Understanding the Effects of Mindfulness Meditation Combined with Aromatherapy to Enhance the Wellbeing of MCAST Beauty Therapy Students: A Narrative Study

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Abstract: This study looks at the effects of the combined practice of mindful meditation and aromatherapy on the wellbeing of MCAST beauty therapy students, potentially providing resources that can help them deal with various stressors. The researchers use a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to draw meaning and understanding emerging from the participants’ experiences. Three MCAST beauty therapy students participated in this study.

The research design of this study consists of six stages: the discussion and planning stage between researchers to identify the best course for the research process; a pre-session held with the three participants; weekly mindful meditation sessions for six weeks; individual interviews with each participant, followed by a focus group; and, finally, the development of the analysis of narrative and narrative analysis.

To examine the data for the emergent themes, the researchers chose to use thematic narrative analysis as it focuses on the *told* (Riessman 2008). In this case, the *told*, emerging from the voice of the participants and reflexivity of the researchers, is what helped identify the common patterns found across the narratives. To facilitate the process, MAXQDA software was used.

Mindful meditation was found to enhance one’s self-awareness and wellbeing, which in turn positively affects the individual’s approach towards one’s personal and professional realm. Additionally, the findings indicate that through mindfulness it is possible to achieve academic beneficence as well as enhance one’s intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, in turn providing students with the highly demanded twenty-first-century skills needed to distinguish one’s professional ability.

Keywords: narrative study; mindful meditation; aromatherapy; wellbeing, self-awareness

Introduction

Local statistics claim that 50% of all mental disorders begin before the age of fourteen (Ministry for Health 2019). Further data indicates that, compared to Europe and North America, Malta is amongst the highest average percentage of students reporting feeling either “nervous” or “low” (WHO 2016: 254 -256). According to recent findings presented by the Richmond Foundation, the youth mental health barometer indicates that 70% of participants aged between 13 to 25 years state that they experience anxiety symptoms. The foundation pointed out that over the past two years, the number of youths demanding their services increased by more than 1000% (Richmond Foundation 2022). Alarmingly, the rise in students experiencing stress and anxiety symptoms is a global concern (OECD 2017). To counteract these issues, several studies are focusing on integrating mindful meditation and aromatherapy in schools.
Purpose of Study

Findings support the use of mindfulness and aromatic oils to reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety and help individuals find some equilibrium (Soto-Vasquez and Alvarado-Garcia 2017; Tregenza 2008; Yager 2009). This study aims to understand whether these two practices can be a useful tool for students to reduce their stress levels and achieve wellbeing. The research question underpinning this research is:

- What effects can mindful meditation combined with aromatherapy have on the wellbeing and professional development of MCAST beauty therapy students?

Research Justifications

Farrell et al. (2016) state that narrative researchers address three kinds of justifications, namely:

Personal Justification

This justification stems from the personal perspective of both researchers as, in particular, mindful meditation has helped in their personal and professional trajectories. Furthermore, as educators, the researchers encounter students suffering from stress and anxiety, which in turn detract from the academic, personal, and professional wellbeing on their work placements.

Practical Justification

Literature states that students feel pressured due to the high demands linked with academic attainment. They acknowledge that the possibility of securing a job heavily depends on how well they can perform (Gouda et al. 2016). As stated by Clandinin (2013), the participants' narrative experiences make the need for the study visible by providing practical justifications. The study intends to bring forward practical and feasible suggestions on how to integrate mindfulness and aromatherapy within the Institute of Community Services (ICS).

Social Justification

This study aims to give a valuable social contribution as the suggestions provided for ICS can be adapted to various state and private schools. Since the chosen practices have been mostly studied in isolation, this research intends to shed light on the combined potential of both practices acting in unison. It will also open further pathways for research and contribute towards filling existing lacunae.

Research Design

To draw meaning and understanding out of the participants’ experiences, a qualitative narrative approach was chosen. To examine the told experiences, a thematic narrative analysis was used as it focuses on the told (Riessman 2008). In this study, various tools were used to collect data, namely the observations and field notes collected during the six mindful meditation sessions, the participants' journal, the individual interviews, the focus group, and collaborative reflexivity. Furthermore, additional data was provided from the collaborative process that developed between the researchers, participants, and researchers' reflexive journal.
Literature Review
The below literature map outlines the literature review performed for this study. The literature search was carried out using the following search engines: Research Gate, Academia, Sage, and Google Scholar.

Figure 1: Literature map
Defining Wellbeing

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 1948: 2). In this definition, the word “wellbeing” is used as a key word to define health. However, this definition has been criticised, with Goldlee (2011) arguing that it is rare for a person to always be in a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Therefore, the question remains as to how to define wellbeing accurately. For this reason, Dodge et al. (2012) propose a new definition, “...stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social, and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing and vice-versa” (230) (Figure 2).

![Diagram of Resources and Challenges]

Figure 2: The above illustrates the definition of wellbeing as proposed by Dodge et al. (2012)

In accordance, Taylor (2003) states that stressful conditions arise from the thought of not having the appropriate resources to meet the current challenging demands. In turn, unconscious mechanisms generate a stress response when the body perceives the possibility of harm (Pitman 2019).

What is Stress?

Everyone experiences stress at some point in their life. High stress levels can cause psychological, biological, and social problems, making a person susceptible to illness (Shahsavarni et al. 2015; Salleh 2008; Taylor 2003). How a stressor influences a person varies according to the individual (Pitman 2019). A human being’s ability to conceptualise things before they happen is a good resource for planning ahead, but unfortunately, it is a cause for unnecessary worry. Sometimes the expectation of a stressor is more stressful than the actual event (Taylor 2003).

What is Anxiety?

Cumulative stress can cause anxiety (Bamber and Kraenzle Schneider 2016; Payne and Donaghy 2010). Anxiety affects a person’s psychological and physical state, challenging and disrupting one’s behavioural, emotional, and cognitive abilities (Bamber and Kraenzle Schneider 2016; Dobetsberger and Buchbauer 2010). Anxiety symptoms can occur without warning (Dobetsberger and Buchbauer 2010). Complementary and alternative therapies such as mindfulness meditation and aromatherapy can help a person cope better with these problems (Bamber and Kraenzle Schneider 2016; Dias et al. 2017; Redstone 2015; Shing-Hong et al. 2013).
The Causes of Students’ Stress and Anxiety

Secondary and tertiary students deal with various stressors, such as academic demands (Pascoe et al. 2019). According to Carabott (2019), one out of every six Maltese students discontinues their education in their teenage years. Statistics indicate that out of 540,000 students (across 72 countries), 66% stated that poor grades are their main stressor, while 59% are concerned that tests may be difficult. Furthermore, 37% feel extremely tense when studying (OECD 2017). Pascoe et al. (2019) agree that such stressors can negatively impact one’s learning abilities, academic achievements, and employability. Hence, the authors strongly recommend providing students with the skills they need to better deal with stress.

Achieving Wellbeing Through Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) Therapies

Healthcare practices that provide a holistic sense of wellbeing are known as Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies (Deligiannidis and Freeman 2014). Hale (1998) states that the mind’s control over one’s physical wellbeing cannot be denied since various illnesses are related to stress. The author explains that this control ability can be taught to transmit positivity. This belief defines mindfulness meditation as it involves training the mind to maintain a conscious awareness of the present moment (Godfrey 2018). Another known CAM treatment to help with wellbeing is aromatherapy. This practice supports the body’s immune system, helps restore homeostasis, and encourages the body to recover faster from fatigue, as the body is able to recover from the harmful effects of stress (Pitman 2019).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness falls under the Eastern and Western domains (Langer et al. 2014). Eastern mindfulness practices includes psychological and meditative aspects, while the Western approach favours the psychological aspect with minimal to no attention to meditation. Even though these two domains have different theoretical principles, they both aim to cultivate a present-oriented mind to enhance health and well-being (Langer et al. 2014). This fundamental aspect is clearly noted as one goes through the multiple definitions for mindfulness.

The term mindfulness was first coined by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer in introducing mindfulness within the medical field. Mindfulness has gained popularity as several researchers continue exploring this practice (Kristeller 2007; Shapiro et al. 2016). Today, mindfulness is an established tool for overcoming challenging behaviours and addictions and improving mental health issues and general wellbeing (Langer et al. 2014; Silver and Strafford 2017). According to Whieldon (2016), mindfulness has had so many positive effects that only good can come out of this practice.

The Benefits of Mindfulness in Vocational Education

Several studies report that mindfulness practices can positively enhance students’ cognitive abilities, behaviour, attitude, and wellbeing (Hyland 2014; Karunananda et al. 2016; Weare 2018). According to Hirshberg et al. (2017), the practice of mindful reflection increases the awareness of one’s internal and external experiences, thus developing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. This level of reflective awareness and control over personal emotions and challenging circumstances empowers the student to respond rather than react to a problematic situation. Furthermore, mindfulness practices are also believed to be beneficial for providing a workforce that has the necessary skills that target the demands of the industry (Nixon, 2019). However, the booming interest in integrating mindfulness
in schools has some scholars warning us to beware as Van Dam et al. (2018) claim that various methodological shortcomings have been noted and that further research is required. Others state that effective integration demands properly trained individuals who have an embodiment of mindfulness (Jean-Baptiste 2014; McCaw 2019). Nevertheless, findings indicate that the introduction of mindfulness in schools is being welcomed by both students and educators (Kuyken et al. 2013; Weare 2018).

*Mindfulness for the Beauty Therapy Student*

Concurring with other authors researching mindfulness in schools, Nixon (2019) argues that mindfulness increases the mind's abilities through problem-solving, enhanced attention, and improves emotional skills through greater empathy and consideration towards others. Moreover, as seen in Figure 3, Nixon (2019) believes that integrating mindfulness into school curricula is the solution to improve the economy.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 3: The above indicates the relevance of mindfulness in relation to human functioning with respect to productivity (Nixon, 2019 adapted from Good et al. 2019)*

For a beauty therapy student, the above characteristics can aid one's educational, personal, and professional growth, which in turn, are essential for a successful career. Each aspect is discussed below.

*Educational Growth*

Good quality knowledge and understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of beauty therapy is an obvious necessity if one wishes to succeed in one's profession. Weare (2018) believes that when mindfulness is taught correctly, there is reliable proof that mindfulness increases cognitive and executive functions. Moreover, Hyland (2014) states that the learning generated through mindfulness provides the student with a tool that can improve one’s clarity of mind and attention. According to Tang et al. (2015), such clarity and enhanced wellbeing are achieved as the brain’s blood flow is significantly improved through mindfulness meditation. Such findings potentially indicate that if beauty therapy students are provided with proper mindfulness training, their academic achievements could improve significantly.
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Professional Growth

According to Hanson (2019), empathic listening is part of the practitioner’s job. Beauty therapists are expected to provide their clients with a consistent, compassionate attitude. This means that a compassionate attitude needs to be consistent with all the service users. Studies show that mindfulness nurtures one’s behaviour and mannerisms, leading to a more compassionate, empathic, and non-judgmental attitude (Brookes 2014; Cauchi 2021; Godfrey 2018; Shapiro et al. 2016). Moreover, the study of Hö̈zel et al. (2011) concluded that frequent mindful meditation practices empower the individual to better handle stressful events, even when the cause of stress remains the same. Such a skill contributes significantly to one’s professional development.

Personal Growth

According to Shapiro (2009), mindfulness “seeps into daily life, bringing greater non-judgmental consciousness to everything that one does, feels and experiences” (602). The mindful journey starts by noticing how life unfolds, allowing one to become aware and explore one’s physical, emotional, and mental state. This generates self-understanding and enables the person to better understand the people and environment surrounding them (Brookes 2014; Godfrey 2018; Kristeller 2007; Shapiro et al. 2016).

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness and meditation practices have natural associations as one can try to meditate with the main focus of being mindful, thus reaping the benefits of both practices (Brookes 2014). Techniques in this practice include focused breathing, mental visualisation, body and mind awareness, and physical relaxation (Lauren 2017; Wong 2019). The purpose of this practice is to nurture positivity, compassion, wisdom, and generosity, thereby promoting outstanding attention span and mental wellbeing (Shapiro et al. 2016). However, some argue that more decisive results are needed, as research in this area is still in its infancy (Britton et al. 2014; Shapiro et al. 2016). Despite these claims, in recent years, mindful meditation is being recognised as an acceptable tool to enhance a person’s wellbeing in diverse professional sectors, including those related to psychological health and education (Greenberg and Harris, 2012; Whieldon 2016).

The mindful Meditation Sessions and their Purpose in this Research

Table 1 briefly describes how the six chosen mindful meditations relate to the purpose of this study.
### Mindful meditation session | Benefits
---|---
**Mindful gazing** | When one holds the gaze, the mind slowly pulls back from wondering thoughts to focus on an object. Doing so calms the mind and develops a compassionate awareness (Godfrey 2018). According to Rajput and Vaishnav (2014), the mindful gaze meditation helps to 1) balance the nervous system, thereby relieving nervous tension, and 2) improve memory and concentration.

**Mindful breathing** | Many state that focusing on the breath can help you feel calmer (Burk 2014). The study of Busch et al. (2012) indicates that both deep and slow breathing techniques significantly reduce negative emotions and thus work in tandem with relaxation. Moreover, Zaccaro et al. (2018) found evidence that slower breathing is associated with increased activity in the autonomic and central nervous systems, thereby promoting mental flexibility, which leads to enhanced relaxation, alertness, and decreased anxiety, amongst various other benefits.

**Mindful body scan** | The body scan is associated with a significant and positive correlation with reduced anxiety, stress, depression and enhanced emotional wellbeing (Hazlett-Stevens 2017; Dreeben et al. 2013; Carmody and Baer 2008; Lengacher et al. 2009). It also provides continuous sensory awareness that can enhance mental engagement. Furthermore, it allows for the concept of noticing without judgment (Dreeben et al. 2013). This non-judgmental practice helps the person to become familiar with things as they happen. In return, it frees the individual from selecting or overthinking experiences (Kiken and Shook, 2011).

**Mindful self-appreciation** | Buddhist beliefs say that when a person loves their existence unconditionally, all their actions, thoughts and words reflect that love (Shonin et al. 2014). Self-appreciation leads to eliminating shaming and belittling oneself, thus improving self-esteem (Shonin et al. 2014). Moreover, according to Brookes (2014), one’s emotional and psychological wellbeing can be greatly enhanced through self-acceptance. Moreover, according to Obigbo and Onyekuru (2012), when an individual feels good about himself/herself, they tend to be happier, healthier, more successful, more productive, and more accepting of others.

**Mindful inner smile** | It is believed that a genuine smile can generate loving energy with the ability to heal (Chai 2002). Bays (2011) agrees that smiling has various beneficial effects, such as boosting the immune system and lowering blood pressure, whilst also serving as a natural anti-depressant. Hellerstein (2011) supports a similar theory, which states that when the body produces too much stress hormone over a long period of time, the chemicals it produces become toxic to the brain and body. Individuals with positive emotions are more likely to be happy, have stronger personalities, experience more stable relationships, and have improved interpersonal skills and cognitive abilities (Abel and Kruger 2010; Jaffe 2011).

**Mindful healing** | According to Wilson (2011), the first step towards healing beyond medicine is to calm the mind. The author further explains that meditation provides the foundation and the skills needed to take home our own power. Schmidt (2004) refers to the above as the “healing attitude” (8). Fulder (2019) suggests that one should adapt to listening to one’s body language, as this can provide deeper insight. Learning to read the signals transmitted by the body enables the person to treat and take care of the problem sooner rather than later. Furthermore, as the person learns to communicate back to the body, one can focus the healing intent through a warm, loving, and comforting energy.

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**Table 1**: A brief description of each mindful meditation that was chosen for this study

### The Importance of Visualisation in Mindfulness Meditation

The brain can produce imagery from all senses, such as scents, sounds, and sights, amongst others (Smith 2018). However, it is important to note that novice individuals might find the visualisation process hard to master. Yet, regular practice will improve imagery and focus (Kamau 2021). Visualisation affects our physical, emotional, and mental state (Lauren 2017) and can be linked with positive and negative emotions which can either reduce tension or increase it (Payne and Donaghy 2010; Smith 2018). When visualisation in mindfulness meditation is utilised positively, it will enable the individual to attain a higher state of consciousness (Smith 2018). The live voice of the person guiding the session can have a therapeutic and relaxing effect on the meditator (Payne and Donaghy 2010).
Mindfulness Meditation and the Importance of the Surrounding Ambience

The environment in which the mind meditates should be calm, peaceful, and positive. Clutter should be avoided as it can distract the mind (Salzburg 2017). Soft background music can have a lasting effect (Banfalvi 2014), and a pleasant scent is recommended. In this study, only aromatic scents will be mentioned. Diffusing essential oils increases awareness, focus, and concentration (Godfrey 2018).

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy treatments involve the use of essential oils. These are produced through the extraction process of leaves, flowers, seeds, fruits, resin, and roots (Pitman 2019; Soto-Vasquez and Alvarado-Garcia 2017). Each essential oil has a unique, organic chemical composition that provides the oil with its therapeutic properties (Ryman 2002). Aromatherapy can be administered through digestion, absorption, and inhalation.

The fastest way for essential oils to reach the bloodstream is through inhalation, which takes seconds for the brain to register and respond (Tucker 2015).

How do Essential Oils Work?

The process of inhalation is achieved through the olfactory system. When the essential oil is released into the air, the aromatic oil molecules are drawn into the nasal cavity and eventually absorbed and dispersed into the mucous membrane. The cilia receptors in the mucous membrane detect aromatic molecules and lock them together. When aromatic molecules interact with neurons in the cilia, they activate an impulse that travels along the olfactory nerve to activate the mitral cells in the olfactory bulb. From there, the nerve signals travel to the olfactory tract and reach the limbic system inside the brain. The limbic system converts electrical signals into odours. It is also responsible for emotions and memory, so smell is the cause of various memories and emotions (Godfrey 2018; Gould 2003; Pitman 2019; Tucker 2015). (Fig. 4)

Figure 4: The process of inhalation (Burbidge 2016)

Aromatherapy as a Tool for Students’ Wellbeing

Linalool is found in several essential oils, a naturally occurring aromatic chemical constituent responsible for lowering stress and anxiety levels (Caputo et al. 2018; Dobetsberger and
The study by Sangwin (2016) shows that aromatherapy aids in reducing stress and anxiety levels among college students. It also improves their quality of sleep and energy levels. According to Lee et al. (2011), aromatherapy is a safe alternative treatment for anxiety, as one eliminates the addictive element found in anti-anxiety drugs. Despite the positive results, the authors still believe that further clinical studies are required.

The Chosen Essential Oils and their Purpose within this Research

The combination of synergetic blends one can create with the various essential oils is endless. The essential oils in Table 2 are the oils that have been chosen for the purpose of this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragrance notes</th>
<th>Top</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blend 1</td>
<td>Sweet Basil</td>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>Frankincense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blend 2</td>
<td>Clary sage</td>
<td>Ylang Ylang</td>
<td>Frankincense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blend 3</td>
<td>Peppermint</td>
<td>Lavender</td>
<td>Frankincense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The three synergetic blends that were chosen for this study

Table 3 highlights the therapeutic properties of each essential oil, thus relating them to the purpose of this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen Essential Oil</th>
<th>Therapeutic properties related to this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Basil</td>
<td>Lawless (2013) describes basil essential oil as “perhaps the best oil that gives the mind strength and clarity” (54). This is due to its cephaica and neuionic properties, making basil an excellent essential oil for clearing the head, calming anxiety and reducing stress-related symptoms (Pitman 2019; Tucker 2015; Gould 2003; Ryman 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>Inhalation of rosemary essential oil improves memory, clarifies and enhances concentration (McCaffrey et al. 2009; Moss and Oliver 2002; Filiptsova et al. 2017). Moreover, other studies, such as those conducted by Saeki (2001) and Rahimi et al. (2019), associate rosemary with reduced stress and anxiety levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clary Sage</td>
<td>Findings show that clary sage has a positive effect on cognitive functioning such as attention, memory and decision making, it also has a reputation for providing psychological clarity, alertness and calmness (Lopresti, 2017; Tildesley et al. 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ylang Ylang</td>
<td>Ylang Ylang is a natural antidepressant, and its properties are known to improve the sense of wellbeing (Neal's yard remedies 2017; Ali et al. 2015; Gnatta et al. 2014). Furthermore, inhalation of Ylang Ylang essential oil causes activation of wakefulness and attention (Hongratanaworakrit and Buchbauer, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peppermint</td>
<td>Improved concentration, relieved mental fatigue, and reduced stress are all well-known properties of peppermint essential oil (Pitman 2019; Tucker 2015). The study of Warm et al. (1991) supports these therapeutic effects as the authors state that inhalation of peppermint essential oil aids focused attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavender</td>
<td>According to Sakamoto et al. (2005), inhalation of lavender essential oil provides a refreshed effect and thereby improves concentration. The authors explain that this contribution may be due to the stress-relieving properties of the oil. Other authors coincide as their findings show that lavender essential oil increases beta power, suggesting that a person is less likely to experience depression (Diego et al. 2009; Caputo et al. 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankincense</td>
<td>Frankincense is known for its ability to help focus during meditation (Tucker 2015; Pitman 2019). It also has a soothing and warming effect and helps relieve stress and anxiety (Tucker 2015, Neal’s Yard Remedies 2017). According to Okano et al. (2019), Frankincense essential oil can counteract the effects of stress and may be helpful in stress management.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: A brief overview of how the therapeutic properties of each chosen essential oil contribute to the purpose of this study
Integrating Mindfulness Meditation with Aromatherapy

Mindfulness meditation and aromatherapy treatments have shared benefits, including reducing stress and anxiety symptoms and promoting a sense of well-being. According to Godfrey (2018), essential oils are excellent companions for meditation. Unfortunately, the literature in this integrated field is still new and limited. Research on such a combination was first seen in the Redstone (2015) study. The results showed that 98.8% of these participants reported decreased stress and anxiety levels. Another study concluded that aromatherapy and mindfulness meditation could be a viable alternative for those suffering from stress and anxiety (Soto-Vasquez and Alvarado-Garcia 2017).

Methodology

This research aims to generate an understanding of the efficacy of mindfulness meditation combined with aromatherapy in enhancing the well-being and professional development of MCAST beauty therapy students. Therefore, this research attempts to answer the following research questions:

• What effect can mindful meditation combined with aromatherapy have on the wellbeing and professional development of MCAST beauty therapy students?

Research Method

A qualitative narrative approach was selected to conduct this research. As stated by Webster and Mertova (2007), a narrative study “provides the researcher with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories” (p.1).

Narrative research allows the researcher to study and understand an experience in which narrative phenomena and methodology are intertwined (Clandinin 2013). Narrative inquiry and grounded theory share similarities; however, the narrative approach is more appropriate for this research because it focuses on temporality, place, and sociality. These three common places provide a fundamental contribution, not only because they allow the researcher to holistically understand an experience but makes him/her one with it (Riessman 2008). Due to the importance given to preserving a pure experience, narrative inquiry provides rich detail—unlike grounded theory—in which the experience is fragmented into coded segments (Riessman 2008). (Fig. 5)
The Narrative Inquiry

In narrative inquiry, one studies the lived experiences of various individuals. Therefore, it is imperative that the narrative researcher becomes part of the phenomenon being studied, otherwise known as “entering in the midst” (Clandinin 2013: 43). This means that the researcher and participant share and unfold experiences as well as create new ones and draw meaning and understanding out of all that emerges (Clandinin 2013; Riesmann 2008). As the storyteller recounts their stories, the researcher views the study from the participant’s perspective, further understanding the individual’s actions, emotions, and behaviour holistically (Kramp 2004). Such information is collected through the participant’s narrative and by observing and noting the participant’s emotions, behaviour, and body language.

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), the “use of narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study” (p.375).

Researcher’s Role

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is crucial since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. It has been argued that in qualitative research, the researcher’s personal contributions, such as values, assumptions, and biases, can help rather than limit research (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

The aforementioned personal justifications significantly contribute to the study as it allows the researcher to be part of the research. This can only be achieved if the researcher is willing to be exposed, implicated, and immersed in what Riessman (2008) calls the “unknown” (27). When one enters the “unknown world”, it is essential for the researcher to learn how
to listen emotionally and attentively. If the researcher harnesses this role well, new meaning and understanding can emerge. To be able to do all this, one must keep in mind that the collaboration between the participant and the researcher is crucial. Creswell (2012) reminds us that a good relational approach actively contributes towards collecting valuable data.

Research Process

The planning of this research was rigorous and labour intensive. The research design of this study is divided into six (6) stages, as seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6: This flow chart illustrates the six stages of the research process

Figure 7: The above shows the six mindful meditation sessions applied in this study
Figure 8: The above illustrates how one mindful meditation session leads to the other, allowing the participant to transition to a deeper meditative state.

Research Instruments

In this study, various instruments were used to collect primary data, namely: observation, participants’ journals, audio recordings, individual interviews and a focus group allowing participants to freely express themselves (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Sample Population

A non-probability technique using convenience and purposive sampling was used to select the sample population. Such sampling technique relies on the researchers’ judgment when choosing the participants (Showkat and Parveen 2017).

Since this research is specific to MCAST beauty therapy students, the selected participants were chosen from that particular group of level 4.2 students. Due to the nature of their studies, the chosen participants possess a background in healthcare and beauty therapy. This is important so that participants can relate better to the benefits of mindfulness meditation and aromatherapy.

Process of Analysis

The data gathered was analysed through a rigorous and lengthy process that underlines the study’s trustworthiness and validity. The process involved the following ten steps, as seen in Table 4.
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Table 4: Illustrates the process of analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Transcripts were created and inputted into the MAXQDA software to later assist the analysis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>The participants’ mindful journals were read and re-read, and anything that needed further clarification was noted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Once the sessions were done, audio recordings were listened to several times and transcripts, journals and field notes were read and re-read, in turn, eventually elucidating the participants’ narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Participants were asked to verify and endorse the content. All participants endorsed their narratives, while one participant pointed out a few minor changes, which were integrated accordingly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>The analysis process was a reflexive exercise that explored emotions and feelings as well as social conditions whilst being aware of the three-dimensional spaces. The reflexive journal and collaborative communication helped to maintain the researchers’ focus on identifying potential outcomes related to the research question (Ciandinini 2013).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>In this study, both the analysis of narrative and narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) were developed. However, only the analysis of narrative is presented in this article. As is typically seen in such presentations, whole segments from the individual transcripts were elicited to explicate various themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>A thematic narrative analysis approach was chosen to examine emergent themes and identify common patterns found across the narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>Transcripts and narratives were re-read in search for resonances, divergences and liminalities to emerge. MAXQDA software was used to facilitate the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 9</td>
<td>Themes and sub-themes were merged, leaving a total of nine common themes (see Table 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 10</td>
<td>Following the analysis, the outcome was discussed by producing reliable arguments that are supported by literature and the participants’ experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: This table shows the nine common themes that emerged from the participants’ narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Achieving self-awareness</th>
<th>Theme 5</th>
<th>Achieving a deeper meditative state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Achieving wellbeing</td>
<td>Theme 6</td>
<td>Enhancing our personalities through mindful meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>The effects of aromatherapy when combined with mindful meditation</td>
<td>Theme 7</td>
<td>Enhancing our profession through mindfulness training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4</td>
<td>The importance of ambience</td>
<td>Theme 8</td>
<td>Mindfulness as part of MCAST curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 9</td>
<td>Dealing with Scepticism</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw and no obligation. Participants were given the opportunity to make changes to the interim text, and the final text was only considered to be final with the participants’ endorsement. A consultation was performed to ensure no participant was contra-indicated to aromatherapy.

No personal protective equipment was needed, no businesses were involved, and animals were not part of this research.
Confidentiality

In narrative inquiry, certain sensitive issues can be exposed. Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance (Clandinin 2013). All participants were ensured confidentiality and pseudonym names were given. Participants signed a consent form giving the researchers authorisation to audio-record the sessions.

Validity and Trustworthiness

In narrative inquiry, researchers must be extremely cautious in providing validity and illustrating that the narratives are not fabricated (Riessman 2008). Therefore, to ensure validity and trustworthiness:

1. This study was mapped with peer-reviewed literature.
2. The discussion section is supported with whole excerpts taken from the transcripts in order for the readersto relate to the collaborative respondents’ and researchers’ views on the subject of inquiry.
3. To further sustain validity and persuasiveness, a pragmatic approach was taken by including variances in the emerging narratives that also contraindicate the main discussed themes.
4. All six mindful meditation sessions, interviews, and the focus group were audio-recorded, hence contributing to the interpretative validity of this research (Riessman 2008).
5. A trusted person was appointed to go over the created themes providing a co-analysis (Riessman 2008).

Analysis of Narrative

An introduction of each participant, as well as their shared experience of mindful meditation, is provided in this section. Table 6 shows which sessions included essential oils.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sessions without essential oils</th>
<th>Sessions with essential oils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mindful gazing</td>
<td>Mindful breathing - Basil, Rosemary and Frankincense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful body scan</td>
<td>Mindful self-appreciation - Clary sage, Ylang Ylang, Frankincense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindful inner smile</td>
<td>Mindful healing - Peppermint, Lavender and Frankincense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: The above indicates the sessions that included essential oils

Erika’s Narrative

Erika is in her twenties and is currently a second-year student following the MCAST Advanced Diploma in Beauty and Complementary Therapies. Due to various challenging situations, Erika was considering dropping out from the course. Her narrative shows how the positive impact of the mindful meditation sessions helped her persevere.

Mindful gazing – Before the session, Erika’s state of being was fragile. After the session, her wellbeing improved significantly, particularly from the visualisation of mindful gazing.
Mindful breathing - Although Erika’s stress and anxiety levels were still high, she kept positive and experienced some moments of deep reflection.

Mindful body scan - Erika’s session was disturbed by a knock on the door and, after that, she could not regain her focus. The thoughts that flooded her mind made her feel overwhelmed. She felt that the use of aromatherapy might have supported her further in regaining a mindful state.

Mindful self-appreciation - Erika described this session as being inspirational. She experienced a feeling of tranquillity and acquired a sense of determination and self-appreciation. The scents of the essential oils helped deepen her experience.

Mindful inner smile - Erika felt these sessions had truly impacted her life. Although Erika’s main stressors had not changed, she felt in control. She explained that she missed the scents of the essential oils.

Mindful healing - This being our last session made Erika feel sad. She claimed that this session was very powerful as she managed to focus and visualise the white light to heal the areas of pain. The scent of the essential oils positively contributed to her experience.

After the six mindful sessions, I met Erika for an interview and then for a focus group. On both occasions, Erika stressed the positive impact these sessions had on her life. She states that every student should have the opportunity to experience mindfulness as it can benefit them personally and professionally. Erika believes mindfulness can help her become a better therapist. Furthermore, she also noticed that through mindfulness, she developed a heightened awareness towards other people. Erika never imagined that these sessions could make such a difference. Even once completing the sessions, she still reaped the benefits. Erika stated that had the session been conducted in a more amenable environment, a mindful state would have been easier to be achieved.

**Elicited Themes from Erika’s Narrative**

The impact these sessions had on Erika is highlighted throughout her narrative. During these sessions, Erika achieved self-awareness, leading to self-appreciation, self-confidence, and a positive attitude. Collectively, these characteristics contribute to enhancing her wellbeing. Figure 9 below shows that Erika’s stress level decreased significantly after each mindful session; similarly, her anxiety level either decreased or remained the same as before.

![Erika’s stress and anxiety levels before and after each mindful meditation session](image_url)

**Figure 9:** Erika’s stress and anxiety levels before and after each mindful meditation session
For Erika, the use of aromatherapy was especially important. The scents acted as an anchor, helping her to immerse herself deeper into the session and enhancing her experience.

*The essential oils were effective. Whenever we had a session with aromatherapy, I felt they really helped me feel calm.*

As the sessions progressed, Erika was drawn into a deeper meditative state. This is indicated by the depth of her reflexive process as she became aware of things that usually go unnoticed. It is this awareness that instills in us a greater sense of appreciation which in turn enhances our values and our sense of morality. Erika’s experience lets us understand how mindfulness can be applied in her profession as a beauty therapist.

*I realised that, at times, we must set aside certain things. When you are performing a treatment, you must give your best to your client. In this way, the client will enjoy the treatment more, and as a therapist, you will feel satisfied.*

In addition to the benefits mindfulness can provide to one’s personal and professional life, Erika agrees that these sessions also helped her with her academic studies. She is certain that if mindfulness had to form part of MCAST’s curriculum, it is likely that students will benefit in the same way as her.

*It is possible that mindful meditation will impact other students in the same way it impacted me.*

Erika believes that mindfulness is a practice that must be experienced. It is through this experience that one learns to appreciate its value. These sessions impacted Erika’s life in more ways than one. The only thing that could have enhanced her experience was having a distraction-free environment during the mindfulness session.

**Jenna’s Narrative**

Jenna is in her early thirties and she is in her final year reading for the MCAST Advanced Diploma in Beauty and Complementary Therapies. Due to Covid restrictions and her husband studying abroad, this was a notably stressful year for Jenna. Jenna’s situation is more challenging since she is deaf. With the help of her interpreter, Jenna enjoyed these mindful sessions just as much as the other participants. She states that her outlook towards life changed for the better through mindfulness, thus positively improving her wellbeing.

**Mindful gazing** – Jenna states that just like the flame is at the centre of a candle, she feels she is in the middle of all her struggles. This session ignited Jenna’s reflexive process, which developed into a profound self-awareness.

**Mindful breathing** - The breathing techniques helped Jenna gain control of herself and her emotions. She found this session more powerful than the previous one and claimed that diffusing essential oils in the room positively affected her experience.

**Mindful body scan** - During this session, Jenna managed to focus very deeply and was filled with a great sense of determination to finish school. However, she would have preferred it if the session included essential oils.

**Mindful self-appreciation** - Jenna stated that the clutter in the room distracted her attention. However, the scent of the essential oils helped her bring back her focus. This session helped Jenna embrace her inner self.
Mindful inner smile - Jenna was sad because her husband’s flight back home was cancelled. This affected her mindset, and therefore could not reap the full benefits of the mindfulness session as she had previously experienced.

Mindful healing - During the session, Jenna felt happy and stated that these sessions created a transformational change that allowed her to appreciate herself more.

After completing the six mindful sessions, I met Jenna twice more, once for an interview and then for the focus group. During our conversations, she stated that based on her experience, she believes that mindfulness can help students with their academic studies.

*It helped me believe in myself. These sessions help me think more positively and not feel discouraged.*

She also believes that aromatherapy and mindful meditation complement each other and should be used in sync. Jenna explained that these mindful sessions did not make her problems disappear but that, through the process, she discovered herself. Additionally, her self-esteem and self-confidence improved, and she also developed a sense of pride.

Jenna wishes to create an awareness of the benefits of mindful meditation amongst the deaf community.

*I would like to share this experience with other people who are deaf like me ..., I want to tell them that it really works.*

**Elicited themes from Jenna’s Narrative**

Achieving self-awareness helped Jenna develop a positive outlook and a greater sense of self-appreciation. In turn, this helped her improve her self-esteem and her overall wellbeing.

Equipped with such essential life skills, Jenna was able to control her panic attacks and keep moving forward.

*I was very surprised with the change I felt throughout these sessions.*

Figure 10 below shows how Jenna’s stress and anxiety significantly decreased after the sessions. It suggests that Jenna was able to enhance her wellbeing through mindful meditation.

*Figure 10: Jenna’s stress and anxiety levels before and after each mindful meditation session*
Jenna’s narrative shows that her focus fluctuated from moments of distraction to moments of a deeper meditative state. She explained that if these sessions had occurred in a more peaceful environment, her experience would have been even better.

Seeing how these sessions helped her overall wellbeing, Jenna thought of how these sessions can help the deaf community. Being purposefully aware of our state and the way it may affect other people is how one starts to nurture mindfulness from within. Jenna believes that through mindfulness, we can connect better with our clients. In fact, she would like to incorporate mindful meditation within her treatments.

... I think that if a mindful meditation session is done before a treatment, it would calm the client and fill them with positive energy.

Jenna is convinced that implementing these sessions within the MCAST curriculum could be helpful to all students across the board. She explained that these sessions were beneficial throughout her studies as they helped her focus better and gain control over her stress and anxiety during assessments.

Jenna is aware that some students may be sceptic about mindful meditation but believes that by word of mouth, many students will be interested in trying these sessions and will overcome the issue of scepticism.

Chanel’s Narrative

Chanel is 19 years old and is in her last year reading for the MCAST Advanced Diploma in Beauty and Complementary Therapies. Due to COVID-19, the educational system she was familiar with changed significantly, and as a result, she felt worried and insecure. This narrative shows how these sessions helped Chanel with her struggles and how the process helped her self-awareness.

Mindful gazing - As Chanel gazed at the candle, she felt a sense of calm.

Mindful breathing - By focusing on her breathing, Chanel became aware of its importance. She realised that we need to reflect on the positive things surrounding us and appreciate the little things in our life.

Mindful body scan - The session helped Chanel clear her mind. Chanel felt a sense of appreciation and decided to enjoy the moments in life as they came.

Mindful self-appreciation - Chanel could not focus because she was upset that her mother tested positive for COVID-19. Yet, the practice encouraged her to think positively even when faced with a difficult situation. Chanel stated that the aromatic scents helped make her experience more pleasant.

Mindful inner smile - Chanel explained that this session continued to strengthen her appreciation for the things we take for granted.

Mindful healing - Chanel explained that these sessions helped her understand that she cannot control certain things, but she can control how she feels and reacts. After the session, she felt strong and thankful.

After the six mindful meditation sessions, Chanel and I met for the one-to-one interview and the focus group. During our dialogues, Chanel expressed how these sessions exceeded her expectations. Chanel noticed that the reflexive process helped her understand herself, and
as a result, she could express herself better. She explained that based on her experience, she agrees that such mindfulness sessions could help students with their personal lives and academic studies.

**Elicited Themes from Chanel’s Narrative**

These mindful sessions allowed Chanel to spend time with the self. In turn, she was able to better understand her emotions, channel her feelings and work through her struggles, consequently enhancing her general wellbeing. Figure 11 below shows how these mindful sessions helped to further reduce Chanel’s stress and anxiety levels.

**Figure 11: Indicates Chanel’s mindful meditation experience before and after each mindful meditation experience**

Besides lowering her stress levels, Chanel claims that this experience helped her acquire a new and positive approach towards life.

*I felt a change. Before, I used to feel more panicked, but now, I am trying to take it one step at a time, and I know I’ll manage.*

She also noted that the use of aromatherapy during the session intensified her experience. However, she claimed that performing the sessions online was sometimes distracting. Albeit, Chanel still found these sessions beneficial as they allowed her to enter a reflexive process leading to a deeper meditative state. She described that these sessions were a learning experience that made her a better person. This is because, throughout the process, she noticed a change in her personality.

*When I have one of those mood swings, I feel I can now stop myself, calm down and express myself more calmly, as opposed to reacting badly.*

Chanel believes that the same calm, grounded, and self-controlled personality is needed when faced with overwhelming situations presented in our place of work. She believes that mindfulness can give the clarity of mind needed to better deal with clients and any challenging situations that may occur in a salon.

*I believe that mindful meditation will also help you perform better treatments... It can also help you deal with certain situations...*

Chanel’s perspective gives us an idea of the practical application of mindfulness within the beauty salon. She strongly believes that mindfulness should be implemented as part
of the MCAST curriculum. According to Chanel, the subject needs to be taught throughout the year. She claims that, like her, students might need someone to guide them and make them aware of the benefits of mindfulness. At first, she could not foresee how mindfulness can affect her life and her way of thinking. However, after her experience, Chanel is now confident that students will enjoy the sessions and will be eager to learn more about the topic.

**Findings and Discussion**

During the analysis, the following nine themes were common in all narratives, namely: 1) achieving self-awareness; 2) achieving wellbeing; 3) the effects of aromatherapy combined with mindful meditation; 4) the importance of ambience; 5) achieving a deeper meditative state; 6) enhancing our personalities; 7) enhancing our profession through mindfulness training; 8) mindfulness as part of the MCAST curriculum; and 9) dealing with scepticism. These themes relate to the participants’ mindful meditation experience, some of which were combined with aromatherapy.

**Theme 1: Achieving Self-awareness**

Mindfulness training involves the individual actively paying attention to the here and now (Langer et al. 2014). This enables the person to achieve self-awareness (Godfrey 2018; Kristeller 2007). All three participating students saw themselves represented in the flame, emerging with their own awareness. This experience ignited the progress towards achieving self-awareness.

It was noted that self-awareness was not immediately acquired, but rather, it was a process that developed gradually throughout the six sessions.

> When I first started these sessions, I was not self-aware of who I am, but by the sixth session, I was surprised with how many things I managed to discover about myself. (Jenna)

As mentioned in the literature, mindfulness is a journey that allows the individual to observe how life unfolds. This process allows the individual to explore one’s own emotional, mental, and physical state (Brookes 2014; Kristeller 2007; Shapiro et al. 2016).

**Theme 2: Achieving Wellbeing**

All participants claimed that after the mindfulness sessions, they felt that their wellbeing improved.

> I felt a change, I used to feel more panicked, but now, I am trying to take it one step at a time... (Chanel)

This outcome is consistent with numerous studies that report similar findings (Hazlett-Stevens 2017; Shapiro et al. 2016; Silver and Strafford 2017). The most common factor amongst the participants was their feeling of relaxation after the session. In the literature, Tang et al. (2015) connect this outcome to the enhanced blood flow activity that occurs in the brain whilst practising mindful meditation.

Apart from relaxation, other factors were unique for each participant yet these still contributed to their wellbeing. For instance, these sessions helped Jenna gain control over her emotions:
These sessions helped to balance out. Meditation did not solve my problems. [...] but at least meditation helped me stay calm.

The above compares to the neuroscientific effect of mindfulness as studies have concluded that regular mindfulness practices allow the individual to handle stressful events better, even when the stressor does not change (Holzel et al. 2011).

Theme 3: The Effects of Aromatherapy when Combined with Mindful Meditation

Relaxation properties are among the most documented benefits of aromatherapy (Caputo et al. 2018; Okano et al. 2019; Pitman 2019; Rahimi et al. 2019). These findings provide further confirmation as all participants felt that the essential oils that were used during the sessions helped them feel calmer and relaxed.

I believe that essential oils positively contribute to the session. I felt more relaxed. (Chanel)

When comparing the sessions that included aromatherapy to those sessions that did not, participants stated that the aromatic scents triggered their brain into a relaxed state much faster.

I felt that the sessions with aromatherapy helped me much more than those sessions without. (Erika)

The findings mentioned support the use of aromatherapy with mindful meditation. In the literature, the same combination is encouraged by Godfrey (2018) and Smith (2018).

It is important to mention that since these sessions were held online and the participants lacked a harmonious ambience, it is possible that the scents of the essential oils were more evident, and thus participants could easily identify the effects.

Theme 4: The Importance of Ambience

The participants’ narratives clearly indicate that they all felt the need to do such sessions in a more serene and peaceful environment, away from distractions and clutter.

I have some clutter in the room, and since I need to keep my eyes open, the clutter was distracting me. (Jenna)

Salzburg (2017) argued that a cluttered room also tends to clutter the mind, thus taking away from the overall experience.

The findings from this inquiry indicate that, when considering mindfulness in an educational setting or in any other setting, it is important that the surrounding ambience serves as an equaliser, meaning that regardless of the energy level that one enters during the practice, the ambience will help them attune to the energy level required for mindfulness training, thus enabling the individual to perform better.

One must be aware that mindfulness is not just a meditation practice (Shapiro et al. 2016), but it interweaves with our everyday lives, bringing awareness to everything that one does and experiences (Shapiro 2009).
Theme 5: Achieving a Deeper Meditative State

Each participant's narrative indicates that at one point or another, they all had powerful experiences which led to a deep meditative state. For the most part, all participants managed to maintain focus and visualisation. However, they found visualising less familiar objects more difficult.

I do not think I was able to focus all the time, but as the sessions went on, I got better at focusing. (Jenna)

Kamau (2021) confirms that one needs regular practice to be able to better retain one’s focus in order to improve visualisation. These findings also indicate that the use of aromatherapy during the sessions can enhance the individual’s focus. However, since the effects of aromatherapy work on the brain’s limbic system (Pitman 2019; Tucker 2015), the experience is unique for each individual. In fact, two out of the three participants confirmed that each time essential oils were used, they felt that their focus increased, whilst the remaining student experienced little to no difference in her ability to focus.

Moreover, participants frequently commented that the tone of voice used during the sessions helped them delve deeper into the session. Payne and Donaghy (2010) emphasise that the live voice can be therapeutic and relaxing, thus allowing the brain to be more receptive to the information given and produce imagery (Smith 2018).

The findings indicate that there are various contributing factors that can aid a person achieve a deeper meditative state, namely the use of aromatherapy, the instructor’s tone of voice, and the ability to retain focus, which is achieved through regular practice and experience.

Theme 6: Enhancing our Personalities through Mindful Meditation

This theme ties in with themes one and two. As discussed, after only six mindfulness sessions, the participants developed a greater sense of self-awareness and significantly enhanced their wellbeing. In turn, this enhanced state enabled them to relate better with the people around them. The participants’ narratives provide excellent testimony as they talk about compassion, forgiveness, consideration for others, and a general positive approach towards life.

Shapiro et al. (2016) state that the primary intention of mindfulness practices is to foster positivity, compassion, and mental wellbeing, amongst various other characteristics. Erika demonstrates this as, throughout the process, she came to terms with a personal issue she has struggled with all her life.

...Everyone makes mistakes [...] We need to see the good in people and in our life. [...] it is because of these sessions that I noticed that I have become much more considerate. (Erika)

All the above relates and gives meaning to Whieldon’s statement claiming that only good things can come from mindfulness (Whieldon, 2016).

Theme 7: Enhancing our Profession through Mindfulness Training

Participating students believe that mindfulness can enhance their future profession in various ways. Firstly, students claim that mindful meditation helped them with their studies and exams, thus enabling them to do well in their assignments.
I felt that these sessions helped me even with my studies. Even before an exam, it helped me do better. My mind was not all over the place or was distracted by the little things. I was able to dedicate my attention as was needed. (Jenna)

The above correlates with the findings of Hyland (2014), as the author states that mindfulness improves the individual’s attention and provides clarity of mind.

Secondly, as beauty therapists, students know that to be successful they need solid intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Amongst various other authors, Nixon (2019) believes mindfulness is the “quintessential skill” needed for the twenty-first-century workforce. Failing to acquire such skills can result in losing clients.

Thirdly, students discussed the idea of incorporating mindful practices with other beauty treatments. They believe this could offer a more holistic service to their clients, potentially distinguishing them from the competition and consequently further enhancing their careers.

This cycles back the study of Nixon (2019), who believes that mindfulness enhances mental, physical, and emotional abilities, creating the perfect recipe for a successful workforce.

**Theme 8: Mindfulness as Part of the MCAST Curriculum**

All participants agree with introducing mindfulness within the curriculum. They believe that mindfulness can positively impact students’ experience at school. In fact, they were adamant that mindfulness should be taught as a separate unit throughout the year as long as the unit does not link to any assessments.

*Six sessions are very short, but if we had to have these sessions throughout the whole year, it would be more beneficial.* (Chanel)

Participants point out that to successfully integrate mindfulness, one needs to ensure that the lecturers delivering the sessions are adequately trained.

*It is important that whoever will guide these sessions needs to be trained...* (Jenna)

This point is emphasised by various authors (Jean-Baptiste 2014; McCaw 2019). They clearly note that effective integration requires individuals who have cultivated a personal transformation that truly demonstrates the intended principles of mindfulness. As stated by Shapiro et al. (2016), the primary purpose of mindfulness is to foster an environment that promotes positivity, creativity, and general wellbeing. It is in fact the reason why various professional institutions include mindfulness to promote enhanced health and wellbeing (Greenberg and Harris 2012; Whieldon 2016).

**Theme 9: Dealing with Scepticism**

In the literature, some authors are not yet convinced of the benefits of mindfulness, and others require further research (Britton et al. 2014; Van Dam et al. 2018). Likewise, there might be students who are sceptical of the practice. However, students who participated in this study believe that people are sceptical only because they have not yet tried the practice and have not experienced the benefits.

*I was surprised with the positive impact they had on me. So, it is possible that mindful meditation will have the same impact on other students.* (Erika)
As seen from their narratives, all three students started these sessions with a certain degree of scepticism. However, after experiencing the first session, they welcomed the practice and even expressed their desire for a longer programme. Such eagerness is encouraging and relates to the literature, as various studies claim that mindfulness practices in schools were welcomed by both students and lecturers (Kuyken et al. 2013; Weare 2018).

Emerging Models

The above themes are interconnected with each other, as one sustains the other. This is evidently seen in the two models that emerged from the findings and the collaborative analysis above.

**Model 1: Self-awareness holds the key to our wellbeing:** The findings show that once self-awareness is achieved, a cascade of benefits that influence our state of wellbeing follows, thus making self-awareness the key to our wellbeing. Reflecting on the self without judgment leads to self-appreciation, which aids the development of various characteristics. Some of those characteristics include a positive outlook towards life, enhanced mental, emotional, and physical strength, a nurturing of our emotional intelligence and soft skills, and a better understanding of ourselves.

All the above offer a sense of wellbeing, hence lowering stress and anxiety. Furthermore, they also play a major role in enhancing our personality, which positively affects our approach towards our personal, professional, and social interactions (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Illustrates how all the positive effects achieved through mindful meditation are interconnected**

**Model 2: Creating a blissful ambience:** It is imperative that one creates a blissful environment. In this study, this involved the stimulation of various senses, particularly...
the auditory, smell, and visual senses (Figure 13). This can be achieved by including soft relaxing music, natural elements such as plants and crystals, and diffusing essential oils.

**Figure 13:** Indicates how one can create the right ambience for mindful meditation

**Conclusion**

This analysis showcased how mindful meditation can lead to a series of events that enhance one’s wellbeing and positively affect their approach toward work and family. This is possible as, through mindful meditation, our social skills, soft skills, and emotional intelligence are potentially enhanced. This study provides evidence that mindfulness practices pair well with aromatherapy as the scents diffused enhance one’s experience. It was noted that when one experiences an intensive mindful meditation session, it is more likely that one enters a deeper meditative state, leading to self-awareness which in turn enhances one’s wellbeing.

This study contributes to four important sectors:

**Education:** Vocational education (VET) is the bridge between education and industry. Findings from this study indicate that mindfulness can be the right tool for MCAST to enhance the learning environment by nurturing students’ cognitive, personal, and professional domains. Literature shows that such characteristics are the qualities salon owners seek in their employees (CBI 2019; Howe and Staden, 2015; Schwab 2018), hence positively affecting students’ employability.

**Society:** MCAST prides itself in preparing students to be better contributors to society. Mindfulness can add to that by enhancing the students’ social and soft skills, which will in turn positively affect a wider community.
**Industry:** Since mindfulness practice can positively impact students’ behaviour and attitudes, it will automatically affect their performance at work. Such an outcome is what MCAST strives for as, ultimately, the goal of VET is to produce a professional workforce.

**International:** Limited research is found on mindful meditation combined with aromatherapy. This study addresses that lacuna, and its findings can aid not only the educational sector in general but also any other sector where human interaction is present.

**Limitations**

The fact that schools were shut down due to COVID-19 limited the study as the researchers wished to see the effects mindful meditation would have had on the quality of interaction between participating students and their lecturers. Moreover, in order to respect health and safety regulations, sessions had to be held online; this proved to be a limitation as the participating students were not able to experience a harmonious environment. The final outcome could have consequently been different.

**Further studies**

Future studies may continue to include students’ perspectives on how mindfulness continued to support them in the place of work. It would be interesting to investigate how mindfulness can benefit the beauty therapy and holistic realm in terms of a.) taking care of the client’s wellbeing through the integration of mindfulness practices within the traditional services and b.) taking care of the beauty therapist’s wellbeing within the salon. Both these aspects can contribute to a more successful business and service provision.

**Recommendations**

**Mindfulness as part of the MCAST curriculum:** If mindfulness forms part of the student’s curriculum, it can benefit them personally and professionally in the ways described in Model 1. Furthermore, since mindfulness can potentially enhance one’s social skills, soft skills, and emotional intelligence, it can also be critical in improving one’s career. In the twenty-first-century, enhancing students’ social and soft skills is a top priority since employers do not only seek work-related skills but also communication skills and emotional intelligence, which are considered valuable assets (Schwab 2018).

**Providing a mindful space:** It would be ideal to have a campus space where one can practise mindfulness. If such a space were to be provided, one would be recommended to follow the suggestions stated in Model 2 so as to provide the user with sensory bliss. This way, MCAST students, lecturers, and staff members can enjoy quality time with the self to enhance their wellbeing.

**Concluding Comments**

The recommendations brought forward in this study are consistent with the studies and findings mentioned in the literature. In this narrative study, the participants described how they felt a significant improvement in their wellbeing with only six mindful meditation sessions. Moreover, they experienced personal growth and saw the potential of also experiencing professional growth, which in turn can benefit a more successful profession benefiting them and the service users. Therefore, it is believed that MCAST would surely benefit if it embraced mindfulness as part of the curriculum and provided appropriate training to lecturers. Understandably, the implementation may be laborious, but given the benefits seen in this study, it is worth exploring various holistic possibilities.
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