Managing Creative Projects and Teams
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Project Plan and Strategy Document

The Design Brief

The problem we are looking to address is mental health and wellbeing, particularly that of students in elementary and middle school within the American education system. Modern society demands updated competencies and this raise in the expectations from a child has led to high competition and stress in young students. A large population of these children are later diagnosed with mental health conditions. NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) notes that in the US, one in six individuals aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year and half of all mental health conditions begin by age 14.

Mental health cannot be separated from cognitive development, language development and social competence as they all affect the development of a child. What are termed as 'behavioral problems' in children are often the early symptoms of onset of mental health issues. Early discovery and support systems in the youth need to be adequately designed and addressed as a compliment to their learning and development.

Scope of work

The project would be executed in phases with critical focus towards identification of root problems and solutioning for the same before detailed testing with the users. We would drive the project by a human centered design approach with immersion and enquiry into the:

1. Expectations of the education system and the role of modern industries in setting the competencies of the youth
2. Effects of stress and professional demands on the learning curve of children
3. Role of education systems in wholistic growth and shortcomings in various systems
4. Awareness of parents and teachers into the possibilities of mental health as a consequence of the education system
5. Various ways in which behavioral problems escalate to mental health conditions
6. Developed ways to identify analyse and mitigate the early age symptoms

And design a holistic robust solution aimed to improve the overall mental health of the young population in the country. This designed system should ensure a positive change in the learning and growth of a child with the help of various stakeholders in the system and lives of these children and bring about the intended change utilising the existent touchpoints in the lives of the children as a fun element in their life.

The choice of this topic was triggered by a statement by GM that they would have a major workforce shortage in 10 years because the present workers are not competent to work with their business goals for the future. The education system has systemic problems on various levels and is leading to a misfit in the growth of children. We were all moved by the effects of these markets and internal conflicts within the country on the mental health of the children and felt deeply that there is an opportunity here.

There is a lot of scope in the perception of this problem from the persona of a middle schooler and we need to dig deeper into the various aspects of their learning in order to understand the micro effects on mental health. The magnitude of the educational system poses a lot of challenges for the government to change the fundamental systems because of the magnitude of students being affected by it daily. There are racial and political unrests and any change this big is not possible in the 4 year tenures. Hence, the solution to these problems have to happen on different levels and private agencies need to step in to partner with educational institutions to create impact. This solution should not be a policy level intervention into the system and rather a tangible implementable strategy.

Constraints

An increase in mental illness amongst children between the ages of 10-14 has become an urgent issue of concern by governments, educators, parents and students over the last year and a half. We witnessed changes in the social and political landscape in the United States through two monumental changes that have been driving forces behind the content of this project, the Covid-19 pandemic and the acceleration of the Black Lives Matter movement. In this we have seen less access to essential services, greater income inequalities, and crippling lack of connectivity. Furthermore in the last year and a half we have witnessed an increase in hate related crimes, including bullying and discrimination. The severity of these issues which in turn have had serious consequences on the mental health of children make the need for a design intervention in the education system a top priority.

The most prominent constraint present when working in the field of education are the fixed ideas surrounding learning. Society has fairly concrete attitudes and beliefs in regards to learning and education that don't often go beyond the scope of traditional subjects. To be able to penetrate this system in a way that suffices for all stakeholders is an opportunity this design project aims to achieve. Because education is funded by municipal, state, and federal taxes, all taxpayers become indirect stakeholders in our design initiative. Although our main motivation for this project is to improve the mental health of students, we will also have to actively tackle the task of education leadership, parents, and community members on the benefits of introducing mental health education into formal education.

The research component of our project will be highly critical in developing an effective solution to the mental health issues of students. Because our target audience is between 10-14 years of age it will become very important for us to draw strong ethical lines around how we obtain information. Not only must we appeal to children, we must involve parents and guardians without compromising research results.

Target user and market

Our intended users are 10-14 years-old children, and their parents and teachers. For this age group, children are entering the stage of early adolescence, which is a transition period. The 10-11 years-old kids are graduating from elementary school and getting ready for middle school. For kids who are 11-14 years old, they prepare for entering high school. From the kids' perspectives, there are a lot of shifts in their lives during this time. From the parents' perspective, the kids turned 10-14 years old can suddenly act and think more like adults, which can be a difficult change for parents to accept. These changes are some of the reasons why there are a lot of arguments between young teens and their parents.

Although early adolescence can be difficult for both parents and children, it is the children who are more negatively affected. They are becoming more mature and more independent during this period, so it's critical for the educational system to lead their mental health in the right direction. Paying attention to children's mental health during early adolescence is beneficial for their current and future lives.

In the short term, struggling with a mental health issue can be dangerous for any age group. If a kid has mental health issues, he or she can experience anger, anxiety, insomnia, hopelessness, reduced appetite, even suicide. Karen Gill emphasizes that physical health, stressful events, environment, family history, and biochemical imbalances can all be the causes of childhood depression. (2019) Even for adults, mental problems can be hard to detect. For children, they need to know how to deal with these problems in order to have a happy and healthy life.

In the long term, like what we mentioned in the project description, one in six U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year. (NAMI) According to the report by Kate Barrington, nearly two-thirds of college students experienced overwhelming anxiety. (Barrington 2019) There is a significant increase in the numbers as the children get older. However, children themselves can't recognize the problem. They need to learn about it as early as possible to reduce this risk.

No matter it is in the short-term or long-term perspective, mental health is critical for kids who are 10-14 years old. Our target users include parents and teachers because their opinions and actions are also essential for kids' mental health. Early adolescence is a very important period in life, so our team wants to focus on this market to find a solution that can be helpful for children's present and future.

Exploration Questions

Through our research we hope to explore ways in which we can improve mental health among 10-14 year olds. Children don't often know the ways to express exactly how they are feeling. We aim to carry out our research in a way in which children can communicate how they are feeling about their mental health through discovery and play. In our research we are interested in finding out how children respond to possible design interventions we propose at the educational level. Through this research we aim to explore the association between feelings of depression and anxiety in the current social landscape amongst students. This can help us understand if students are feeling overwhelmed by what is going on around them. Furthermore we would like to explore whether children suffering from more severe mental health issues are also suffering from cognitive, language or social impairments. For this we will involve parents and educators in order to better understand their viewpoints on mental health and ways in which they can become advocates for the mental health of students.

Expected Outcome

Tangible strategic solutions with an ecosystem to cater to various aspects of the system need to be developed. Solutions could range from strategies, products, spaces, interfaces and services which need to leverage the aspects of relatability and play in them. These solutions should be designed in such a manner that they plug into the daily activities of the children.

These solutions can also be developed with the children in the center, using co-creation to gain one to one insights within the form of workshops and games. Behavioral triggers and actions of the children would give valuable data to help in identifying symptoms and act as touch points within the ecosystem for the solutions to intervene. The end outcome (ideally) of the solution would lead to early identification and rectification of behavioral cues in order to prevent the onset of mental health issues for the youth of the country.

Success Metrics

The solutions need to be analysed on the basis of the following quantifiable goals:

1. **Impact feedback** - A qualitative expert understanding of the impact of the solution to the defined problem(s)
2. **Commercial viability** - Investment and action into this solution should make sense to a business. This aspect is critical as a market test of the viability of the solution
3. **Scalability** - The system and its ecosystem should remain viable when scaled up
4. **Happiness** - satisfaction of the children is a reflection of their excitement and happiness
5. **Adoption**- Children would adopt the element of interaction if they engage with it

Research Plan

Who or what will we study?	Format (interviews, observations, surveys, desk research) + sample size (number of observations, interviews, or inputs)	Where will we find the people or information?	What key questions/issues will we explore?	When will the research happen?	Who on the team is responsible?
The information of American educational systems, mental health, and intended market	Secondary research (related news, scholars, reports, etc.)	Google, Google scholar, CNN, New York Times etc.	What is the critical information we should know about our topic? What are some invented but not working solutions?	Throughout the study, mainly before the survey and observation	All of us will do the search.
The kids in 10-14 years old group	Observation Sample size: a class ~ 20 kids	We will reach out to schools and connect with teachers and parents	How do kids respond to our possible solutions in school? How to co-create with kids to find better solutions?	We plan to reach out people to schools next week, and have the observations on week 11	Brielle and Sara will charge the event, and all of us will try to connect with possible participants.
The grown-ups who are most influential on kids	Interview Sample size: 10+ teachers and parents	After the observation, we will talk to the teachers and parents	What do parents and teachers think about early education of mental health? How can our team cooperate with them to find solutions that really work?	The same time as the observation, which is week 11	Anamika and Soumil will charge the event.