school and responsibility for implementing school-based mental prevention and SEL programs, (3) practice experience in mindfulness or related educational programs, and (4) intellectual and experiential background related to the Eastern Trinity (i.e., Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism). Phenomenological studies typically involve sample sizes ranging from 6 to 20 individuals to capture detailed experiences [29]. Accordingly, the study selected eight participants using purposive homogenous sampling by the lead author, who had no prior relationship with them.

The lead author contacted schools that implemented the MindUP program and employed personnel responsible for implementing mental health prevention programs in schools. The recruitment process involved an online one-on-one discussion via Google Meet, during which the participants voluntarily shared their experiences. They demonstrated active engagement and expertise in areas such as MindUP, SEL, mindfulness practice, school-based mindfulness programs, the Eastern Trinity, or MBSEL. Before officially participating, they were given comprehensive information about the study, including its objectives, ethical considerations, and publication policies. The study ensured that the confidentiality of the information of the participants was strictly maintained throughout all recruitment and research phases.

Eight school counselors (men: 4, women: 4) aged between 24 and 33 years ($M = 29.13$, $SD = 1.121$) participated in the study. Each participant was assigned a non-identifying code to maintain confidentiality. Serial numbers were then appended to these codes to denote the order of interviews such as M1 for the first male counselor and F3 for the third female counselor.

2.3. Data collection and procedures

Data collection was conducted between September and November 2022. The research team initially crafted screening questions in Vietnamese, which were subsequently translated into English. The participants were given detailed information about the study, who provided written informed consent. Semi-structured questions were formulated to explore the experiences of the participants in the MindUP program at their respective schools and their perspectives on the implementation of a western-oriented mindfulness course in an eastern country influenced by the Eastern Trinity.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to enable the participants to articulate their experiences comprehensively. A condensed table of questions was sent to the participants at least three days before the interview to facilitate detailed responses and encourage reflection on pertinent experiences. The interview commenced with the following questions:

1. When I talk about mindfulness practice, what does that mean to you?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences in practicing a school-based mindfulness program for your students/working school?
3. How do you perceive an MBSEL program and its effect on the mental health and academic achievement of students?
4. Please tell us your self-evaluated strengths and limitations when practicing an MBSEL program.

5. How do you feel about us (with experience practicing mindfulness from original Buddhism) adopting a school-based mindfulness program of western origin?
6. Please self-evaluate your capacity to implement an MBSEL program.

The study used these probes to elicit as thorough a description of the mindfulness practice experience as possible. Additional questions were designed to establish the influence of Eastern Trinity experiences on the current perception and practice of the participants of school-based mindfulness:

1. Based on your experiences with the Eastern Trinity, what are the advantages and disadvantages of practicing school-based mindfulness in this multi-religious and multicultural context?
2. Do you think your experiences of the Eastern Trinity have changed the way you would practice mindfulness/school-based mindfulness? Why (not)?

In the closing section, the participants were asked questions to ensure that they obtained enough opportunity to share and discuss their experiences:

1. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we have not covered?
2. Do you feel that you had a chance to share everything you wanted to?

The study was conducted in the Vietnamese language across four sessions of group discussions between the researchers and participants that lasted between 50 and 60 min ($M = 57.2$, $SD = 2.05$). The participants were given the option to participate online or onsite to promote a comfortable and confidential space based on their preferences.

2.4. Data analysis

Given the scope of the present study, we utilized the six-stage process of interpretative phenomenological analysis for data analysis [30]. The lead author engaged with the concepts of bracketing and the search for essences within the MBSEL framework after translating and interpreting the data in accordance with the appropriateness principles. This process involved the explicit identification of preconceptions related to the topic. To mitigate subjective bias, another researcher (a third party) supervised the team throughout the bracketing process. By setting aside preconceptions, we aimed to minimize potential bias formed through personal experiences [30].

In Stage 1, the transcripts were read and reread to achieve a sense of familiarity with the experience of each participant, such as their interpretation of the *misunderstanding of the concept of MBSEL*. In Stage 2, themes were identified from the data by making comments in the descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual margin of the page. For example, the quote “I find mindfulness exercises easy to teach but sometimes uncomfortable, especially in emotional management. For many students who have strong emotions, it is hard to release, but can be repressed” was noted as *adaptability*. In Stage 3, a return to the beginning of the transcript was made to identify and label essences in the negative margin to the one previously used. For example, the quote in Stage 2 was labeled as *adaptability*. In Stage 4, the essences of this transcript were produced. For example, two essences of the transcript of M1 were labeled as *adaptability* and *limitation* in understanding the MBSEL framework. This method of analysis was then repeated for each transcript. In Stage 5, the lead and second researchers repeated Stages 1–4 to compare individual data with others under the supervision of the third-party researcher. This process enabled the researchers to discover the universals underlying the intersubjectively experienced phenomenon and limited bias. The final stage involved writing and translating the essences into a coherent account. The lead researcher initially conducted this process followed by the second engaging in discussions to review and refine the themes as they emerged during data analysis until the most credible interpretation of the data was reached.

The study used a relativist approach to assess the quality of the present study by utilizing a list of criteria [31]. This study makes a *substantive contribution* to broadening the current understanding of the strengths and limitations of the application of a western theoretical framework to the multi-religious and multicultural contexts of the east in terms of mindfulness practice. The impact of this study lies in the evidence that the MBSEL program (MindUP) can be highly adaptable to multi-religious and eastern cultural contexts but is heavily dependent on the authentic perception of the implementer of original mindfulness and the MBSEL framework. The width of data is provided through numerous quotations to illustrate each interpretation and the different expressions of each essence experienced by the participants. Furthermore, the study displays *coherence* in the presentation of these essences, which were analogous to the participants, thus, providing a meaningful picture of the strengths and limitations of the practice of MBSEL within an eastern multicultural and multi-religious country such as Vietnam. McGannon et al. [31] additionally suggested that the notion of critical friends should be utilized to encourage reflection and provide alternative interpretations and perspectives. In line with this notion, the second researcher acted as a critical friend in reviewing the codes and respective quotes interpreted by the lead researcher. The peer review conducted between the first and second researchers occurred under the supervision of the third-party researcher to ensure the minimal appearance of bias in the data. After a relativistic group discussion, the result was returned to the participants for comment and approval to use in the Findings section. All steps in the data analysis process strictly followed cultural integrity to gain credible results.

3. Results

The study identified two superordinate themes that described the experiences of the participants in terms of adaptability and strengths and limitations, reporting to MBSEL practice perceived by the eastern-culture practitioners.

3.1. Theme 1: adaptability

Native practitioners ambiguously perceived the adaptability of an MBSEL program. When interviewed about their understanding of the definition of MBSEL, their responses, although expressed differently, exhibited intrinsic properties that are consistent with the mindfulness concept but not the MBSEL concept. Notably, the definition of the interview group of the component “consciousness of the present moment experience” displayed two trends, namely, concretizing into intentional attention (e.g., “Paying full attention to the present moment with no distractions, no judgment or self-judgment in the present moment”; M4); and generalizing to life activity in general (e.g., “Mindfulness is returning, living fully with reality, and knowing and accepting what is real in us”; M4).

Although the questions aimed to explore the MindUP program and the related understanding of the participants of the MBSEL framework, the majority provided incorrect definitions: they stated that MBSEL was an original mindfulness practice and that the program was being implemented. They simply taught students how to practice meditation to practice mindfulness at school. The next question focused on their perceptions of the MindUP program in which the results indicated that they possessed an unequal understanding of the program. A number of participants used MindUP on students even when the problems of the students were outside of the scope of MindUP. Specifically, the MindUP program was a skill training course that helps students shift their focus from internal experiences to cognitive experiences. This course aims to guide them in practicing gratitude and mindfulness to self-develop their mental health and cultivate themselves. Alternatively, the MindUP program was intended to allow students to practice meditation or yoga for 15–30 min every school day. This program was similar to the reduction of stress or to help users better cope with stressful situations. It mainly used mindfulness techniques to recognize and self-regulate behavioral habits, thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions under stress (mindfulness-based stress reduction practice). From another aspect, MindUP was established for students with a tendency to self-harm, especially borderline ones who are at risk of suicide (dialectical behavior practice). Other participants suggested the use of exercises in the MindUP program to help students cope and reduce the occurrence of automatic thinking in their depression (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy practice).

Regarding the initial perceptions of the participants about the awareness of those who practice the MindUP program, the majority stated that the MindUP program was relatively popular due to its simplicity, ease of use, and benefits. However, other participants pointed out that the popularity of the program is limited, especially among people working in the public education system, because it has only recently been introduced.

Not many people know it, few people use it, and few people have been properly trained because it is still quite new in Vietnam. (M1)

Because it is culturally appropriate, easy to apply, and easy to understand for counselors and therapists. However, it is difficult to understand properly and thoroughly with the majority. (M4)

Furthermore, a number of the participants mentioned the philosophy of neutrality in beliefs about the Eastern Trinity when responding to the question about their feelings regarding practicing a mindfulness theoretical framework that originated from the west in its birthplace, the east. Vietnamese practitioners have used MindUP as a tool for bridging the eastern and western cultures and have provided students with cross-cultural psychological and educational experiences due to the neutrality and harmony in mindset. This aspect aligned with the trend of the education of students to become global citizens who can adapt in multicultural and religious environments. Other participants shared their experience in practicing a school-based mindfulness framework of western origin:

Thanks to teaching and practicing MindUP, I found the western way of practicing mindfulness as a social–emotional skills exercise to be a great innovation. It is an eclectic transformation from a Buddhist experience to ideologically neutral education. (M2)

I feel that MindUP requires the implementer to understand more about positive teaching methods and positive educational practices in schools than guiding students to meditate like we [Eastern people do original mindfulness practice] practiced and taught before. (F4)

It seems that I have quite embraced the core philosophies of MindUP and implemented it well in my school. Although I am a Catholic, since childhood, I was raised in a family with Confucian and Taoist traditions. I am always aware of God’s existence, as well as feeling the presence of my ego and the moments I am experiencing. MindUP accepts these reflections within me and helps me spread my contemplations to my students. I think it is more of a compromise and integration of ideas between the core philosophies of religion than the spread of faith. (M1)

With its long-standing origin related to parallel and harmonious learning, living, and the development of the philosophies of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and even Catholicism, it was one of the unique features of Vietnamese culture, religion, and society. The Eastern Trinity has become a safe fulcrum for helping the gradual adaptation of MBSEL in Vietnam due to the harmony originating from the Vietnamese lifestyle for thousands of years.

3.2. Theme 2: strengths and limitations

The strengths and limitations of MBSEL practice as perceived by the Vietnamese practitioners, who exhibited similar experiences regarding the exercises and techniques of MindUP. With the focus on the present moment and the development of the SEC of individuals, MindUP can be applied nearly anytime and anywhere and utilize resources readily available to individuals such as thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and breathing. This practicality was advantageous for the practice of MindUP in schools given the heavy content of the educational curriculum. The participants easily conducted *introspective studies* on their experiences due to this closeness and simplicity, which provided them with an additional perspective when supporting students. Although perceived effectiveness varied, a number of participants agreed that the effects of MindUP were evident relatively quickly and were suitable for the educational context of Vietnam. M2 addressed this point as follows:

Mindfulness exercises, such as naming emotions, observing thoughts, or feeling the body, are “doors” for clients to begin to increase their ability to turn more inward. The exercises are easy to do, have quick results, and have few side effects, which students are excited to do.

Echoing the viewpoint of M2, F1 described additional insights regarding the swift impact of MindUP. Teaching the mindfulness exercises was easy but occasionally uncomfortable, especially in terms of emotional management. For many students with strong emotions, release was difficult but can be repressed.

The abovementioned opinion demonstrates that advantages and disadvantages coexist. As F1 shared, MindUP is “easy to teach but sometimes uncomfortable”: the implementation is relatively straightforward and effective but hinges on the adeptness of the participants in selecting appropriate exercises and techniques. This aspect underscores the necessity for professional and systematic training opportunities. Moreover, other participants highlighted the benefits of MindUP, such as “creating a more existential lifestyle” (M4) and “making the working process with students easy to implement” (F3), while expressing their perception of the MBSEL approach such as “helping students’ self-train mindfulness and stress management” (M1) and “increasing the students’ resilience” (F4).

A notable aspect of MindUP practice was its dual impact on the practitioner and the student. Through interviews, the majority of participants reported benefits to their personal and professional lives. In general, within the MBSEL program, the primary advantages stemmed from its simplicity, ease of use, and alignment with the context of the educational curriculum in the implementation of exercises. This aspect applied not only to the personal experiences of the practitioners but also to the process of working with students. Another advantage was the discernible effect of application within a relatively short timeframe, which facilitates practitioners in rapidly identifying changes in students and accordingly devising suitable strategies. However, a number of challenges persist, including the lack of recognition of the basic lessons and exercises related to MindUP and the philosophy of SEC development. These difficulties included MBSEL training, professional development, and the practice of MindUP that aligns with the educational context of a developing country such as Vietnam. Currently, practitioners must undergo training and supervised practice to utilize MindUP. When queried about this issue, M1 remarked that MindUP was not widely known in Vietnam. In the course for school-based mindfulness practice, the organizers needed to invite licensed foreign trainers to teach the course.

Many participants opted to conduct research through diverse sources. Subsequently, they frequently engage in the self-application and self-examination of their acquired knowledge in their personal lives initially. They then “mainly rely on their experiences to apply in the context of practice at the current working school” (F2). M4 shared: “Until now, I am still self-studying and taking international courses to improve. No group of colleagues practice this program.”

In summary, this endeavor was a highly proactive one. However, it also required time and could constrain the capacity of the practitioners to master it by primarily relying on the self-assessment process (without supervision). Consequently, these self-assessments posed potential risks to the process of working with students if the participants employ improper techniques. Furthermore, a few participants mentioned that they were hesitant to practice MindUP due to their “lack of sufficient experience.”

Moreover, the participants highlighted that various student-related factors, including extent of cooperation, perseverance, resilience, and self-resources, influenced the effectiveness of MindUP. For instance, F3 mentioned that “for clients whose lifestyles are detached from reality, there would be some unacceptable responses to mindfulness,” which indicates lifestyle as a significant influencing factor. Concerns were also raised about the ability of students to persist in the practice, as expressed by M3: “Since MindUP is a long process of learning and practicing to get benefits, it is difficult for students to maintain practice long enough.” Furthermore, M2 pointed out issues related to effectiveness: “The difficulty is the student’s training to maintain results, which may not be enough for the student because sometimes it does not fit their complaint,” which highlights challenges in achieving desired outcomes within the expected timelines of students’

The concept of “the pace of learning, practicing and experiencing MindUP varies from person to person and they need time” was widely acknowledged, which necessitates practitioners to exercise patience and high levels of clinical sensitivity to determine the timing of the implementation of MindUP. However, the study identified bias and misunderstanding about MindUP practice, because the practitioners tended to overly emphasize its use as an approach in school counseling but overlook its role as an educational mindfulness training framework that encompasses educational activities and the practice of social-emotional skills.

4. Discussion

To the best of the authors’ knowledge, this study provides the first qualitative account of the exploration of the experience of practicing MBSEL programs in a developing country with an Eastern Trinity religious background. By obtaining a sample from a novel

population and employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, the study highlights the strengths that the MBSEL program and mindfulness practice bring to practitioners and students. Additionally, the study addressed limitations related to training, fostering, and guiding participants to practice MBSEL to enhance the understanding of MBSEL or school-based mindfulness programs. The findings expand and deepen the understanding of the influence of a western-origin mindfulness-based educational program on the practice of mindfulness in a country with a history of original mindfulness practice.

Based on the perception of the participants with experience in original mindfulness practice, the MBSEL program (i.e., MindUP) is ideologically suitable for students as well as mindfulness practitioners in Vietnam. The MindUP program leads to positive prevention experiences and effects in schools with the advantages of simplicity, ease of use, and relevance to the context. At the same time, we acknowledge certain non-positive experiences of school-based mindfulness programs, including their potential to cause harm for stylists. Increasing evidence from UK-based studies indicates that not all students benefit from such programs. A few may undergo harm due to several underlying reasons such as teacher training and confidence in the content of their teaching [32,33]. These non-negative experiences share certain similarities with the Vietnamese context, because the same findings that are related to the training of mindfulness teachers/practitioners can implement a school-based mindfulness program as well as the self-efficacy of practitioners [32,33]. However, the experiences of Vietnamese students participating in mindfulness practice classes in the MindUP program have provided researchers with a clear insight into the nature of the mindfulness experience of practitioners (i.e., students and participants). The philosophy of neutrality and the spirit of harmony in Vietnamese religious activities have contributed to ease the adaptation of practitioners in this country of the MBSEL program. The Eastern Trinity religious background with the philosophy of the harmonization of Vietnamese teachings and lifestyle is a factor that promotes the positive interference of a mindfulness-based educational program that originates from the west, which exerts a positive impact on a country with a long history of mindfulness.

Regarding the limitations, we note important findings that help can develop an MBSEL program that well adapts to the multi-religious and multicultural contexts of Vietnam. However, a major biggest problem is that misunderstanding continues between mindfulness practice and mindfulness-based teaching or educational programs (e.g., MBSEL). The participants were able to practice mindfulness well (due to the relevant background of their home culture); they also understood the characteristics of a western mindfulness-based practice educational program (MindUP). However, they have gone beyond the scope of MindUP in terms of practice and student support. Mindfulness practitioners in Vietnam perceived MindUP more as an approach for counseling or psychotherapy instead of as a teachable mindfulness-based practice program. Therefore, the participants did not correctly understand the essence of MBSEL and could not distinguish between mindfulness practice and a school-based mindfulness program. This situation places them and their beneficiaries (students) at risk during practice. This consequence was also previously mentioned in relation to the negative experiences of students participating in universal school-based mental health interventions [34]. These difficulties created a feeling of apprehension toward the acquisition and application of a new school-based mindfulness practice program.

In addition, an undeniable critical finding is that although the program implemented is MBSEL (MindUP), practitioners lack a sufficient understanding of SEC or SEL. The participants were much focused on the processes and techniques of counseling and psychotherapy instead on the lessons in the essence of the MindUP program. Mindfulness activities that provide students with opportunities to learn about their brain, understand the influence of their thoughts and feelings, and learn strategies to become a caring and altruistic person [24], have not been mentioned. In essence, MBSEL practitioners in Vietnam continue to lack an authentic perception of this program as well as experience a certain barrier in perception related to the SEC or SEL. This is a significant finding in our study, which helps to contribute to the development and spread of the applicability of MBSEL to a developing country if and only if they have appropriate solutions.

4.1. Limitations and strengths

The study has three strengths. First, we found that a mindfulness-based educational program that originates from the west can be harmonized with eastern mindfulness practice values due to the impact of the philosophy of neutrality in the Eastern Trinity. Second, misunderstanding about the concepts of mindfulness practice and school-based mindfulness programs has prevented the successful use of the MBSEL framework by mindfulness practitioners. This contradiction leads to the consequences of the identification of MBSEL as an approach for school counseling practice. These findings point to certain aspects of programs (that already exist) for teaching MBSEL to practitioners. Specific training programs for such practitioners can be modified to incorporate small changes that fit a developing country. Another strength stems from the deep connections that exist between the religious beliefs of the participants and the Vietnamese culture, due to the cultural congruence between the MBSEL program and cultural-religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. It solely considered the perspectives of the participants and not those of the students who were on the receiving end of the programs. The limitations and strengths were solely assessed through the subjective perspective of the participants and not through any other or multiple means. Thus, future studies should aim to broaden the scope of the research or pilot the impact of MBSEL programs on school-based well-being.

5. Conclusion

The present study identified the strengths and limitations of MBSEL practice within a developing country characterized by multicultural and multi-religious backgrounds. Through the utilization of an interpretive phenomenological study involving eight experienced and well-trained practitioners of mindfulness and MBSEL, the study broadly revealed the factors that hinder the development of MBSEL as well as mindfulness practice. The participants reported difficulties such as the lack of opportunities for professional development and supervised practice, reliance on personal experience for self-assessment, and challenges in supporting students

to maintain long-term mindfulness practice. Alternatively, the study observed advantages, including simplicity, practicality in implementation, efficiency, and access to rich references. During the interviews, the participants demonstrated a sufficient understanding and application of MBSEL but exhibited limitations in authentic knowledge related to SEC or SEL. These findings represent initial insights into MBSEL within a developing country with a longstanding foundation of mindfulness practice and available resources for further development in mindfulness practice or studies.

Ethics approval and consent

This study received approval from the Research Ethics Board of the Department of Science and Technology of a critical pedagogical university under the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (supervised committee: QD4167-DHSP). All participants of the study provided informed written consent.

Data availability statement

The data and material for this study is available for those who want to know about the in-depth interview data of the participants.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this entire paper represents my own work which has not been submitted to any journal before.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Tat-Thien Do: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Thien-Vu Giang:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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